

Involving the common man

Grassroot News, N.W.—In Portland, Ronnie Herndon, co-chair of the Black United Front, speaks out against racism, exploitation and oppression in the same manner as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this unique interview Herndon gives a political analysis of Dr. King's movement.

Q: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was among the centerpieces of movement that spanned two decades. What should he be remembered for?

Herndon: I think it's important to remember the effect King had on the common people. It was King who told everyday people that they had to act, to be persistent and consistent. That was a valuable contribution in the struggle for the liberation of Black people. Everybody can bemoan our plight but it's much more when you say that you must confront injustices strategically, tactfully and intelligently. King was the past master of that.

Q: What kind of appeal did King have with common everyday people that got them to move?

Herndon: All King did was to say to Black people that what was happening to us was unjust. Here are some things that we feel will work in combatting injustices. When you go back to the Montgomery bus boycott the fact that Black people would have to give their seats up when the bus filled up was unjust.

The thing about our struggle is that things that are unjust about the way we are treated are easily understood. But what frightens Black people is confronting injustice. Throughout our history we've always responded to someone whom we think is sincere and who speaks to the basic needs of the people.

Q: King's message was transmitted during the '50s and '60s. What was important about that era in history?

Herndon: One of the things that many people don't realize is until the movement that Black people brought to a feverish pitch in this country, there wasn't much going on in terms of progressive movements. The movement occurred at the end of the McCarthy era in which a lot of people had been hurt, lost their jobs and been frightened. It was the Black movement that brought the whole country out into the streets to demonstrate. The Korean War had ended and Black men were coming home saying that they were being killed and maimed

to come home where they couldn't even buy a hamburger where they wanted to.

At this same point in history many African nations were demanding their freedom. The same movement was felt in many Caribbean nations. It's important to make this international connection. King was just a part of it.

Q: How did King respond to the segregation of the South vs. the discrimination in the North?

Herndon: When the struggle really began to heat up, as Blacks were demonstrating for basic human rights, many newspapers, politicians and leaders in the North found it convenient to point their fingers at the South. When King talked about moving the struggle up North he found that many of the same people who praised him, now were criticizing him. The tactics that were used in the South were no longer useful in the North. King said himself that the violence he ran into in New York was more extreme than anything he encountered in the South.

Racism is something that's prevalent all over America. When King moved up the Mason-Dixon Line he became a source of embarrassment for white liberals. They could no longer say that racism was an aberration of the South. King asked what were they going to do about the racism in their own back yard. The answer he got from most people was, "Nothing."

Q: In the homes of many Black families is the picture of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy. What was the true relationship between the Kennedys and King?

Herndon: Many people think that the Kennedys did a lot of things to help Black people. If you examine the record carefully you will find out that this is not true. John Kennedy was a clever enough politician that when King got arrested he called officials in the South along with King's wife. This was publicized all over the country and Black people loved Kennedy. The Black vote which was so overwhelming in favor of Kennedy determined his victory over Nixon. After Kennedy was elected and making promises and not progress, King questioned him. Kennedy responded that they were moving too fast and that this wasn't the right time. King was very disappointed. At the same time when Kennedy was making broken promises to Black Americans, he

was trying to overthrow the government in the Congo.

Q: Isn't it ironic that it was Robert "Bobby" Kennedy who authorized a wiretap of Dr. King?

Herndon: When John Kennedy was president, Robert Kennedy was Attorney General. He not only wiretapped King's phone but where King went as well. Now, here was the same man whom they said was O.K. as long as he stayed in the South, but now they were wiretapping King as if he were a criminal. We need to do a lot more research and look at the Kennedys a lot more carefully, because we give the Kennedys a lot more praise than they deserve.

Q: King's philosophy matured as he began to speak out against the Vietnam War. How did this affect the movement?

Herndon: King saw the war as an unjust war. It was another case in which White America was destroying people of color. He said it just like that. Here you have poor, yellow people that were being oppressed and now the United States was supporting a dictator. This country hated King for speaking out against the war. The *New York Times* came out attacking King, saying he had no right talking about matters concerning foreign affairs. Here you have a man who earned a Ph.D. and was considered one of the sharpest men in the country. King recognized that whatever happens in the world effects Black people here in America. And we should be informed. Many people say that King was assassinated because he had spoken out against the Vietnam War.

Q: Whenever you say "King," the topic of nonviolence is not far behind. What do you think King's nonviolent philosophy was?

Herndon: In the beginning most of the confrontations they had were nonviolent. This means that when they had a demonstration and whites came up to them to throw eggs, hit and beat them, they were not going to strike back. For a long time many people tried to go along with it. But after a while many Blacks involved in the demonstrations said later for that. This shift came about through organizations like SNCC, different college organization, and young people.

Many people believe, and I included, that King took a tactic and made it a principle. Peaceful demonstrations are a tactic. When they

work you use them. Not when you're involved in a peaceful demonstration and you get attacked and do nothing to protect yourself. Near the end of his life as he was organizing the March on Washington, if it wasn't effective, he was going to turn everything over to the militants.

If the country was faced with Martin Luther King saying that, what younger leaders were telling you was correct: if they became united in a program it would hurt the power brokers in this country. Rather than facing that, they killed him.

Q: Ronnie, in Portland you confront as much as King did. Does the possibility of being assassinated for speaking out ever concern you?

Herndon: Everyone, at some point in their lives, thinks about death. No one wants to check out any sooner than we think we should. For me I know how this country treats Black people who speak out against injustices. But it gets down to, are you going to allow yourself, your family and community, to be treated like dogs? Are you going to sit by and let your children go to a no-good school? To see businesses set up in your community and not even hire you? To have your women walk down the streets and treated like prostitutes? When you see all the injustices that we're faced with, like drugs, bad housing, and police brutality, if you have any concept of yourself as a man or a woman, then you have to speak out and do something against it. If you are not, then act like a dog.

I would much rather have my time spent on the planet fighting against these injustices that beset our community and people. I can't think of a more important way of spending your life.



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