

# Today's Black leaders demonstrate King's philosophy

Black leaders today are demonstrating one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s lesser-known legacies by speaking out on U.S. foreign policy issues, says Rutgers University authority on Afro-American history.

Dr. David Levering Lewis, one of the foremost biographers of the slain civil rights leader, says that King's willingness to state his views on foreign policy "modeled a stand that is being revived today as leading Blacks go on record against the Reagan administration's position on South Africa and its handling of crises in the Middle East."

King saw the clear connections between global problems and national issues, the Rutgers historian notes. "He was among the first to oppose the Vietnam War, and he paid a very high price for that departure. Although he won the Nobel Peace Prize, he was persecuted for the rest of his life by the justice department under President Lyndon Johnson."

*"The more carefully King is scrutinized, the better he looks."*

As America prepares to celebrate the first national holiday in honor of King, Lewis points out that although disturbing conditions still exist for Afro-Americans, King solidly succeeded in his foremost goal of overcoming segregation in this country.

Problems today are quite different from those that existed when the Southern Baptist minister led the march on Selma and preached his dream of an integrated America, noted Lewis, a scholar of international distinction who is Rutgers University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of History.

"Segregation was outlawed in the South," he states. "Afro-Americans gained voting rights. Affirmative action programs have shown surprising resilience at the state and local levels, despite the so-called 'color blind' policies of the national administration. Our basic civil rights gains are probably irreversible."

But, Lewis maintains, if King were alive today he might seem out of touch with the times. "He would probably risk appearing irrelevant by remaining faithful to his large vision of a transformed society."

Some of King's heirs in the civil rights establishment, the old guard leadership of the NAACP and Urban League, are "hopelessly shortsighted and inattentive to the new shape of problems," Lewis contends. "They have disserved us all, particularly Black Americans, by continuing to focus solely on white racism."

Lewis agrees with those Afro-American scholars who maintain that in spite of historical oppression, the crime, violence, illegitimacy and school dropout rate within Black underclass communities are determined more by social class and family instability than racial discrimination. And, this group of scholars contends, government handouts, alone, cannot solve the crisis.

Lewis, however, notes that while the government programs of the '60s and '70s may have overreached themselves and were marked by abuses, they did work. "Head Start and the Job Corps did help equip people for schooling and better jobs," he declares.

Economics and class increasingly divide Black Americans, Lewis says, and pose particularly severe problems for young Blacks.



Rutgers University historian David Levering Lewis, a foremost biographer of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., says that Black leaders today are reviving a lesser-known legacy of the slain civil rights leader when they speak out on U.S. foreign policy issues. Lewis, an internationally known expert on Afro-American history, is the State University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of History and is a resident of Jersey City, NJ.

"The national pattern of declining minority enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities seems to come from a social psychology at work," he explains.

"Disenchanted? That's a euphemism for the attitude among minority young people today. With 30 percent unemployment among Black youths and with even very bright youngsters unable to get jobs, many feel that there is no use going to college. It's a grinding situation."

Characterized as "one of the most talented, productive and wide-ranging scholars of his generation," Lewis joined the faculty of New Jersey's State University in September. This semester he will teach a course on the impact of European imperialism in Africa. His book on that topic, titled *Race to*

*Fashoda*, will be published in the fall. It is based on extensive research into previously unused sources in France, Ethiopia and the Sudan.

In addition to *King: A Biography* (1970), Lewis is well known for *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, a highly readable account of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Now in the research stage is his biography of W.E.B. DuBois.

Future biographers of Martin Luther King, Jr. will continue to treat him favorably, Lewis predicts. "The more carefully King is scrutinized, the better he looks. Even those things that allowed the FBI a season of delectation and voyeurism do not diminish the man's character."



*Special Observance of*  
**Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday**  
**Black History Month**  
*The Afro-American Heritage Bicentennial Commemorative Quilt*

will be on display at the  
**OREGON HISTORICAL CENTER**  
 1230 S.W. Park Ave., Portland, OR 97205  
 10 a.m. to 4:45 p.m., Monday through Saturday  
**ADMISSION FREE**



We remember him as a

**"drum major for justice."**

**WE SALUTE**

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

**Oregon Department of Transportation**