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OPINION

How We Can Truly Honor Dr. King

Redeeming the soul of America

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In his last Sunday sermon at Washington National Cathedral, Dr. King retold the parable of the rich man Dives who ignored the poor and sick man Lazarus who came every day seeking crumbs from Dives' table.



Dives went to hell, Dr. King said, not because he was rich but because he did not realize his wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf separating him from his brother and allowed Lazarus to become invisible. He warned this could happen to rich America, "if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life."

At his death in 1968, when he was calling with urgency for an end to poverty in our nation, there were 25.4 million poor Americans including 11 million poor children and our Gross Domestic Product was \$4.13 trillion.

Today there are 46.2 million poor people including 16.1 million poor children and our GDP is three times larger. Twenty million of our neighbors are living in extreme poverty including 7.3 million children.

Disgracefully children are the poorest age group in America and the younger they are the poorer they are and one in four preschool children are poor. More than one in three black children and the same proportion of Latino children are poor. Children have suffered most since the recession began.

I have no doubt that Dr. King would be mounting a nonviolent poor people campaign to end rampant hunger, homelessness, and poverty today.

Let's honor Dr. King by our committed action to end child poverty and close the morally obscene gulf between rich and poor in our nation where the 400 highest income earners made as much as the combined tax revenues of 22 state governments with 42 million citizens in 2008, and the wealthiest top 1 percent hold more net wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined.

The rich don't need another tax break and they need to give back some of their unfair share of our

nation's tax subsidies, loopholes and bailouts to feed and house and educate our children and employ their parents.

Let's honor and follow Dr. King by naming and changing the continuing racial disparities, undergirded by poverty, that place one in three black and one in six Hispanic boys born in 2001 at risk of prison in their lifetimes. Incarceration is the new American apartheid. Let's reroute our children into a pipeline to college and productive work to compete with children from China and India.

Let's honor and follow Dr. King by speaking truth to power and demanding justice for poor and vulnerable children with urgency and persistence and effective nonviolent direct actions to bring our nation back from the brink of self destruction fueled by the unbridled greed of the few and a military budget that dwarfs our early childhood development budget where the real security of our nation lies.

Let's honor and follow Dr. King by stopping the resurgence of racial and income segregation in our schools, unfair treatment of children of color with zero tolerance school discipline and special edu-

cation practices that push them out of school and towards prison, and efforts to undermine the hard earned right to vote. Let's not return to Jim Crow shenanigans that strangled our democracy far too long.

Let's honor and follow Dr. King by building a beloved community in America where all have enough to eat, a place to sleep, enough work at decent wages to support a family, buy a home, raise children, and send them to public schools that empower children with hope, confidence and skills for the future.

Let's truly honor Dr. King by transforming our education system that sentences millions of children to social and economic death by failing to prepare them and our country for the future. That a majority of all children in all income and racial groups and 76 percent of black and Hispanic children cannot read or compute at grade level in fourth and eighth grades is a threat to America's future economic and military strength.

Let's honor Dr. King by ensuring every child's safety and right to live by ending the epidemic gun violence in our nation that has snuffed out more than 1.3 million American lives since he and Robert Kennedy

were killed by guns in 1968—including the lives of approximately 148,000 children and teens.

Let's honor Dr. King by standing up and doing whatever is required for as long as needed to break the political grip of the National Rifle Association and their allies who seek to add more guns to the approximately 300 million in circulation and continuing production and sales of assault weapons and high volume ammunition magazines that should not be in the hands of civilians.

The day after Dr. King was shot, I went into riot torn Washington, D.C. neighborhoods and schools urging children not to loot, get arrested and ruin their futures. A young black boy about 12 looked me squarely in the eyes and said, "Lady, what future? I ain't got no future. I ain't got nothing to lose." Let us follow Dr. King by proving that boy's truth wrong in our militarily powerful, materially rich, but too spiritually poor nation.

Dr. King is not coming back. It's up to us to redeem the soul of America. He told us what to do. Let's do it.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Best of Times and the Worst of Times

Equality and justice in America



BY CHARLES J. OGLETTREE JR.

With the death of Trayvon Martin nearly a year ago, many wondered whether there could be any justice in America. The indictment of George Zimmerman and the subsequent focus on the shooting death of Trayvon Martin has set the legal process to take its course in the near future.

In looking at the overall state of race and justice in America, clearly a lot of progress has been made.

On Nov. 4, 2008, the United States elected its first African-American President, Barack Obama, who is just beginning his second term. Clearly, the job of equality and justice is not the job of one man. But, since his election, President Obama has taken a number of steps that make the state of race and justice a positive one.

If we simply look at the Supreme Court, which decides much of our legal issues that impact us greatly,

the President has had the opportunity to appoint two people. And on both occasions, he appointed women; including a woman of color.

When we look at the United States Circuit Courts, which are one step away from the United States Supreme Court, President Obama has appointed the first African-American for Mississippi to the Fifth Circuit; an African-American with Haitian connections to the Second Circuit; the first woman in Massachusetts to the First Circuit; and an African-American woman to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals.

This only begins to show the diversity and quality of his appoint-

ments. More importantly, the President - in his first term - persuaded Congress to support a \$787 billion stimulus package, has had healthcare approved, and prevailed in the Supreme Court on protection of rights of immigrants. These successes reveal the commitment to the state of justice, equality, and progress in our country.

Despite the progress of the past four years, there is still much work to be done. We still have a problem in terms of employment, housing, and an increasing negative reflection on the African-American presence in the criminal justice system.

While many of these issues are influenced by local and state legis-

lation, they are still troubling when you see the African-American unemployment rates in double digits, housing foreclosures increasing, and the state of equality in our criminal justice system that leaves all of us at peril.

The good news, of course, is that under the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder, the first African-American Attorney General, the disparity between powder cocaine and crack cocaine has been reduced from 100 to 1 to 18 to 1. This is a step in the right direction. But leveling the playing field to a 1 to 1 ratio is still necessary. And we hope that will be accomplished in the coming years.

President Obama has made clear

his views on the kinds of justices he wants for the courts, what kinds of tax cuts he wants, as well as his views on a woman's right to choose, immigration, and now, stricter gun laws. Voters carefully assessed and made their decision for themselves and for their children and grandchildren for generations to come.

In conclusion, it is the best of times and the worst of times. We have made a lot of progress on many issues, but the job is not done.

Charles Ogletree Jr. is the Jesse Climenko Professor of Law at Harvard Law School and executive director and founder of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice.

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