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OPINION

Progressive Change for New York City

Leading the fight against economic and social inequalities

BY MARC H. MORIAL



A new year brought a new mayor and new hope for progressive change to America's largest city. With the inauguration of Bill de Blasio, New York City, recently viewed as an incubator of urban innovations in the fights against crime, terrorism and cholesterol, is returning to its roots as a leader in the fight against economic inequality.

In his inauguration speech, Mayor de Blasio made it clear that he intended to pick up the mantle of former New York progressives like Franklin Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, and Fiorello LaGuardia "who challenged the status quo, who blazed a trail of progressive reform and

political action, who took on the elite, who stood up to say that social and economic justice will start here and will start now."

This is welcome news to the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers who swept the new mayor into office in November with 73 percent of the vote. It is also good news to the National Urban League, which is headquartered in Manhattan and has been leading the charge across the nation for many of the progressive ideas championed by Mayor de Blasio.

The priorities include his focus on job creation for all New Yorkers, proposals for more affordable housing, an expansion of community health centers, and reform of New York's "broken" stop-and-frisk policy that has unfairly targeted young men of color.

The new mayor also joins the National

Urban League and a growing chorus of progressive voices in calling for an end to income inequality. We are especially encouraged by his plan to ask those earning more than \$500,000 a year to pay a little more in taxes to provide the city's children with a critical educational foundation by funding full-day universal preschool and after-school programs for every middle school student.

A native New Yorker, de Blasio got his start in public service as an aid to New York's first African American mayor, David N. Dinkins. He also served in the Clinton Administration as a Housing and Urban Development regional director and managed Hillary Clinton's 2000 campaign for the U.S. Senate. He represented his Brooklyn neighborhood for eight years as a New York City Councilman, and from

2010-2013, he served as New York City public advocate, the city's second-highest elected office.

Running a city the size and complexity of New York is a daunting challenge, made more so by the stark and often competing interests of Wall Street and Main Street. But Mayor Bill de Blasio has rolled up his sleeves and hit the ground running. He even shoveled his own walkway during the city's first major snowstorm.

New Yorkers, hungry for leadership that understands the economic and social challenges they face every day, are hopeful they now have a special champion and kindred spirit in City Hall. We look forward to working with the new Mayor on the progressive policies he shares with the Urban League movement.

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The Martin Luther King Jr. You May Not Know

More than a civil rights leader

BY BRIAN J. TRAUTMAN



Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as one of the 20th century's most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous "I Have A Dream" speech. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge by and large derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King's radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vi-

cious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "The Octopus of Poverty," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967 King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to edu-

cate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change.

The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' He cautioned that "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of so-

cial uplift is approaching spiritual death."

King's most pointed speech against militarism was "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," delivered at Riverside Church in NYC on April 4, 1967.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, "because my conscience leaves me no other choice." With such a call to conscience, "a time comes when silence is betrayal."

In the speech King calls the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty

at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King's efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King's dream of the Beloved Community.

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