



“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

BERNIE FOSTER
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LISA LOVING
News Editor

HELEN SILVIS
Multimedia Editor

PATRICIA IRVIN
DAVID KIDD
Graphic Designer

MONICA J. FOSTER
Seattle Office Coordinator

JULIE KEEFE
SUSAN FRIED
Photographers



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415 N. Killingsworth St.,
P.O. Box 5455, Portland, OR 97228.
Telephone (503) 285-5555.

E-mail: info@theskanner.com
World Wide Web site:

<http://www.theskanner.com>
Fax: (503) 285-2900

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Selma: White Savior Not Required

The fierce and aligned, if not coordinated, campaign to smear the motion picture “Selma” by suggesting it inaccurately portrays the role of President Lyndon Johnson in the fight for Blacks’ civil rights is par for the course. Critics of the movie that focuses on the campaign for voting rights in Selma, Ala. suggest that Johnson was a champion for civil rights and is principally responsible for securing voting rights for African-Americans.

At best that point of view is a misunderstanding, and at worst, and what I firmly believe, it is a deliberate attempt to create a false narrative to diminish the principal and central role of Blacks in advocating for their own freedom.

It is ironic, and sad, that the first full-length theater released movie chronicling the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is being trashed in an attempt to exalt a White president. The criticism of “Selma” betrays the truth and common sense. Lyndon Johnson was a southerner; a Texas politician firmly entrenched as a Dixiecrat. His selection as John F. Kennedy’s vice presidential running mate was a political calculation to secure southern votes and resulted in an uneasy alliance between the Texan and the young Bostonian. The tragic assassination of JFK thrust Johnson into the Oval Office and placed upon the Texan the late president’s agenda.

Lyndon Johnson was no civil rights champion. He was a pragmatic politician who was smart enough to read the moment and



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self-absorbed enough to recognize history would judge his legacy based upon a historical movement for Blacks’ rights.

Common sense makes plain that in the turbulent 1960s, no occupant of the White House, the seat of world power and White domination, saw their role as a liberator

rejected to violence in the south. Johnson ‘negotiated’ civil rights, and used his skill as a legislator, to win in the margins. And even while proving successful in moving civil rights legislation LBJ co-existed with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who was leading a campaign to suppress and eliminate Black leadership.

Lyndon Johnson should be credited for a few things. He courageously appointed two African-Americans to positions of authority in the federal hierarchy, historical appointments that were impactful in their significance. Former NAACP legal counsel Thurgood Marshall was named to the United States Supreme Court

Roy Wilkins, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., SNCC and others had not existed, would Lyndon Johnson pro-actively advance a civil rights agenda?” The truthful answer is, no. Johnson felt the pull of a powerful social movement and understood that change, even if not desired or convenient, was upon the nation and inevitable his presidency.

Perhaps what galls me most with the latest effort to bestow white knighthood on a White male for racial sensitivity is it comes upon the heels of protests against police brutality. If we do not speak forcefully against the misappropriation of history, we will witness a similar false accounting about our present circumstances decades It also occurs as Hollywood churns out another motion picture anointing White benevolence toward a Black child, a seeming theme in ‘Tinseltown’ that suggests Black people are incapable of self-determination and success without the aid of Whites. It is the worst characteristic of White liberalism and perhaps the reason why it has taken until 2015, nearly 47 years after King’s death, for a major motion picture to center on the Nobel Prize winner and human rights icon.

We are not in need of White saviors. We could use some willing White partners who recognize and acknowledge the brilliance of Black leadership and understand that their empathy and emotional investment in our plight can never approximate the struggle, sacrifice and commitment of Blacks to our own liberation.

It is ironic, and sad, that the first full-length theater released movie chronicling the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is being trashed in an attempt to exalt a White president

of the descendants of enslaved Africans. The rights of Blacks were not central to the maintenance of power though it became a necessary consideration for the preservation of order.

What also challenges the Johnson-as-savior narrative is the truth. As president, he walked gingerly in taking on southern governors who were using their powers to oppress African-Americans and deny them their constitutional rights. He reluctantly used his power to protect Blacks being sub-

and the brilliant economist Robert Weaver was made the first Black to serve on a presidential cabinet when Johnson made him secretary of the newly-created Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). And there were other appointments in the federal bureaucracy that changed the hue of national government administration.

While I admire LBJ’s tenacity, the campaign to canonize him as a civil rights saint is far-fetched. The simple question is “If King,

Dr. King Left Blueprint for Ending Poverty

“There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it.” Not too many years ago, Kirtley Mather, a Harvard geologist, wrote a book titled, “Enough and to Spare.” He set forth the basic theme that famine is wholly unnecessary in the modern world. Today, therefore, the question on the agenda is: Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?”

In January 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took a very rare “sabbatical” at an isolated house in Jamaica far away from telephones and the constant pressures as a very public civil rights leader to write what would become his last book: “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?”

Professor Mather’s book arguing that mankind had achieved the ability to move beyond famine was published in 1944, yet in 2015, despite seventy more years of unparalleled advances in scientific and technological capability and global resources and wealth, hunger and want are still rampant – most shamefully in the United States with the world’s largest economy.

Hear again Dr. King: “There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will . . . The



CHILD
WATCH

Marian
Wright
Edelman

well-off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. The poor in our countries have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the mainstream of our societies,

Americans, including 14.7 million poor children, living in our boastfully rich nation.

How can it be that the top 1 percent of Americans enjoy more of the nation’s wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined and that millions of children are hungry and homeless and poorly educated? If the qualification for individual and national greatness is genuine concern for the ‘least of these’ as those of us who are Christians say we believe, and if nations and our concurrent role as members of nations and not just as individuals are accountable, then too many of our political, corpo-

million children being the poorest Americans.

Reflecting on the direction the struggle for civil rights and social justice should take in Where Do We Go from Here?, Dr. King shared a story about the need to commit to difficult struggles for the long haul and described a nine and a half hour flight he had taken from New York to London in an older propeller airplane. On the way home, the crew announced the return flight from London to New York would take twelve and a half hours. When the pilot came out into the cabin, Dr. King asked him why. “You must understand about the winds,” he said. “When we leave New York, a strong tail wind is in our favor, but when we return, a strong head wind is against us.” But he added, “Don’t worry. These four engines are capable of battling the winds.”

Dr. King concluded: “In any social revolution there are times when the tail winds of triumph and fulfillment favor us, and other times when strong head winds of disappointment and setbacks beat against us relentlessly. We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us as we journey across life’s mighty Atlantic; we must be sustained by our engines of courage in spite of the winds. This refusal to be stopped, this ‘courage to be,’ this determination to go on ‘in spite of’ is the hallmark of any great movement.”

‘King said: The poor in our countries have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the mainstream of our societies, because we have allowed them to become invisible’

because we have allowed them to become invisible. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these.’”

When Dr. King died in 1968 calling for a Poor People’s Campaign, there were 25.4 million poor Americans, including 11 million poor children. Today, there are more than 45.3 million poor

rate, and faith leaders and citizens – all of us who live in America – are failing.

The national holiday celebrating Dr. King’s birthday is over, but I hope we will heed and act on his 1967 declaration —“the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty”—and work to win the first victory right here at home in the biggest economy on earth and end the shame of 14.7