Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What Would MLK Do If He Were Alive Today: Six Essential Reads

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A protest following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson.

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The Conversation

March 21 marked the anniversary of the third protest march from Selma led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that culminated on the steps of the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, demanding voting rights for African Americans.

As doctoral candidate at University of California, Irvine, Mary Schmitt explains, Selma was "a moment in civil rights history that played a crucial role in the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act."

The first march started on March 7, 1965, but ended in violence. The second march started on March 9. The third march started on March 21, with 3,200 people under the protection of federal troops. By the time the marchers reach the state Capitol in Montgomery on March 25, their numbers had swelled to 25,000.

Scholars writing for The Conversation have emphasized the relevance of King's nonviolent — and successful — resistance movement today.

Here are some highlights from The Conversation's coverage.

America's crisis today

In considering the importance of looking to the past for role models among black leaders, Bowdoin College historian Brian J. Purnell points to the many problems in American cities in the 21st century and how they have led to the emergence of different forms of protest.

"The cost of living in American cities rises each year while for decades wages for working people have flat-lined. Public schools in cities like New York City and Philadelphia are now more racially segregated than they were in the 1960s. The Supreme Court has limited policies that promoted affirmative action and voting rights."

Purnell highlights the "Black Lives Matter" movement:

"Like the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, today's leaders are fighting for African-Americans' human and civil rights."

There is also, since November 2016, "a widespread and resolute discontent with the election of President Trump," as Managing Director of the McCourtney Institute of Democracy, Pennsylvania State University, Christopher Beem, puts it. Many protesters, he says, want to "resist" and "to stop what they see as his degradation of our democracy."

What can the protesters learn from King's vision?

'All men are created equal'

King's vision was to build a more inclusive and just community. As Beem writes,

"At the very core of the Declaration of Independence and thus at the cen-

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In a stark change from his earlier views, King devastatingly targeted White moderates willing to settle for "order" over justice. In an oppressive environment, the avoidance of conflict might appear to be "order," but in fact supported the denial of basic citizenship rights, he noted.

"We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive," King wrote. He argued how oppressors never voluntarily gave up freedom to the oppressed – it always had to be demanded by "extremists for justice."

He wrote how he was "gravely disappointed with the White moderate ... who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom."

They were, he said, a greater enemy to racial justice than were members of the White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and other white racist radicals.

Call for economic justice

By 1967, King's philosophy emphasized economic justice as essential to equality. And he made clear connections between American violence abroad in Vietnam and American social inequality at home.

Exactly one year before his assassination in Memphis, King stood at one of the best-known pulpits in the nation, at Riverside Church in New York.

There, he explained how he had come to connect the struggle for civil rights with the fight for economic justice and the early protests against the Vietnam War.

He proclaimed:

"Now it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam.' It can never be saved so long as it destroys the hopes of men the world over."

He angered crucial allies. King and President Lyndon Johnson, for example, had been allies in achieving significant legislative victories in 1964 and 1965.

Johnson's "Great Society" launched a series of initiatives to address issues of poverty at home.

But beginning in 1965, after the Johnson administration increased the number of U.S. troops deployed in Vietnam, King's vision grew radical.

King continued with a searching analysis of what linked poverty and violence both at home and abroad. While he had spoken out before about the effects of colonialism, he now made the connection unmistakably clear. He said:

> *"I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor in America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam."*

King concluded with the famous words on "the fierce urgency of now," by which he emphasized the immediacy of the connection between economic injustice and racial inequality.

The radical King

King's "I Have a Dream," speech at the March on Washington in August 1963 serves as the touchstone for the annual King holiday. But King's dream ultimately evolved into a call for a fundamental redistribution of economic power and resources.

It's why he was in Memphis, supporting a strike by garbage workers, when he was assassinated in April 1968.

He remained, to the end, the prophet of nonviolent resistance. But these three key moments in King's life show his evolution over a decade.

This remembering matters more than ever today.

Many states are either passing or considering measures that would make it harder for many Americans to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

It would roll back the huge gains in rates of political participation by racial minorities made possible by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

At the same time, there is a persistent wealth gap between blacks and whites.

Only sustained government attention can address these issues – the point King was stressing later in his life.

King's philosophy stood not just for "opportunity," but for positive measures toward economic equality and political power. Ignoring this understanding betrays the "dream" that is ritually invoked each year.

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