

# Martin Luther King Knew the Difference Between Nooses and Handcuffs

✘ There was plenty of soaring rhetoric at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Martin Luther King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech. President Obama spoke eloquently. Whatever else one may say about him, he can deliver a speech. Congressman John Lewis, who was beaten and almost killed by racist police in Selma, told us that "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

There was lots of talk about the progress that has been made over the years. And lots of talk about how the dream is still unrealized, how the struggle must continue. They talked a lot, too, about the great "wealth gap" between blacks and whites today. President Obama said, "The gap in wealth between races hasn't lessened, it's grown." But neither he nor the other speakers talked about why, in Jesse Jackson's words, "We're freer [today] but less equal."

It was a day to celebrate the turning point in the civil rights movement. So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that the speakers stayed clear of some of the harsh realities that help explain why African-Americans are freer today but less equal.

No one mentioned that 50 years after Dr. King told us about his dream, black children are being abandoned by their fathers in numbers never seen in history. When Dr. King spoke, about 25 percent of black babies were born to single mothers. Today, it's 72 percent.

And no one talked about what just may be the single most important explanation for poverty in America. A while back, William Galston, an advisor to President Bill Clinton, took a

hard look at why some people are poor, and he came up with what appears to be a simple solution to avoid a life of poverty. Just do three things, he said: finish high school, marry before having a baby, and marry after the age of 20. *Only 8 percent of families who do this are poor while 79 percent who don't do these things are poor.*

In America's biggest cities too many black kids drop out of high school. And we've all heard stories about good black kids who take school seriously finding themselves the targets of ridicule because they're "acting white," in the depressing term used by other black kids who have no use for education.

Most black kids aren't criminals, of course. Most are good, decent people just trying to get by, like everybody else. But young black men commit a disproportionate amount of crime and often wind up behind bars. A young man with little education and a prison record isn't likely to get a good job. He's another reason too many black people are less equal today; he's another contributing factor that explains the wealth gap between the races.

If many of the speeches accentuated the positive, several others were downright disheartening. Marc Morial, the president of the Urban League brought the Ku Klux Klan into the conversation. "Somewhere along the way," he told the crowd, "white sheets were traded for button-down white shirts. Attack dogs and water hoses were traded for Tasers and widespread implementation of stop-and-frisk policies. Nooses were traded for handcuffs."

Melanie Campbell, president of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, stayed with the KKK theme, telling the crowd: "There are no white sheets, but there are judges in black robes in the U.S. Supreme Court who struck down Section IV of the Voting Rights Act, opening the floodgates in many states to pass more voter I.D. laws to block people of color and young people from voting, with the goal of ensuring we

never see another black man elected President – or woman – of the United States of America.”

Does Mr. Morial really believe that stop-and-frisk is doing more harm to black Americans than having babies out of wedlock? Does Ms. Campbell think that judges in black robes are doing as much harm as bigots in white sheets? Would Martin Luther King, if he were still with us, buy into this nonsense?

There were no black conservatives at the celebration to counter this kind of drivel – no Tim Scott, the only African-American in the U.S Senate; no Allen West, who recently served in the House; no Dr. Ben Carson; no Clarence Thomas. The so-called progressive people who are constantly preaching to us about the importance of diversity, wanted no serious diversity of opinion.

But President Obama did get in a few words that made conservatives nod in agreement. “During the course of 50 years,” he said, “there were times when some of us, claiming to push for change, lost our way. The anguish of assassinations set off self-defeating riots. Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse making for criminal behavior. ... [It was] as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child.”

For that, the president deserves credit.

It was a nice celebration on the National Mall. It paid homage to one of the great speeches in American history; in my view the greatest speech of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Martin Luther King were still with us today, he would have had a few words to say about the destruction of the black family; about men who have sex with 15 year old girls but have no interest in being fathers. He would have said something about crime in black America, a plague that has destroyed lives and

communities.

And he would have said it with passion and grace and a soaring rhetoric that would leave us mesmerized. Unlike some who masquerade as black leaders today, Martin Luther King knew the difference between men in white sheets and those in black robes. He knew the difference between nooses and handcuffs.

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