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[My Question for Dr. King](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/FI8BCERWNBUpJpNLupWoj8?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com)1964 and today

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| [Dan Rather](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/gQsZCG6WPEfApAQkHQ0-CM?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com) and [Elliot Kirschner](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/ob8zCJ6WVRfKmKDZUvDwbz?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com) |

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The phone rang today from friends and family watching this week’s edition of the CBS News program “Face The Nation.” Apparently, I had made an appearance on my former network in the form of archival footage — a flashback to an episode of that same program from nearly 60 years ago. Wow. How time flies. The guest on that Sunday’s “Face the Nation” in 1964 was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was in Washington at the time to lobby for passage of the Civil Rights Act. I remember the moment but didn’t recall what I had asked Dr. King until I recently rewatched the clip. As I reflect today on my question and his answer, I can’t help but ponder the passage of these many years and the winding and far-from-finished journey we as a nation and a people have taken on civil rights. The clip was featured in a segment (shared below) about growing diversity among members of Congress. In 2023, most people of color and women in Congress are Democrats. Making note of this political divide echoed the exchange I had with Dr. King way back in 1964. At that time, I was curious what he thought of the direction the Republican Party (the so-called “Party of Lincoln”) had taken on race relations. “Do you think there’s a real danger of the Republican Party becoming the ‘white man’s’ party in this country?” I asked. “I think this is a real danger,” he answered in his measured voice. “I’ve talked with some Negro Republicans who are very concerned about this. I see trends and developments which will reveal that unless the liberals of the Republican Party take a much more … decisive role in leadership positions, this will become a white man’s party. And I think this will be tragic for that Republican Party as well as tragic for the nation.”Here’s the “Face the Nation” clip:Image removed by sender.The record shows that in the decades that followed, the grim scenario Dr. King lamented in our exchange largely came to pass. In 1968, Richard Nixon used dog whistle appeals to racism in his euphemistic “Southern Strategy” to win the White House. In the ensuing years, what had been a “Solid South” for Democrats tracing back to the Civil War became a wall of red states that helped propel Republicans to power. From Ronald Reagan's demonizing “welfare queens” to George H.W. Bush’s Willie Horton ad, Republicans had concocted a playbook of racist appeals in order to win the white vote. With Trump, dog whistles became bullhorns. To be sure, Democrats have also sometimes used racist subtexts to appeal to white voters. And despite Trump’s toxic and xenophobic rhetoric, he performed better with minority voters than previous Republicans had. Furthermore, we have seen more prominent Black Republicans seeking, and winning, elected office. These trend lines suggest we should avoid the most simplistic narratives around race and politics.We have made a lot of progress since 1964. While significant overt racism still exists in America, we are also at a point when even most self-described “conservative” Republicans embrace Black public officials who share their political ideology. Dividing lines between the races are not nearly as impervious or immutable as they were.Some politicians and others point to these societal changes and say they prove that racism itself is over, along with the need for remedies to address it, such as voting rights laws and affirmative action. Sadly, this view is not supported by reality. Discrimination, while perhaps subtler or even subconscious, permeates our society from our neighborhoods to our schools to our jobs and to our health.With all this context in mind, it is important to remember that Dr. King’s vision of America was one in which race was inextricably tied to power — and that power was built on a foundation of white supremacy. He preached that we, as a nation, would never reach the full potential of our founding until we reconciled this fact. As Dr. King stated in his “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom:“In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”In honor of Dr. King’s birthday, scores of politicians, companies, and organizations will issue comfortable statements praising his courage or quoting his memorable rhetoric. Far too few will acknowledge the continuing truth of what he said. That truth was widely viewed as “radical” at the time. To some swaths of America, it still is. As I tweeted this summer, undoubtedly inspired by some comment in the news at the time, “Make no mistake, if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were alive today, he would be stigmatized as ‘woke’ and attacked accordingly.”Image removed by sender. Twitter avatar for @DanRather[**Dan Rather** @DanRather](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/T9soCQWg3RUoEoyOf5rysB?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com)[Make no mistake, if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were alive today, he would be stigmatized as “woke” and attacked accordingly.](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/T9soCQWg3RUoEoyOf5rysB?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com)[5:27 PM ∙ Aug 21, 2022](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/T9soCQWg3RUoEoyOf5rysB?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com)[**103,413**Likes**14,144**Retweets](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/T9soCQWg3RUoEoyOf5rysB?domain=na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com)Everything Dr. King stood for is under attack in America today. You can see it in efforts to disenfranchise voters. You can find it in the whitewashing of history and the demonization of so-called “critical race theory.” Whether it’s the banning of books, attacks on labor rights, or the death knell of affirmative action, an America of ideas, engagement, and reckoning with our past is under siege. In the sneers at “wokeness,” one finds an effort by the privileged to hold onto the positions of power they feel they are owed. It is an insult to everything Dr. King hoped to achieve.A significant proportion of today's Republican Party has been taken over by performative hatred, lies, and reactionary attempts to undermine American democracy. This dynamic presents new and unique challenges to our journey toward justice. Dr. King would have been fearless in denouncing these forces of hatred and autocracy. An important way to celebrate Dr. King is to recognize that he was human and thus subject to all the frailties and contradictions inherent to our species. Yes, he had his flaws. No, he was not perfect. But rather than deified, he should be studied as a leader and a visionary. To celebrate him in context is to recognize that he was deeply political, although not in a simple party line sense. Rather, he understood how to amass the power of the people to shift the levers of government — even subtly. Small changes, he knew, can lead to big results. Today, Dr. King’s work remains far from finished. To continue to bend the “arc of the moral universe” toward justice, there is a need to recognize the role politics will invariably play. At the same time, Dr. King understood that political divisions could exacerbate social ones. The business of mending what tears us apart, while remaining firmly rooted in a foundation of justice, is a mission each generation must adopt. Beginning in 1962, as a young, new correspondent for CBS News, I covered Dr. King and his then fledgling movement throughout the Deep South. He was struggling to gain traction and garner news coverage. He faced constant danger but was determined not to give up, never to give in.By 1964, I had become the network's chief White House correspondent. As such, I had a front row seat as Dr. King’s efforts helped drive historic civil rights legislation through Congress and into federal law. By then, he could see clearly how much remained to be done and how many perils lay ahead. He pressed on, although an early death would be his destiny. In his victories, may we find hope.  In all that remains to be done, may we summon his inspiration to continue to forge a path of progress. Steady.***Note***: If you are not already a member of the ***Steady*** community, please consider subscribing. 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