

OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.



BEYOND THE DREAM AMERICA'S FAILURE TO HONOR MLK

Over half a century later, Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision for racial equality remains a distant reality as his warnings go unheeded



Your Turn
Ricky L. Jones
Guest columnist

By 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was flailing. King hadn't had a major victory in years, and his popularity had plummeted.

As he neared death, almost 75% of Americans disapproved of him, labeling him a race-baiting troublemaker. Painfully for him, even a majority of Black people didn't support him.

Those closest to King wondered how he could go on as he tumbled into depression.

The immediate past provided no encouragement in 1968.

Medgar Evers had been shot to death on his driveway in Jackson, Mississippi, in June 1963. King's simultaneous rival and comrade Malcolm X was murdered just over a year and a half later in New York.

The Black Power movement had been born a few years earlier, and its leaders were already targeted, persecuted and, at times, marked for death. King's 13 years on the front lines of America's Civil Rights War ended when he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. He was only 39 years old.

What followed his death was a string of events that served to dismantle his legacy and allow anti-Blackness in America to flourish.

MLK's legacy and America's racial struggle

1968

The year MLK was assassinated, marking the end of his leadership in the civil rights movement.

1964

The year the Civil Rights Act was passed, outlawing racial segregation and discrimination.

1965

The year the Voting Rights Act was signed into law, aiming to protect African Americans' voting rights.

2013

The year of the Supreme Court ruling *Shelby County v. Holder*, weakening key provisions of the Voting Rights Act.

75%

The percentage of Americans who disapproved of MLK by the time of his death, reflecting the intense opposition he faced.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall. The civil rights leader was assassinated April 4, 1968.

JACK GRUBER/USA TODAY; ILLUSTRATION TREATMENT BY ABEL MUNIZ MONTENEGRO/USA TODAY NETWORK

Martin Luther King Jr. became another abandoned Black leader

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson and others, King had been abandoned by many leaders of the NAACP and other Black legacy organizations. He was still hounded by the U.S. government as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and COINTELPRO continued efforts to destroy Black leaders and resistance to racial inequality.

He was struggling to hold together his own coalition of lieutenants like Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams and others, who all quickly went their separate ways after King's death. Du Bois, one Black America's greatest intellectuals, had given up seven years earlier. He wrote to his friend Grace Goens in September 1961: "I just cannot take any more of this country's treatment. ... Chin up, and fight on, but realize that American Negroes can't win."

Du Bois left for Ghana the next month and never returned. He died the day before the 1963 March on Washington, a mere two months after Evers.

MLK did not live to see us misuse his words

King did not live to see racist anti-Black politicians and pundits misuse his words arguing

See JONES, Page 8B

Jones

Continued from Page 4B

people should “not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character” to oppose Black progress.

He did not live to see the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for which he fought so fiercely, weaponized by the U.S. Supreme Court and attorneys general like Kentucky’s Russell Coleman to justify the legal destruction of affirmative action and diversity initiatives, and set the fight for racial equality back decades.

King did not live to see the Voting Rights Act of 1965, of which he was so proud, gutted and rendered little more than a “dead letter” by the Shelby County v. Holder ruling in 2013. Since then, racial voting disparities in America have increased exponentially.

King was a brave man born out of the Black radical tradition

King did not live to see cowardly Black free-riders (not Freedom Riders) who will not open their mouths in defense of their people benefit from his sacrifice and suffering.

He did not live long enough to see the Ward Connerlys, Clarence Thomases, Candace Owens and Daniel Camerons of the world.

He didn’t live to see Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., skinning, grinning and genuflecting before Donald Trump as he bastardized the words of Fannie Lou Hamer.



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s widow, Coretta Scott King, leads a march through downtown Memphis in 1968 after he was fatally shot on April 4.

SAM MELHORN/MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL

He did not live long enough to see a Black man running for governor of North Carolina proudly proclaim that Black people owe America reparations.

Nor did King live long enough to see a Black president or the unrelenting white backlash that has followed him.

What would King think of America today?

The searing truth-telling writer James Baldwin didn’t see most of it, either. He outlived King by two decades, eventually dying in 1987 during the ra-

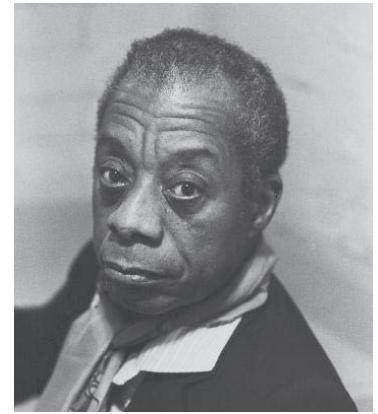
cial onslaught of the Reagan era. He was only 63.

For those decades, Baldwin was the one left behind.

He lived long enough to bear witness to the grief, pain and white retribution that followed his friends’ murders.

What Baldwin saw was neither pretty nor encouraging.

He damningly reflects on America in Raoul Peck’s Oscar-nominated documentary “I am not your Negro”: “I’m terrified at the moral apathy – the death of the heart which is happening in my country. These people have deluded



James Baldwin JYM WILSON/USA TODAY

themselves for so long that they really don’t think I’m human.

I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means that they have become, in themselves, moral monsters.”

Current political and social anti-Blackness has grown more and more brazen in America and, unfortunately, there are no Kings or Baldwins left to fight it. What would Baldwin, King and their fellow warriors think of America today?

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