

Lessons From The Civil Rights Movement For This Election Day And Beyond

By Eugene F. Rivers III and David L. Tubbs · October 29, 2020

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Creative Commons photo.

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(OPINION) Much of the nation awaits Election Day with trepidation, worried about the outcomes in various races,

potential delays in reporting results, and the possibility of fraud or ballot tampering. Nearly three of four Americans also worry about violent protests breaking out after election results are announced. The presence of real extremists

among us—as evidenced in the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer—has only added to our anxiety.

These worries are more acutely felt because of cultural and political divisions now familiar to us all. Influential voices aggravate the situation by insinuating that doomsday will be upon us if certain elections do not turn out as desired or expected.

One way to dispel the anxiety is to remind ourselves that the United States is much bigger than whatever may transpire on Nov. 3, 2020. As a nation, we are not reducible to the results of any election nor to any office, not even the presidency.

Furthermore, we have resources in American political thought to help us through this period. Anyone troubled by the prospect of violence should reflect on the strategy behind the great victories of the Civil Rights Movement.

A key element of that strategy was the principle of nonviolent resistance. In the face of seemingly implacable enmity from those determined to preserve legal segregation, African Americans forswore retaliatory violence and refused to demonize their persecutors. As professing Christians, they even prayed for their persecutors, believing that none of them was irredeemably bad or evil. Allowing for the possibility of personal transformation, they envisioned a future in which the persecutor and the persecuted could live in a state of concord and civic friendship—a state adumbrated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in various speeches and writing, including his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Some might question the relevance of this history for us because the United States is now a more secular country.

Many office holders and citizens do not pray for their

many since voters and citizens do not pray for their

political opponents because they simply do not pray.

Nonetheless, the Civil Rights Movement contains lessons for believers and nonbelievers alike.

Those seeking to end legal segregation found themselves in a conflict that must have seemed to them like a second civil war. Their good will towards their adversaries should today be seen by secular persons as praiseworthy, especially because that good will was unreciprocated. Their good will meant that they acknowledged the humanity of their adversaries, a principle in some versions of just-war theory, because a lasting peace cannot take shape without acknowledging the humanity of all those involved in a conflict.

Based on his theological studies, Dr. King knew that human beings sometimes behave more badly in a group than they do alone, especially when they strongly identify with a group. Knowledge of this tendency helped King to more fully understand the hatred and violence directed at African Americans by those defending segregation, who took their whiteness as the most important feature of their identity. And because no one individual or group was immune from that tendency, King saw the need to develop a strategy so that African Americans would not succumb to it. Hence the strategy of nonviolent resistance.

Some might question the wisdom of this strategy and its relevance to our current circumstances in view of what happened to Dr. King. After all, this fearless apostle of nonviolence was murdered on April 4, 1968. But King's ideas and example helped our nation get through a terrible year.

Despite rioting and turmoil in the United States following his death and the death of Robert Kennedy on June 6, 1968, a presidential election took place in November, followed by an orderly transfer of political power in January 1969. Our nation was then sharply divided and beset by radicalisms on both the left and the right. But we overcame the divisions.

In retrospect, it would be hard to deny that King persuaded countless Americans to reject violence as a means of effecting political change. But King's achievement may now be in jeopardy, because violence seems to be an option for an increasing number of Americans.

What, then, should we take from the preceding?

Notwithstanding the potentially high stakes in some of the races, and contrary to some pronouncements on both the left and the right, the future of our republic does not depend on the outcome of any race or set of races on Nov. 3. Rather, the future of our republic will depend—as it always does—on the capacity of the American people to exercise self-control, honor sound principles and extend civility and respect to political opponents.

The vast majority of Americans, whether on the left or the right, are not extremists. We should therefore resist the temptation to demonize candidates, incumbents, and fellow citizens whose politics differ from ours, even if they fail to show good will towards us. This temptation may persist for days or weeks after Election Day, especially if we are discouraged by the results of certain races or if the results in some races are not known. And if we strongly identify with either political party, we should be mindful of the tendency described above that so alarmed Dr. King.

Millions of Americans have this year reflected on the history of race relations in the United States, and much of that history is dispiriting. But that history also provides lessons and should now give us grounds for hope. If those in the Civil Rights Movement could respond to savage blows on their bodies with love and prayers for their assailants, we should be able to convey respect and good will to other Americans whose political affinities diverge from ours.

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