



**KING, KATRINA AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE:  
RESISTING THE ERASURE OF HISTORY**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 09-04-08, p. A-7*

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No one serious, sane or minimally aware could deny the historical meaning of the moment, not only because of the anticipated nomination acceptance speech of the first Black presidential nominee of a major party, but also because it was to happen on August 28, the day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his historic speech “I Have A Dream”, during the massive March on Washington in 1963 in the midst of our Liberation Movement to expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country. King and his Dream, which was, as he said, “deeply rooted in the American dream”, had served as a common ground of reference and promised racial reconciliation for the cooperative task of creating a new and just society.

And so, all who could and would were there waiting with great and ever-growing anticipation: the 80,000 in the Denver Stadium and 40 million plus before the TV. It was an impressive testimony of what it meant and promised to mean. For most it was a sense of the historic presence and promise of something new, needed and wondrous. For African Americans, it had also a special and no doubt deeper meaning as a history unfolding for which our ancestors had struggled—not for the nomination or even the office, but for what they signified. This moment signified the realization of a dream of freedom, justice and equality, justification of an historical hope, and a momentous measure of our progress in the struggle and martyr-generating journey from the Holocaust of enslavement to the real possibility of an African American leading the society that had enslaved us as a people. Also, the groundwork had already been laid for him well by the powerful appearance and

presentation of his wife, Michelle, thru her dignity-affirming portrait of the African American family, insisting on its role and reality in the American experience.

The presidential nominee had by all evaluations, except the most pathetically petty, done exceptionally well. He had put forth the central theme of the promise of America, and raised and dealt with a series of concrete issues, demonstrating confidence, dignity, discipline and decisiveness in his delivery. He had gently mentioned the Katrina catastrophe in a criticism of a “government that sits on its hands while a major American city drowns before its eyes”. He had thus settled for the soothing categories of “American”, and “city”, rather than reference to the human toll which would have conjured up faces, phobias and moral issues his advisors seem to prefer to avoid.

As he ends, he refers to the historic March on Washington and Dr. King’s speech without mentioning Dr. King’s name, calling him first “a young preacher from Georgia” and then simply “the preacher”. He presents the speech without its core demand for freedom, justice and ongoing struggle, and instead, concentrates on King’s call for recognition of our linked destiny and our commitment to march forward and never turn back or walk alone.

Whatever assumed strategy the presidential candidate from Illinois, Kansas and Hawaii or his advisors might have been pursuing, it is a strange, inexplicable and unacceptable violation of memory and a mangled attempt to erase and rewrite history. There is a morality of remembrance we as Africans are obligated to practice. Indeed, our foremother, Fannie Lou Hamer, freedom fighter of this very period, taught us

that “there are two things we all should care about—never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over”. It is these bridges which stand at the heart of our history and the head of the struggle to wean America away from its narrow notions of citizenship, rights and human reality. And it is this history that called our candidate into being, made him an electable candidate in the moment of America’s inward turn to renew itself, to pick itself up off the floor and field of broken dreams, unattended victims of floods and foreclosures, deceived and disregarded veterans of unjust wars, and a decisive lack of respect in the world.

King is not simply a “preacher from Georgia” nor can we sum up his dream as simply an interracial togetherness detached from the demand for justice and equality for which he sacrificed his life. Nor is it morally sound or suggestive of a new America to forget or omit the freedom fighters, demonstrators, marchers and martyrs who expanded the realm of freedom in the country and gave the candidate a platform on which to stand and make a credible case for himself.

The candidate from Chicago is right “at the defining moments like this one, the change we need doesn’t come from Washington. Change comes to Washington. Change happens because the American people demand it, because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time”. Indeed, what the masses of people and the urgency of the hour demand is a different kind of politics

and a principled leader to cultivate and commit to both and our candidate can and obviously wants to be that leader. But regardless of how much he wants and tries to do this, the political culture and considerations of election will push him toward the conservative “center” and keep him there in the quest of re-election unless there are organized efforts and an independent and interrelated progressive movement that insist on his keeping his original commitment, refraining from centrist and rightist turns and justifying them under the vulgar principle of political expediency. Thus, the candidate’s campaign must prefigure the society he wants to bring into being, not hide histories, privilege Whites or suppress the sacrifice, suffering and struggle of any people.

King taught us in his visionary speech that the fight for social justice remains unfinished until it reaches, respects and raises up everyone. And he defined the promise of America as a promise of the “inalienable right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and equal access to “the riches of freedom and the security of justice”. He wanted us not to engage in empty claims of reconciliation and peace without justice, but to have faith in the capacity of humans to change for the better and best, and build the good world we all want and deserve. And for him and us, this faith begins in mutual respect, is grounded and grows in justice, and finds its wings in our ultimate freedom and flourishing in the context of our own history and the fullness of our own unique and shared humanity.