

Just in time for MLK Day, presidential contest becomes one of race

by Marc_H._Morial

The proximity of the South Carolina primaries with the birthday of one of the civil rights movement's greatest leaders compelled several presidential candidates of both parties to take the name of Dr. Martin Luther King in vain. Welcome to the world of campaign politics in a year of a highly competitive campaign.

How ironic, in the last state in the Union to agree to observe the MLK national holiday and one where up until a decade ago the Confederate flag flew over its capitol.

You can't really blame the politicians vying for our nation's top office. With 60 percent of voters in the state's Democratic primary likely to be African-American, the stakes are high.

A few weeks before the MLK holiday, Sen. Hillary Clinton shot the first awkward salvo in what was a largely color- and gender-blind race before the pivotal South Carolina primary was on the horizon. Her comment regarding President Lyndon B. Johnson's role in enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 hit nerves - not necessarily for its content but its tone.

"Dr. King's dream began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964," she said. "It took a president to get it done."

As much as she tried to take her words back and reframe them, "the feeling hung in the air that she was denigrating America's most revered black leader," a recent New York Times editorial observed.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s stood upon many shoulders, including those of Dr. King. The results the movement achieved weren't the work of one man but many Americans - of all races, religions, genders and ages. While King propelled the fight with his impassioned oratory, he and other civil rights leaders realized that without powerful allies on Capitol Hill and in the White House, their efforts alone weren't likely to bring about the kind of change they envisioned. At the same time, it was the public pressure that the movement put upon the powers that be that prompted Johnson to act in the first place.

Where Clinton failed was in not adequately distributing the credit in a sensitive manner.

"Some of her advisers could have told her, 'You don't want to be affiliated with a position that says, somehow Lyndon Johnson took over Martin Luther King's dream and got it done,'" observed longtime civil rights activist Lawrence Guyot to the Washington Post.

But misfires happen, especially in the heat of political battle. Sen. Barack Obama's campaign took the former first lady's stumble as an opportunity to pounce: Staffers assembled a list of quotes that could be taken as racially insensitive. A whole exchange of mud slinging between both camps ensued, culminating with an appearance by former President Bill Clinton, once called the first African-American president, at his wife's side taking Obama on. A vicious cycle of hurt spiraled out of control, fueling more media speculation about anything and everything but the truth of the matter. They eventually called a truce, thank god, even though their debates continued to be heavy on the personal snipes and light on talk about African-American concerns.

As unappetizing as this campaign scuffle seems, it shows just how pivotal this year's black and minority vote will be for both parties. In the past, the Democratic Party has tended to pick up a majority of the black vote, but there are aspects of the GOP that have appeal, especially among religious blacks in the South, as former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee can attest to. He won the endorsement of 50 black religious leaders in South Carolina prior to his party's primary. And it is no coincidence that John McCain, Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney and others have issued statements praising the civil rights leader on his birthday.

Historians fear that overinvocation of King's name risks reducing him to an icon best known for his "I Have a Dream" speech instead of improving public awareness of the vision he embraced and championed, which toward the end of his life focused heavily on anti-poverty and anti-war issues and lost him some of the support he had in the early 1960s, especially in the media and the White House.

"Following King meant following the unpopular road, not the popular one," observed Melissa Harris-Lacewell, professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University, to the Washington Post recently.

Tossing Dr. King's legacy around like a political football does little to advance the cause of equality for all Americans that he fought so passionately for. The MLK holiday is so much more than a day off. It should serve as an opportunity to keep his dream alive for generations to come.

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