

Civil rights movement must continue to evolve

by Marc H. Morial

In light of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday celebration, USA Today recently asked me about the future of the civil rights movement half a century or so after it began. I told the paper the role of the National Urban League and other civil rights groups was evolving to cater to the younger generation, which possesses no memories of a struggle born well before they were.

Today's youth are looking for something different than their parents and grandparents. This is evident in the giving patterns of young minorities, who are more likely to believe that the key to greater equality is greater access to financial power than political power.

According to the City University of New York's Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, they are more interested in gaining access to Wall Street than marching on Washington. They also tend to support nonprofits that emphasize individual attainment and employ a business model of operation.

Instead of fighting for basic rights guaranteed to Americans, we are now fighting for our economic future. There is no doubt that blacks have made great progress in surmounting past challenges and thriving in the 21st century: Our quality of life has improved as has our future.

In 1960, 20.1 percent of blacks graduated from high school, which was a little less than half the percentage of whites. Now, 81.1 percent hold high-school degrees or higher - compared to 86 percent of whites. High school dropout rates have fallen to nearly one-half of what they were in 1975 - 27.3 percent to 15.1 percent in 2004, narrowing the gap with whites of 13.4 percentage points to three. Since 1970, life expectancy has risen 11.4 years, while that of whites has increased 7 years.

In *The State of Black America 2006*, the National Urban League found the overall status of blacks to be at 73 percent of whites. In terms of health, education and social justice, blacks were from 74 to 78 percent of whites and even surpassed whites in civic engagement. However, economically, they lagged substantially behind at just 56 percent.

Despite educational improvements, the gap in salaries has actually widened since 1960 when median income of black households was roughly \$14,000 less than whites in 2004 dollars. Now, that difference has expanded to \$21,372 despite a near doubling of household income. When it comes to personal wealth, whites still outperform blacks - 10 times over.

As I said in my keynote address at our annual conference last July, the idea of expanding the American dream and table to everyone is still relevant now as it was in the 1960s. The fight to sit at the lunch counter

was an important one. But what's the use of winning the right to eat at the lunch counter if you cannot afford the meal? Now, the civil rights struggle is more a fight of not only being able to afford lunch but being able to purchase the lunch counter.

There was a time when blacks were denied the right to own property. In 2004, home ownership among blacks hit an all-time high of nearly 50 percent.

For the black community to achieve economic equality with whites and be competitive in the global marketplace, it is not enough just to own property - though it's a very good start. We must also be able to maintain and secure that ownership for generations to come. And it is not enough for our children to just graduate high school. To obtain the jobs of the future, they will need to go to college at the very least to acquire the skills of the future and gain the financial freedom we desire for them.

In 1967, at the 11th convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pondered the question, "Where do we go from here?"

He also realized that the movement he helped create was an evolving entity. To grow and flourish, it couldn't just concentrate on securing basic liberties for minorities. It had to expand into something bigger - not only for the sake of the future generations but for the legacy of those who gave their lives to the cause.

A decade after the birth of the SCLC, Dr. King realized that to keep the movement alive he needed to begin to expand its scope to issues standing in the way of greater equality such as poverty and the Vietnam War, causing consternation within the Johnson administration.

After all, it wasn't just about guaranteeing basic inalienable rights to blacks in the South even back in the 1960s. It was becoming less a struggle for the rights of blacks to vote and operate freely within American society. The inner-city ghettos in northern cities emerged out of poor economic conditions - not necessarily out of political circumstance. The riots of the late 1960s occurred in areas whose residents had the right to vote for years and where the first blacks after Reconstruction won election.

"We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us. We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. We gained manhood in the nation that had always called us 'boy,' " Dr. King said before the SCLC's 11th convention. "But in spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower."

Dr. King realized that economic as well as political empowerment would put the black community on the track to full equality and prosperity in the United States by blacks - especially the poor - "the additional weapon of cash" to combat discrimination. He foresaw a "host of positive psychological effects" that would result from widespread economic security among blacks.

"The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement. Personal conflicts between husband, wife, and children will diminish when the unjust measurement of human worth on a scale of dollars is eliminated," he told the SCLC nearly 40 years ago.

At a National Urban League forum in Harlem last June discussing the impact of the "n-word," one panelist said part of the reason why the younger generation invokes the word more freely than their elders is that they are not as aware of the racial epithet's history. They don't feel the pain of the word because their elders would rather repress bitter memories of the past than relive them. But that's the last thing we should do in our efforts to move forward to be stronger and better than ever.

When our youth is unaware of what came before, we are undermining their ability to build upon the movement's progress and create a brighter future for future generations. Without those memories, we have no context in which to put our aspirations. While the movement has taken on a new form and will serve new constituents as the United States evolves demographically, we must not forget the reason why we embraced this struggle in the first place.

We must concede that the challenges now faced by the black community are somewhat different from the 1960s. Our youth have our legacy in their hands. We can either engage them and emerge stronger or ignore them and relinquish our power.

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