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Opposition to War in Iraq is Byrd's Finest Hour

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Greatness is revealed when ordinary people risk their status by taking principled but unpopular positions. It takes courage to speak against prevailing societal opinions.

Last January, during Dow Chemical's Martin Luther King Jr. celebration, there was an uncomfortable silence when guest speaker Marty King (Martin Luther King III), congratulated West Virginia on the courage of Sen. Robert C. Byrd in his unwavering opposition to the war in Iraq.

When King made his comment, I was struck with the incongruity of the moment. At the time, I reflected on how Byrd had failed to support civil rights initiatives in the past and refused to support the speaker's father specifically. On reflection, it was an awesome historical juxtaposition that I am grateful to have witnessed and have grown immensely from the experience. As the year of 2004 progressed, I often considered the praise of Byrd by Marty King and came to agree with this positive assessment of our senior senator.

We should be extremely proud of Sen. Byrd in his steadfast opposition to the way the war in Iraq has been promoted in general and his caution that we are sacrificing too many civil liberties. Byrd has been a consistent, honorable voice in his opposition to how this administration misleadingly linked the war in Iraq to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and to weapons of mass destruction, plus opposition to the civil liberties violations of the Patriot Act.

Byrd has incurred the censure of national commentators and the disapproval of local constituents as he stands for the truth of his convictions. This is Byrd's finest, if not most popular, hour. He has shown that it is possible to be patriotic and supportive of American troops while criticizing the war that has America mired in an unnecessarily difficult situation accompanied by the condemnation of the international community.

While we should all pray that the elections in Iraq are successful, that democracy will be established and our troops will safely come home, this does not excuse the pretext that brought us to this point.

When I think of Byrd's courageous stand against the war, I see shades of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In the public commemoration of the King holiday, it seemed that Dr. King's most memorable act was in 1963 on a balmy summer day when he told thousands at the mall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and millions on television "I have a dream," the phrase that has come, in the public's eye, to characterize King's greatness. But author Michael Eric Dyson aptly warns us in his insightful King biography that we limit the greatness of the man when we allow the King celebration to tailspin into one or two catchphrases. We actually mock the legacy when politicians and community leaders are allowed to quote his phrases while failing to devote themselves to his causes.

Dr. King's civil rights legacy is without peer. His strategies of speaking truth to power through love and passive resistance through nonviolence were such radical concepts that racists had no defense as they were revealed to be narrow-minded extremists. Dr. King's religious writings, such as his letter from the Birmingham jail, contain a message every clergy member should read, especially the emergent leaders of the religious right. His civil rights reflections are as pertinent today as when he was alive.

After the March on Washington, Dr. King was established as the preeminent civil rights leader. He traveled the world and was justifiably celebrated as a hero. But he was more interested in truth than celebrity, more concerned with justice than acceptance, and found more value in standing for righteousness than fund raising.

Dedication to principle caused him to passionately criticize the war in Vietnam. The response was immediate and decidedly negative. Dr. King delivered his historic address, "A Time to Break Silence," to clergy and laity at the Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967, exactly a year before he was assassinated. It was in this speech that he first publicly linked his opposition to the Vietnam War to the civil rights movement.

The last year of Dr. King's life was spent facing fierce criticism from former allies. He suffered a decided drop in popularity polls. He risked losing all the funding sources for his civil rights initiatives, yet he remained steadfast because he believed the war in Vietnam was immoral. Unseen forces attempted to eradicate King's influence and governmental agencies leaked negative information about his private life, but history has proven the truth of King's convictions about Vietnam.

As I listen to the current criticisms of Sen. Byrd, I am struck by the parallel. By risking his reputation for the sake of his convictions, Byrd is reliving part of the King experience and, whether we agree or disagree, he should be admired for his courage.

All fair-minded people should question the motivation of political enemies who castigate Byrd because of his former mistaken racial positions while they accept more recent enemies of unity into their fold. I only hope that Byrd will expand his courageous stance against the war, and support with renewed vigor the rest of Dr. King's dream of social and economic equality.

Perhaps a new alliance with the civil rights community will provide a way for the latter days of this longstanding senator to truly be his best days.

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