

Bracing for Impact in 2020: What We Can Learn from MLK's Journey

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As the nation braces for a contentious, divisive presidential election year ahead, Rev.-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voice of reason and calm is needed more than ever. Not unlike 1968, 2020 is a year when this nation is on edge. Back then, the Vietnam War loomed over the nation like a dark cloud, seemingly without end. Streets in many major cities around the country were rife with racial unrest. Segregationists were incensed with the wave of nonviolent protests that pitted Blacks v. the rest of America. It was in King's infamous, last speech on April 3rd in Memphis that he said, "*The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around.*" Wow! Sound familiar? Too much so.

I suppose the good news today is that the nightly news is not giving us updates on the number of deaths and casualties from a war taking place halfway around the world, though it's clear that we are living at a time when we are one tweet away from igniting global panic. Our streets aren't in flames, though some of our cities are one police-shooting or mass shooting away from a massive outpouring of civil unrest due to the inaction on policies to protect people from gun violence. What's too similar is that the nation is engaged in a race and class war where immigrants are getting demonized and stereotypical tropes are being used to castigate and marginalize women and racial and ethnic minorities. King called on people to take to the streets to hold nonviolent marches. He called on residents to demand respect and justice for access to jobs and fair wages. "Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater

determination,” King said that Memphis night. “And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.”

To make America a better nation is going to require a collective effort where people of all races and backgrounds will have to embrace the economic and demographic realities of a country that will be majority minority in less than 20 years. This imminent change has fueled fear and tension in cities – large and small. The need for citizens take a deep breath to pause, listen and understand each other is what King would have wanted. There’s a need for corporate leaders to fill the void where civil conversations are absent. As King once said, “People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”

Our survival in 2020 is going to rely on us following King’s advice to listen more, and communicate better. As professionals who shape messages on a daily basis, we have to push ourselves to be thoughtful, creative and bold. Yes, bold in a way that allows us to celebrate the goodness in humanity and challenge those around us to stand together with a “greater determination” to minimize hateful speech, and eliminate insensitive images and messages that only lead to an unraveling of the intricate, but delicate weaving of our country’s democracy. King offers some advice to us during this election year that should be etched in our minds throughout the year: “We shall have to do more than register and more than vote; we shall have to create leaders who embody virtues we can respect, who have moral and ethical principles we can applaud with enthusiasm.”



About the Author: Neil Foote is a veteran journalist and media executive. He draws from his experience at the Miami Herald, Washington Post, Belo Corporation and Tom Joyner's Reach Media. He also teaches digital and social media for journalists, media management and business journalism at the University of North Texas' Frank W. & Sue Mayborn School of Journalism and runs Foote Communications, a media consulting firm. The native of Brooklyn, NY also is president of the board for the National Black Public Relations Society and founder of PoliticsInColor.com