

COMMENTARY

Despite his flaws, King made the difference.

A hero in a country that asks too much

By Peter H. Gibbon

For most of human history, heroes have been warriors. So it was a significant moment in the progress of civilization when the world's most powerful nation anointed as a hero a man who had rejected violence.

For most of American history, our heroes have been white. It was transforming when in 1986 Americans decided to create a national holiday to honor an African American who had preached racial equality and insisted that we live up to the promises made in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Why, nearly 35 years after his death, is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a hero? With his charisma, electrifying speeches, and organizational genius, he led a civil-rights revolution that ended segregation in the South. Then he moved on to confront poverty, prejudice and war. Challenging his own organization, as well as the racism of white Americans, he took radical stands on poverty and Vietnam.

Jailed 13 times, King faced constant death threats. His house was dynamited. He was stabbed. He was assassinated fighting for a cause that continued the work of Abraham Lincoln and influenced other protest movements, the feminist revolution, and the apartheid crusade. King had moral as well as physical courage. Born privileged, he expected a life of comfort and scholarship, but the Montgomery bus boycott thrust him into a crisis from which he never retreated.

King was not only extraordinarily courageous, but also great-souled. Though critical of American society, he held out hope. He freely gave cred-

it, insisting that the real heroes of the South were those "sitting-in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake." And King grew as a preacher, speaker and person. Though he listened and changed, about his deepest convictions he could not be budged.

What made King a hero? It helped to have heroic models: his father, Baptist

minister Martin Luther King Sr.; Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays; civil-rights leader A. Philip Randolph, and Gandhi. King turned to history, literature and philosophy for guidance and inspiration. Above all, he had his religion. Named after the 16th-century Protestant reformer, King drew from Christianity an endless stream of quota-

tions, his passion for social justice, his commitment to nonviolence, his sense of destiny. His faith enabled him to see meaning in suffering. And it permitted him to face squarely his own death, when he was only 39, propelling him into the pantheon of martyr/heroes.

I recently debated with revisionist historian Howard Zinn on the University of Pennsylvania campus for the NPR radio program *Justice Talking*. One student asked me whether we should still look up to Martin Luther King Jr., knowing, as we do now, that as a Christian minister he was unfaithful to his wife. As I travel around the country talking to students about heroes, this question comes up all the time.

In an information age, our knowledge of the intimate life makes it hard to have heroes. And King's infidelity was indeed relevant at the time, since it gave J. Edgar Hoover ammunition to blackmail him and interfere with the civil-rights movement.

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roses only by their flaws. In one of his sermons, King warned about the dangers of hero worship: "You don't need to go out saying that Martin Luther King is a saint. Oh, no. I want you to know this morning that I am a sinner like all of God's children."

Our heroes become credible, more accessible, more human, when we acknowledge their failings. King had to appear confident but was often anguished, unsure of which way to go. Toward the end of his life, he noted: "We stumble through life with a feeling of insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, a sense of impending failure."

Today, familiar with the flaws of our great men and women, we not only cut them down to size; we also are reluctant to believe that any one person can make a difference. And like King himself, we are more comfortable giving credit to groups rather

than to "heroes."

But could a committee have written the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail"? Could just anyone have delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech? How many people could have stood on the bombed-out porch of their home and said, "We must meet hate with love"?

Without King's vision, the South might have erupted in a violent race war. Without his leadership, we might not have achieved one of the signal accomplishments of the 20th century — the one we celebrate today — the widespread belief in racial equality and nonviolent social change.

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