

Documentary Review: Martin Luther King, Jr. Under Siege

“King in the Wilderness” (HBO Documentaries, Peter Kunhardt, 2018)

<https://www.hbo.com/classrooms/king-in-the-wilderness>

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As the title of this essay indicates, Peter Kunhardt’s timely documentary “King in the Wilderness” should actually be called “King Under Siege.”

It must first, and always, be said that MLK was a dedicated Religious Humanist; never more so than in the final three years of his life, the period of time that this documentary deals with.

We are all very familiar with the Sit-Ins, the Freedom Riders, the Bus Boycotts, the Bull Connors, and all the rest of the iconic moments from the early years of the Civil Rights Movement that were led and orchestrated and inspired by MLK.

We know all about the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights bill and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

We are far less familiar with what happened after all these seminal events in the history of the American Civil Rights struggle.

Indeed, it is not easy to see MLK as the enemy of America that many felt he was after 1965.

He became the enemy of the African-American community that he so proudly led. He was called names by young Black militants who felt that his belief in Non-Violence was craven and pusillanimous.

Stokely Carmichael, head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), stood up to MLK and forcefully rejected the basic principles of pacifism and incrementalism that the Civil Rights Movement stood for. Rioting and violence permeated the Black Power Movement that Carmichael helped create. This violence began even prior to King’s assassination in 1968; it was a movement that he inveighed against as he continued to counsel patience and tolerance for the enemy.

In the wake of the passage of the groundbreaking Civil Rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, King sought to extend his activism to include Housing Rights, Labor Rights, attacks on Poverty, and, most controversially of all, a call to end the Vietnam War.

For all this innovation in his activist work, King was viciously persecuted by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI and saw his popularity among Americans drop perilously. His landmark 1967 speech at the Riverside Church in Manhattan forcefully brought up the vexing issue

of Vietnam, which forced him to confront President Johnson; the man who had worked with him to achieve those unprecedented legislative victories.

The new and very aggressive activist stance led King to Chicago where he marched in the ghetto neighborhoods to expose racist housing practices. While on these marches he quickly learned of the virulent racism and anti-integrationist sentiment of Northern Whites.

This racism was quite different from the racism the Civil Rights activists had experienced in the South. The old Confederacy remnant made no secret of its support for Jim Crow lawlessness and racial separation. But in Chicago there was a far more hidden racism that was deeply integrated into the very institutional core and fabric of the corrupt Richard Daley cabal mafia. Archival footage of the march shows clearly the toxicity of this racism with Nazi banners and Confederate flags being waved as the activists walked through the city.

King also brought the movement to Los Angeles' impoverished Watts ghetto where he confronted the bitterness and frustration of its inhabitants, generated by some deeply complex and stratified socio-political problems that went way beyond the basic Civil Rights issues of the South. Decades of injustice and institutional racism had acted as a corrosive that affected the socio-political process which controlled people's lives and prevented them from having basic human dignity.

After the cobwebs of Jim Crow began to be cleared away, though not completely eradicated, King thus took on the even more difficult and intractable problems that pervaded American society in a way that brought him grief and persecution.

"King in the Wilderness" provides us with a very painful up-close view of MLK at a critical juncture in his life. He had achieved success after success since he took the helm of the Civil Rights Movement in 1956. The methodical and media-savvy strategies that he developed in the Jim Crow South had paid off real dividends. The Gandhian value of Non-Violence had become the bedrock of the movement, until he embarked on this new and hazardous turn after 1965.

He lost SNCC to the violent machinations of Carmichael who did not hesitate to criticize Non-Violence and its African-American proponents. The Black Power Movement sought to return to the old Nation of Islam separatism once espoused by Malcolm X.

Carmichael and the militants seemed to have forgotten that, prior to his assassination at the hands of NOI henchmen working at the behest of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X had begun a new movement of his own that was inching closer to King and to the idea of integration and of Whites and Blacks working together under the rubric of Religious Humanism.

As the Black militants began to splinter the Civil Rights Movement, the FBI continued its persecution of MLK and supposed Communist elements in the ranks of his organization.

Hoover remained an implacable foe of King and his use of extra-judicial measures to spy on the movement became a central factor in the ongoing attempt to silence the activists and crush their spirits.

“King in the Wilderness” shows us a man in the throes of a painful realization that the work he began a decade earlier was taking a dangerous new turn and that he would have great difficulty keeping the movement together in the face of the gargantuan problems that were now being confronted. He decided to enter the volatile fray of labor issues, fair housing practices, and the cause of global peace.

Where the issues of African-American social integration were clear and obvious to many, the issues of universal social justice dealing with poverty and violence were not at all agreed to by every American.

MLK was soon seen as an interloper and as not being satisfied with what he had already achieved.

Many White Americans saw him as a Communist and a traitor, while a restless Black activist youth cadre led by Carmichael saw him as an Uncle Tom appeaser whose Non-Violence and careful incrementalism was ineffective.

The documentary allows us to see not only King’s courage and perseverance in the face of persecution and isolation, but to better appreciate his ultimate accomplishments in the years that followed his assassination.

Indeed, the violent approach of his radical antagonists led to dead-ends and a marked lack of legislative and political advancement.

We have seen this approach in the prescriptions of the New Black Separatists led by rabble-rousers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jordan Peele, who prefer to be wealthy celebrity entertainers than to actually do the hard and thankless work of social activism and community organizing.

Although King did not live to see how much more he accomplished through his stubborn Non-Violence and incrementalism, watching his struggle for peace and against poverty reminds us that things today are not at all what they were at the end of the 1960s. He still remains the most effective leader for social change that this country has ever had.

At the recent Anti-Gun march in Washington, DC organized by the High School students of Parkland, Florida, we saw the deployment of his sacred legacy in the most aggressive manner.

Like King, the students see practical value in the political process and in the pressing need for racial and class equality. Most importantly, the young people have fully embraced what Sephardim have called Convivencia; that cultural pluralism that comes

from different groups, ethnicities, and religions coming together harmoniously and peacefully:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/Davidshasha/JgbF4HTBnr0>

Against the naysayers who preach violence and separatism, these courageous young people see the power of Non-Violence and the need for full equality and social integration. They too understand the gradual, unfolding process of our democratic system and have not been dismayed by the obstacles placed before them. They have absorbed the inevitable attacks on them without fear and with a very strong heart.

It must finally be said yet again that MLK was a man who believed in the rare and noble values of Religious Humanism. As a Christian preacher he saw the value of God's salvation, but he also understood the power of ideas and Humanistic learning. He was a deeply reflective man who knew that books are nothing without Love of the Neighbor, and that the power of God is nothing without the strength of the mind and a truly realistic approach to the world as it is, and not as some hollow pie in the sky.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of King's death it is important to remember his commitment to the values of Religious Humanism and to his belief in American Democracy. It has become all too common for people to lose faith in our institutions and core values and deny the hope that is necessary to effect change. There are too many people who have embraced despair and nihilism, refusing to believe that change is possible and can be generated by our human(e) actions.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sought human equality and social justice under the rubric of God's everlasting love. It is often difficult to see him with fresh eyes today, as he has become such an indelible and iconic figure that the saintly blinds us to the human.

But "King in the Wilderness" shows us a man of flesh and blood whose life was so very cruelly taken from him by an assassin's bullet. It refuses to sugarcoat the painful reality that he faced as a soldier for justice and equality. He was a man who made mistakes, but whose prescriptions have led to real, tangible progress and which have helped to ameliorate many of the problems we face as a society.

As King so well understood, the task is always left unfinished as there is so much more to be done. But in the face of despair and disenchantment, he demanded that we take the reins of activism into our own hands and continue to press on with the fight no matter what the cost.

So, in spite of what the current crop of nihilistic separatists and scared skeptics would have us believe, King's dictum of the long Arc of Moral History bending towards Justice rings as true today as it did when he was marching on behalf of the downtrodden and when he was himself the target of oppression and persecution.

May his memory always be a blessing to us.

David Shasha

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