

OTHER TAKES

Palaima: What King could teach us about our role in the world

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Every Martin Luther King Day, I make sure to reread a few speeches and sermons by this great man of God. His words remind me that a great political figure can stand bravely for peace and justice.

This year I also rented the just-released DVD of Abby Mann's classic docu-drama "King." In one of the extra short documentaries, Mann and singer Tony Bennett talk about their own personal impressions of King. Their memories are vivid after 40 years.

Tony Bennett? Who knew? Or rather, how easily we forget.

Mann and Bennett speak simply as American citizens. They are not intellectuals. They say what they know and what they still feel about the Martin Luther King they knew and loved.

Bennett recounts what made him see the racism that he believes still permeates our country. At the end of World War II, the then Tony Benedetto was a corporal in Germany. In Mannheim, he ran into an old friend from the High School of Industrial Arts in New York City, where, as Bennett explains, poor Depression kids got a chance to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps."

Bennett's old friend Frank Smith was African American. They had played music together in high school and were overjoyed to find each other in the wreckage of Europe. Bennett says simply, "We loved one another very much."

Bennett invited Frank back to dinner. There a captain called Bennett over, took out a razor blade, cut off his corporal stripes, threw them on the ground, spat on them and declared, "You're shipping out in 20 minutes. We don't like the company you keep." Bennett was reassigned to graves registration, a gruesome job, digging up and identifying bodies - all because his friend was black.

Years later, Bennett "bristled up" at such injustice, "just couldn't stand it," and he was among the public figures who accompanied King on his freedom marches in the South. Ironically, at the end of one day, local authorities denied the marchers permission to use a stage so that Bennett could perform. They found 18 unused coffins in a funeral home and stacked them. Bennett sang for the marchers, who were exhausted by the tension and real violence of the day, standing atop what for him were collective symbols of war and racism.

Bennett explains his performance philosophy: "Life can be tough for anybody. I am glad I can make people forget their problems for an hour and a half." He also observes, "It's funny how politics gets in the way of humanity. How difficult it is for one person to stand up for what's right" because "greed makes everyone forget the rules of this country." He also wonders why it is that the rare figures, such as Jesus Christ and Martin Luther King, who "speak truth and beauty and show us how to live are the ones who get assassinated."

Both Mann and Bennett are aware that in the last year of his life King had shifted his focus away from civil rights. He was speaking out and rallying people against wealth disparity, the war in Vietnam and our other foreign wars. His writings and speeches between April 1967 and April 1968 are full of strong criticisms of American war-making. He demands, again and again, that "America address itself to the problem of poverty." He was in Memphis in April 1968 in support of the labor rights of 1,300 sanitation workers.

Abby Mann marvels that King persevered in criticizing the war in Vietnam, despite serious warnings about its impact on his civil rights work: "If you come out against Vietnam, that's over, you're destroyed. And to say 'No, I'm gonna do it.' And then they say, 'What's that gonna mean? You're not gonna change things.' And he says, 'Yes, but I'm not gonna keep quiet.' And he did it out of (his) basic decency."

And now we still have war and poverty and growing wealth disparity. The president has vowed that we will "end tyranny" and help "the force of human freedom" in Iraq and around the world. Who knew? How easily we forget.

Pick up Michael J. Sullivan III's recent "American Adventurism Abroad." It analyzes the 30 major American foreign interventions between 1947 and 2001. In 26 cases, "terrible disasters have been visited upon the local societies targeted by U.S. interventions." These include 500-plus cumulative years of disrupted politics and dictatorships, nine cases of direct coups leading to military regimes, nine cases of tolerated overkill even to the point of genocide, and a conservative total of 6.6 million deaths. This is how we spread human freedom.

This is our track record since World War II, in plain fact. It is what King was trying to make us see when he was martyred. And Vietnam was not even the midway point.

Sullivan and King both argue that the United States does not make the world safe for democracy, but for capitalists, who, according to King, "take the profit out with no concern for the social betterment of (other) countries."

King then supplied the vision and the courage. Sullivan, Bennett and Mann now provide some of the proof.

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