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Opinions

50 years after the March on Washington, what would MLK march for today?















1. He sang at the debut of 'Gone With The Wind' - At age 9, Martin Luther King Jr. sang in his church choir at the Dec. 15, 1939, Atlanta premiere of the Civil War-era romance. One of the film's stars, Hattie McDaniel, refused to attend because Loew's Grand Theatre had separate sections for black and white filmgoers.

Turner Entertainment

BY PETER DREIER August 22, 2013

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What would the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. march for if he were alive today?

America has made progress on many fronts in the half-century since King electrified a crowd of 200,000 people, and millions of Americans watching on television, with his [“I Have a Dream” address](#) at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. But there is still much to do to achieve his vision of equality.

Fortunately, many Americans are involved in grass-roots movements that follow in his footsteps. King began his activism as a crusader against racial segregation, but he soon recognized that his battle was part of a much broader fight for a more humane society. Today, at age 84, King would no doubt still be on the front lines, lending his voice and his energy to major battles for justice.

Voting rights: Along with other civil rights leaders, King fought hard to dismantle Jim Crow laws that kept blacks from voting. He was proud of his role in pushing Congress to

pass the Voting Rights Act in 1965. He'd be outraged by [the Supreme Court's recent ruling](#) to weaken the law that, among other things, increased the number of black voters and black elected officials.

Since that ruling, a movement has burgeoned to stop states' efforts to require photo IDs in order to vote, shrink the early-voting period, and end same-day voter registration and pre-registration for teenagers who will turn 18 by Election Day. Today, King might lend his name to these campaigns and join the [Moral Monday protests](#) in North Carolina, where thousands have opposed that state's efforts to restrict voting rights.

Gun violence: During the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, King faced constant death threats and feared for his family's life. He owned several guns and allowed armed guards to protect his home. But Bayard Rustin — a pacifist who was one of King's closest advisers — persuaded King to give up his guns and guards and embrace a nonviolent strategy.

King's commitment to nonviolence grew stronger as he grew older. After John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, King wrote: "By our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim, by allowing our movie and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing, by allowing all these developments, we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes."

Today he would probably push for tougher limits on gun ownership. He would have joined the college and high school students who recently [camped outside Florida Gov. Rick Scott's office](#) for 31 days, demanding repeal of that state's shoot-first "[stand your](#)

[ground” law](#). And he’d probably support the activists in Chicago who recently protested for several days outside a conference of the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-sponsored lobbying group that has been a major advocate of “stand your ground” laws. He might call on cities, colleges and churches to divest from companies that manufacture military-style assault weapons.

Mass incarceration: King recognized that the criminal justice system has long had a double standard when it comes to the treatment of black and white Americans. Today he would be joining prison reform groups, the ACLU, the NAACP and others that have been protesting racial profiling by police and drug policies that have resulted in 2.3 million Americans behind bars, many for nonviolent, minor offenses.

King would have applauded Attorney General [Eric H. Holder Jr.’s recent speech](#) outlining plans to reduce mass incarceration rates by limiting the number of people sentenced under mandatory-minimum laws. You could hear King’s spirit echoed in Holder’s words: “A vicious cycle of poverty, criminality and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. We cannot simply prosecute or incarcerate our way to becoming a safe nation.”

Women’s reproductive freedom: In 1966, King was one of four recipients of [Planned Parenthood’s first Margaret Sanger Award](#), named for the group’s founder, a pioneer in educating women about birth control. In accepting the award, King said that “there is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger’s early efforts.” He noted how “at the turn of the century, she went into the slums and set up a birth-control clinic,

and for this deed she went to jail because she was violating an unjust law. Yet the years have justified her actions.”

King never spoke publicly about his views on abortion, and he was murdered five years before the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, but he was a fervent advocate for universal health care. “Of all the forms of inequality,” he said in 1966, “injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.” Today King probably would speak at rallies and participate in vigils at state capitals in Maine, North Carolina, Texas and elsewhere to protect women’s access to health care and reproductive freedom — and challenge those who are trying to shut down Planned Parenthood clinics.

Immigrant rights: King would be pleased by the ties between the civil rights and immigrant rights movements. Ten years ago, a coalition of union, immigrant, faith and civil rights groups organized an [Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride](#). More than 900 riders on buses from nine cities traveled 20,000 miles, in the tradition of the 1960s Freedom Riders, to support immigration reform. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), one of the original Freedom Riders, spoke at a rally when the buses reached New York, declaring: “Martin Luther King would be very proud. We are white, black, Hispanic, Native American — we are one family, in one house, and we are not going to let anybody turn us around.”

Now a much broader coalition is pushing for comprehensive immigration reform, energized by young activists who call themselves [Dreamers](#), a term that evokes King’s 1963 speech. Many of these young people share the values, culture and aspirations of

other American youth, but they feel, as King described the typical African American 50 years ago, like “an exile in his own land.”

National spending priorities: By 1965, King had turned against the Vietnam War, arguing that it was stealing precious resources from domestic programs and that it was “an enemy of the poor.” In his last book, “[Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?](#)” King wrote, “The bombs in Vietnam explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.” At the time, he called for a comprehensive plan to create jobs, rebuild cities, improve schools and lift the poor out of destitution.

Today, King would probably be working with unions, religious organizations and activist groups such as Code Pink to cut the defense budget and redirect money to help rebuild our cities and social safety net. He’d be speaking out against Congress’s recent [cuts to food stamps](#), [Head Start](#) and other anti-poverty programs. In particular, King, who had close ties to the United Auto Workers — once the backbone of a powerful labor movement that helped build the postwar middle class — would be calling on the president and Congress to help revitalize Detroit with loans and grants to create jobs, restore public services and create a smaller but more humane city.

Income inequality and the working poor: A half-century before Occupy Wall Street, King warned about the “gulf between the haves and the have-nots” and insisted that America needed a “better distribution of wealth.” During the final few years of his life, King focused much of his energy on helping low-wage workers fight for rights and respect. He was in Memphis to support striking garbage workers when he was assassinated in April 1968.

Today he would join the growing campaigns to unionize and improve pay and working conditions for workers who earn poverty-level wages. He might disrupt Wal-Mart stockholder meetings to demand that the company pay employees a living wage, join fast-food workers in [their nationwide walkout](#) on Aug. 29, and urge consumers to boycott the Gap, Wal-Mart and other companies until they stop manufacturing their products in overseas sweatshops. He'd also be vocal about raising the federal minimum wage, which was one of the demands of the March on Washington.

Housing and predatory lending: Appalled by the slums and blatant residential segregation in our major cities, especially in the North, King lobbied hard for anti-discrimination laws in the 1960s. Today, King would be equally outraged to learn that banks [targeted African American and Latino neighborhoods](#) with subprime loans in recent decades. As a result, in the past few years, about one-quarter of black and Latino borrowers have lost their homes to foreclosure or are seriously delinquent on their mortgages, compared with about 12 percent for white borrowers. From 2009 to 2012 African Americans lost about \$200 billion in wealth, and the wealth gap between whites and blacks now stands at an astonishing 20 to 1 ratio.

King would find common cause with community groups such as the Home Defenders League and state attorneys general, such as California's Kamala Harris and New York's Eric Schneiderman, who are pressuring Wall Street banks to reset mortgages for underwater homeowners. King might link arms with homeowners such as [Rose Gudiel](#) of Los Angeles, who, with friends and neighbors at her side in 2011, refused to leave her house when the bank sought to evict her after she missed a few mortgage payments because her brother, who had been helping her, died. Gudiel and her friends occupied the

bank's office and later got arrested at Fannie Mae's regional office. The bank reset her loan, and she is back in her modest home with her family. But she's now working with the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment to help other homeowners in similar circumstances. Gudiel was carrying out King's view that sometimes you have to break an unjust law — and get arrested — to change it.

LGBT equality: Typical of most Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, King did not approve of homosexuality, even though his close adviser Bayard Rustin was openly gay. But when some civil rights leaders objected to Rustin's role as the key organizer of the March on Washington, worried that it would tarnish the movement, King insisted that Rustin stay in the job.

Since the 1960s, public opinion toward gay Americans has shifted dramatically. Had King encountered more openly gay men and women, his views probably would have evolved as well. After all, when King spoke out against state laws banning interracial marriage in 1958, he sounded a lot like those who advocate for same-sex marriage today: “When any society says that I cannot marry a certain person, that society has cut off a segment of my freedom.”

Today, with the support of the NAACP and a growing number of black clergy members supporting gay rights, King would stand — and sit in when necessary — with the LGBT community to help push states toward legalizing same-sex marriage and ending other forms of discrimination against gay Americans.

The night before he was shot, King spoke at a rally for the striking garbage workers in Memphis. He told the crowd about a bomb threat on his plane from Atlanta that morning, saying he knew that his life was in danger because of his political activism.

“I would like to live a long life,” he said. “Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.”

We haven’t gotten there yet. The best way to honor his memory is to continue his struggle for social justice.

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