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What Would Dr. King Think?

By Colbert I. King
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On the eve of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, it seems fitting to ask what the Nobel Prize winner would think of America and race in the 21st century. Of course, the answer is unknowable. But it's not beyond reason to speculate how King might react to a few noteworthy events in contemporary America.

Four topics come to mind: Georgia's highest court, the U.S. Supreme Court, a fallen councilman and a suburban county coming to grips with itself.

· *King's home state of Georgia.* In his book "Vernon Can Read!", high-powered Washington lawyer Vernon Jordan tells the story of his first real case after graduation from Howard University law school in 1960. Jordan and his boss, Atlanta lawyer Donald Hollowell, were trying to get a stay of execution for Nathaniel Johnson, a young black man sentenced to death for raping a white woman. The case had been badly handled by a white attorney, and the version of the rape story received by Jordan and Hollowell convinced them that Johnson, who had been arrested in the middle of the night without a warrant and who had no real chance of getting a fair trial, was being railroaded to the death chamber.

Working frantically to get a stay, the two lawyers ended up in the chambers of W.H. Duckworth, chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, to make their case.

"In the middle of this literally deadly serious matter," Jordan wrote, "Duckworth asked me, 'Son, where do you play basketball?'"

"I shook my head and said, 'I don't play basketball anywhere.'"

"We left the chambers empty-handed."

While Jordan and Hollowell had been running from office to office trying to save Johnson's life, he was executed. Walking home that morning during a hot Georgia summer, Jordan wrote that he was "thinking of how our client had been killed by a poisonous combination of incompetence, hatred and indifference -- and then the tears began to flow."

"The more I cried, the weaker I got, and before I knew it I looked down and realized that I had totally lost control. I had urinated on myself."

Over dinner a few weeks ago, Jordan spoke to some of us about a recent trip to Atlanta, where he had the chance to meet the current chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court.

Her name is Leah Ward Sears, the first woman to serve on that high court and, since last year, its first

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female chief justice and the first African American woman to lead a state's highest appeals court anywhere in America.

Dr. King, I think, would call that progress.

· *The Alito hearings.* In paying tribute to the NAACP's Clarence Mitchell after his death in 1984, Republican Sen. Howard Baker Jr. said, "In those days, Clarence Mitchell was called the 101st senator but those of us who served here then knew full well that this magnificent lion in the lobby was a great deal more influential than most of us with seats in this chamber."

No telling what King would make of today's civil rights leadership in light of the hearings for Supreme Court nominee Judge Samuel A. Alito Jr. Confused and dismayed might be the answer.

King would have observed that the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation's oldest civil and human rights coalition, actively opposes Alito. The conference charged that Alito is outside the judicial mainstream on civil and voting rights issues, employment discrimination, the rights of criminal defendants and the power of Congress to prevent and remedy discrimination.

Yet, as King would have noticed, and as *The Post* confirmed, the senators spent more time quizzing Alito on abortion and presidential powers than on issues related to race. King probably would be left wondering why, in the face of the active opposition of the NAACP, the National Urban League and others, the U.S. Senate in 2006 is hell-bent on confirming Sam Alito.

The whole thing would probably leave King asking if the country is drifting away from concerns about civil rights and civil liberties. He might also question whether Alito's success reflects the waning influence of America's civil rights leadership. King, a product of the struggles of the 1950s and '60s, also might have been confused by the appearance of Alito himself. That was no Bull Connor, Lester Maddox, Orville Faubus or George Wallace sitting in the witness chair. Nominee Alito, King would notice, said nothing to the Judiciary Committee during hours of questioning that would confirm the characterization of him as a judge who favors curtailing the rights of individuals and is hostile to core constitutional and civil rights.

Dr. King, in all likelihood, would end up placing great credence in the words of the civil rights coalition. But the fact that it is likely to lose the Alito fight might well cause King to fear that the America he placed in gear to advance toward full equality for all will now slip into reverse.

· *The councilman.* King would have been saddened to see how far Marion Barry, an early civil rights activist and the first chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, has fallen from grace. King, who had the ability to refrain from overreaching, would recognize the excessive pride, character flaws and careless behavior that have brought about Barry's downfall.

King would also see, through Barry, the destructive and tragic impact that drugs have had on the African American community since his assassination in 1968. King would mourn the loss of healthy self-esteem in the many left behind -- as exemplified by Barry -- and the erosion of gains that have occurred on the watch of black leaders, some of whom have become prone to think too much of themselves and not enough of the people they should be serving. King couldn't be pleased.

· *A county looks at itself.* There's a good bet that Dr. King, after witnessing the retreat on Capitol Hill and the descent of a civil rights pioneer, would probably close out the week feeling upbeat about a fledgling

movement across the District line in Montgomery County.

On a rainy night this week, nearly 200 people, mostly blacks and Jews, gathered under the joint sponsorship of the county NAACP and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington at the Bolger Center in Potomac to remember the past, but also to build a future based on mutual cooperation, goals and respect.

The meeting was held against a backdrop of racist graffiti painted on five of the county's schools and churches and symbols of hate placed on Jewish school buses. King would have been heartened by the resolve of the gathering to continue what he and Rabbi Abraham Heschel started on Feb. 6, 1968, when they locked arms and marched for peace at Arlington National Cemetery.

The program quoted his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech in which he aimed to "speed up the day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands."

King would have liked that, too.

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