

11-5-2004

America's Unfinished Democracy: The Struggle for Black Racial Equality

Julius A. Amin

University of Dayton, jamin1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Amin, Julius A., "America's Unfinished Democracy: The Struggle for Black Racial Equality" (2004). *History Faculty Publications*. 109.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/109

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlengen1@udayton.edu.

PERCEPTIONS

AMERICA'S UNFINISHED DEMOCRACY: THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK RACIAL EQUALITY

By Julius Amin

It's been 40 years since the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. energized a large crowd in the University of Dayton Fieldhouse, but the struggle for civil rights continues. Racial equality remains a piece of America's unfinished democracy.

Most Americans remember where they were when King was assassinated. Since the organization of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56, King had become a household name in America. For more than a dozen years, he was a major leader in America's fight against racism, discrimination and injustice.

America, in the 1960s, was a country on the brink. It was a tumultuous time. Race riots in cities such as Birmingham, Newark, Selma, Detroit, Dayton and others confirmed that democracy was still an elusive dream for the nation's largest minority.

In the midst of the problems, King put together a broad coalition to fight the war against racism. This coalition transcended racial boundaries, cut across class lines and appealed to all Americans to bring an end to the racial injustice endemic to America's social and economic landscape. King's tactics desegregated buses, lunch counters and other public areas. He marched with hundreds of thousands on Washington, D.C., organized the Poor People's Campaign, sought alliances with world leaders, won the Nobel Peace Prize and called for the radical redistribution of economic wealth. He dedicated his life to calling attention to the lives of the poor and the oppressed.

His mission, he told followers, was to "save the soul of America." King's life was, indeed, a "profile in courage."

Toward the end of his life King had grown impatient with the slow pace of change. Blacks, he thundered, must be "dissatisfied" with inferior schools, poor housing, police brutality, ghetto conditions and racism. A year before his assassination, in a speech, "America's Chief Moral Dilemma," King wondered about the "commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans...to genuine equality for Negroes." Shortly before he died, he stated that "America is a racist country." King's pessimism stemmed from the growing recognition that the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s had largely engaged only the surface of much deeper problems. The roots of racism were much deeper.

Over three decades have elapsed since the civil rights movement, and blacks are still at the top of the misery index. Poor schools, high unemployment, substantial disenfranchisement, police brutality, racial profiling, disproportionate incarceration and high drop-out rates are typical characteristics of the black community. During the recent presidential campaign, neither President George W. Bush nor Senator John Kerry offered an agenda on how to dismantle the deeply rooted racism that continues to grip American society.

The news is more depressing with the recent analyses of the Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Fifty years after *Brown*, more than 50 percent of young blacks attend segregated schools. In education, Harvard law professor Lani Guinier has convincingly shown that blacks "lag behind in multiple measures ...and within the black community boys are falling further behind girls." Black educational institutions suffer from neglect, and more. This is particularly unsettling when we consider the vital role of education in a "knowledge-based society."

In recent years, key individuals who were activists during the civil rights movement have questioned the sincerity of the current power structure to address the root causes of racism. For example, Andrew Young, while praising the movement's successes in ending legal segregation and increasing voter registration, has also observed that the movement failed to dismantle an "entrenched American economic system and the Byzantine subtleties of institutionalism." Others have reached similar conclusions.

Roughly 35 years ago, the Kerner Commission declared that racism was the "destructive cutting edge," that had turned America into "two hostile societies." Today, America is once more pushing for democracy overseas, while ignoring it at home. The monumental challenges resulting from continuous racism directed toward the black community are as relevant today as they were in the 1960s.

Each generation has an obligation to make improvements, not to settle for what it has inherited. This generation, like King and his generation, must work to form an inter-racial coalition that will seek racial justice in America. Diversity must be implemented in deeds as well as in words.

For peoples of all colors, there is no time to wait.

—Julius A. Amin is professor and chair of the history department at the University of Dayton. He teaches courses in black history and coordinates the Africana studies program. 📍