

## Beck's Rally: What Would MLK Do?

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his weekend marks the 47th anniversary of the famed March on Washington - the crowning glory or turning point in the civil rights movement.

It was also this march, which catapulted the "I Have A Dream Message" to the front pages of papers and eventually captured the imagination of the Nobel Peace Prize judges. The question for this coming weekend will be, "What would Martin do about the social ills of our day?"

Both conservatives and liberals will voice their opinions this weekend. But why prompt an Armageddon over the legacy of Dr. King? A little history may be appropriate here. Several months ago the Glenn Beck Show chose this date for its Restoring Honor Rally and secured the Lincoln Memorial location, apparently not even realizing the King tie-in until later. The Honor Rally was originally designed as a spiritually oriented event to show the nation that the community of faith is united behind "our unswerving commitment to be 'One Nation Under God.' "

Then enter Rev. Al Sharpton, who decided to develop a competing rally. Trumped by Beck's location and media platform, Sharpton has organized a march accusingly titled, "Reclaiming the Dream." Sharpton's website invites "progressive" organizations to march with him for reform of immigration, healthcare, and other social justice issues. Beck's rally originally was cast as spiritual, while Rev. Sharpton and his allies have characterized his march as a protest to Beck's event. Further, Sharpton's march sounds like an overtly, politically driven throwback to the '60s - without the focus and fire of King's original event.

This weekend these two groups will face off in Washington, DC: Glen Beck with his Restoring Honor Rally and Al Sharpton with his Reclaiming the Dream Rally. As these rallies descend on my city this weekend - every hotel room will be taken and over a million people are expected to join them. One group is ostensibly white, conservative, and largely Republican. The other group is predominately black, liberal, and largely Democratic. Both groups will have descendants of MLK as part of their presentation teams - Martin Luther King, III with Sharpton and Alveda King (MLK's niece) with Beck. Both will claim that they represent the true spirit of King's legacy. One group will label the other un-American, while the other claims its opponent is racist.

The fact that there are two competing events is good because engagement is the mother's milk of democracy. The only question I have is whether the events of this weekend will lead to more of the same old race-based politics of the past or not. You know exactly what I am talking about. Further, I am concerned that everything is set in motion to create a political stalemate - the PR equivalent of two people attempting to shout over one another to impress a third party.

At this critical juncture in history, all Americans need solution-based moral and political leadership. We need to break the historically tainted lenses through which we view our collective moral and political decisions. African Americans are at an even more acutely strategic moment. Having slipped to the second most numerous minority African-American civic and moral leaders must decide to exert their political power and become a conscience to both Democrats and Republicans.

If only 18 to 20 percent of black voters feel at liberty to vote their values, blacks could become the swing vote that changes the destiny of our nation - race by race, candidate by candidate. The most natural unifying alliance that African Americans could build is with white and Hispanic evangelicals, who share their core values and worldview. With this kind of radical new alignment, new approaches to our most pressing problems could be developed and tested. Our newly defined "good guys" of whatever party could begin to emerge. Wishful thinking? Perhaps.

Yet this weekend we are celebrating the legacy of the ultimate dreamer, whose famed words moved him from being seen as a national security threat to center stage of the nation's value system. Forty-seven years after the speech, everyone wants to be identified with the passion, power, and purpose of his message. In order to make real moral and political change possible in 2010, once again some black leaders have to wander off the "political plantation" upon which their people currently reside - the Democratic Party.

Therefore, although I have very close friends and associates on both sides, I have chosen to participate with Glenn Beck and to attempt to build the new coalition I have just discussed. Rallying with Beck may temporarily bring a backlash of ridicule and rebuke to many of the black civic and religious leaders who join me. Long term, however, the courage of these leaders will point the way and embolden others. Despite any personal discomfort, we feel that it is time to make a real change.

The African-American relationship with those in power in the Democratic Party is very similar to being in an adulterous relationship. Our lover shows up at his convenience, demanding what he wants on his terms. Oh yes, there are always the promises, which are never fulfilled. As an adulterous woman, you get no respect. There is no romance, no flowers, and no acknowledgement in our lover's everyday world. After all, he is married to another woman. On the other hand, Republicans have historically failed to give black voters the time of day.

The members of the GOP often speak in lofty terms of disembodied, conservative principles instead of applying those principles to solving real life problems. As the preacher once declared, "People don't want to know how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Just last week Sarah Palin showed all conservatives how to do it wrong. She made the classic mistake of supporting Dr. Laura Schlessinger's use of the "N" word without sufficiently articulating her understanding of the feelings of the average black voter. Most African Americans would simply have said to Dr. Laura, "The N word should never be used 11 times in one program."

As an aside, I happened to appear on the Larry King Live show the same night that Dr. Laura announced that she was going to quit the airways because of the personal attacks. Her statement that she needed to resign in order to regain her voice was appropriate, but I think that both she and Palin need to also regain their voices through meaningful public service, reaching out to minorities, and pursuing younger Americans by championing causes with which they can identify.

My personal reasons for involvement in the Restoring Honor Rally are primarily moral, not political. First of all, I believe that there needs to be a spiritual alarm sounded in the nation. I am convinced that the only answer to our country's moral freefall is another great awakening. This means that we preachers must

preach to individuals with a desire to see them transformed internally and spiritually.

Second, this critical mass of faithful believers will need to start a grassroots movement to recapture the essentials of "living faith." We then must take responsibility for the disappointing political and cultural leaders we have elected or tolerated.

I would like to encourage everyone to pray for a spiritual awakening in America, which will affect the way we vote and the way we rebuild our most cherished institution. This weekend, I will join hundreds of thousands of Christians in prayer and reflection. I believe that America can continue to fulfill its call to be an instrument of God - if the churches return to faithful prayer, practice, and preaching of the Word of God. My dream for America is based on the same Bible that inspired Dr. King's dream...the same Bible from which he preached...the same Bible that formed the basis of most of our American laws and values. If King were alive today, he would lament the fact that Al Sharpton has become simply a protestor and not a dreamer. He would decry the divisive tone of the "Reclaiming the Dream" event fashioned in honor of his vision. I believe he would applaud the Glenn Beck event with just one word of caution: "Be careful to finish what you start!"