

Bush celebrates MLK's birthday with a trip to Mars (and Atlanta)

MARTIN Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968 at age 39. The American media, however, seems to have executed a post-mortem King assassination of their own, silencing the reverend sometime around 1965. It's this earlier King – the one fighting the simple basic struggle against segregation, who we celebrate every year on Martin Luther King Day. For most children educated in America, King fought to desegregate lunch counters and buses – then he was killed.

History in America is sanitized into a bland porridge of holidays and songs devoid of complex meaning. Most Americans are unaware, for example, that Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" was actually a diatribe against private property – at least until the populist stanzas were cut from the song, along with its heart and soul. And most folks never knew that the phrase "under god" is only a relatively recent (1950s) addition to the pledge of allegiance. And they're unaware that during the last years of his life, Dr. King was the most recognizable anti-war activist in America, and a radical force for economic justice and transformation.

It's this amnesia that created the social space for George W. Bush to travel to Atlanta for King's birthday, ostensibly to memorialize Dr. King. While there, he hosted a fundraiser to build a war chest to fight against the fundamental principals that Dr. King stood for.

Bush's visit came on the same day he announced plans to expand the federal debt to pay for a fanciful space colonization plan. The Washington Post estimates that this

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program, seemingly more inspired by the comics of Bush's youth than by any real science, would cost American taxpayers at least \$170 billion over the next 16 years. While a relative bargain when compared to the ultimate price tag for the Iraq invasion and the ensuing endless wars, it's still an extravagance that a fiscally bankrupt nation can scarcely afford. In essence, the federal government is akin to a vagrant on a shoplifting spree at a high-tech store. Only in this case there's a bill – and as yet unborn Americans will have to pay it off.

Flash Gordon did it – why can't we?

The idea of a trip to Mars isn't new. Hollywood sent Flash Gordon there in 1938. But humankind's fascination with the red planet, named for the Roman god of war, predates Hollywood by many millennia. And there's nothing new about the Bush proposal. George W's father made a similar proposal in his 1989 State of the Union speech three years before he was voted out of office. It was the \$500 billion price tag that torpedoed the senior Bush's dream. In today's climate of fiscal adventurism, the younger Bush isn't impeded by pragmatics. What's a few hundred billion dollars in this age of astronomical debt?

The pathetic reality of the new plan is that it isn't the work of a visionary or a dreamer. It's not about striving to see how far science can go. There are certainly more pressing tasks for science, like saving the planet from technology's toxic by-products. No, this isn't about determination or challenges. It's not even really about going to Mars. It's about the 2004 US presidential election – nothing more. The Mars initiative, *The Washington Post* reports, emerged not from any forum of scientists or world leaders (they would certainly have preferred research on alternative energy or combating global warming, for example), but from Bush's political advisors. The Mars program, the theory goes, will brand Bush as a "visionary," helping him shed the "dimwit" image that still plagues his "re"election campaign.

And there are a few ancillary benefits as well, with the usual cast of characters, led by Halliburton Corporation, lining up at the trough to cash in. NASA, it seems, will be contracting with Halliburton to develop "mining technology" for Mars – a service that will be paid for whether or not any human ever sets foot on that planet.

al Qaeda in Space?

In saner times, the whole Mars initiative would have been written off as "silly," and shelved as it was during papa Bush's reign. But these certainly aren't sane times, with Halliburton supporters in Congress parroting lines about the need to militarize space. The

Mars program, they argue, will do just that – giving the US military supremacy in space over our supposed enemies. With our most threatening enemies, however, armed mostly with box cutters and hatred, space seems a rather unlikely battlefield.

The offensive irony in Bush's announcement concerns his choosing to unveil his celestial ambitions during the celebration of Dr. King's birthday. When Bush said, "We will build new ships to carry man forward into the universe to gain a new foothold on the moon and prepare for new journeys to worlds beyond our own," one didn't have to think too long to imagine Dr. King's response. He already responded, as Amy Goodman readily pointed out on Democracy Now, back in August of 1967, a month after George W. Bush turned 20 years old. At the time, Dr. King argued, that "if our nation can spend \$35 billion a year to fight an unjust evil war in Vietnam and \$20 billion to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth." King's words are more pertinent now than ever, with a much richer nation spending proportionally less now on social programs than it did in 1967.

During the same speech delivered to the 11th annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he went on to outline a fundamental need for radical change that seems at least as pertinent today as it was when King first uttered these words: "I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy Now, when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice."

This is the real Dr. Martin Luther King – the King that is invisible in most public school textbooks. It's this Martin Luther King who was gunned down in Memphis. And it's this Dr. King who the "evil-doers" are still deathly afraid of as they desperately try to erase his memory. It's this Martin Luther King whose memory George W. Bush mocked by his presence in Atlanta both by calling for a renewed space program and by raising funds for the Bush-Cheney presidential ticket.