

HEROES AND VILLAINS

The cycles of history and historicism are never-ending. You and I may say history never repeats itself. Others disagree. Karl Marx said history unfolds as tragedy, then returns as farce. The glories of the past are unceremoniously debunked and revised in the present, and heroes of yore are laid low.

Washington, Jefferson and other Founding Fathers so far have fared fairly well, given that they were enslavers, racists and misogynists by today's mores. Modern scholarship with its granular research may have enhanced some reputations by shedding light on real people. It is important to know that our heroes, with all their gifts and accomplishments, were also human and men — mostly men — of their time.

The cycle of adulation and revisionism is not really the subject of this essay. I'm talking about a peculiar inversion of the cycle. My question is this: How could Americans who were reviled, rejected, scorned, marginalized and/or demonized during their lifetimes, become eligible after their deaths for the high honor of being portrayed on a U.S. postage stamp? Put another way: How could we as a nation have so underestimated their worth, the importance of their contributions, the extent to which they embodied, enhanced and promoted values we hold dear? Isn't that what we look for in the faces on our postage stamps?

Consider another possibility: Are we going too far honoring some of those characters on stamps, placing these all-too-human "heroes" on a philatelic pedestal? Does the face on the stamp represent full rehabilitation, or is there a segment of the culture that still fears, resents, resists, rejects? Didn't we just see President Trump himself resisting, when he erased the Martin Luther King free day at national parks?

The massive MLK statue in Washington, as well as the stamps honoring him, capture an idealized image that masks as much as it reveals. It cannot encompass the context and substance of MLK's brief, harried life — the death threats, the racist terror, police harassment, FBI persecution, political infighting and media attacks. All this continued to the day of his violent shooting death at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968, when he was just 39.

I prefer to think history's verdict is more reliable than contemporaneous experience. The accumulated evidence of the historian provides a more accurate portrayal of people and events than even



eyewitness accounts. (Russian proverb: No one lies like an eyewitness.) A news story develops quickly to meet a deadline. The historical narrative unfolds slowly, to be amplified, revised, refocused and given a new write-through, cycling ever closer to cultural consensus and accuracy.

To the extent that people on the stamps in this discussion did not achieve this full acclaim until after their deaths, I ask: Why?

One answer is that you can't be on a U.S. stamp unless you are dead. That's the way it's always been. Something about death and democracy, I guess. Whether or not it's written into law, there's a principle behind the practice. Something about idolatry and democracy. We honor the dead on postage stamps, but not the living.

The question remains: Why is Martin Luther King Jr. so worthy of tribute in death after being calumniated in life? Is it easier to honor someone who no longer makes "good trouble," in the words of the late Rep. John Lewis? I think it goes deeper. Something in the American fiber resists recognition of greatness when it comes with a lesson. We know now that the people on these stamps had something to teach us — something that made America greater, better, that added meaning to our experience as Americans. And yet, their perceived transgressions got in the way for some of us. These cultural icons crossed boundaries of conventional behavior, pressed up against rules, flouted tradition. They provoked a sharp response from their critics, which spread mistrust, resentment, outrage and other discomforts to Americans who resisted change and strange.

Some of these honorees were their own worst enemies, with self-destructive habits and addictions. Think Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Others were outspoken activists who challenged authority and were threatened with jail (MLK, Pete Seeger). Some were blacklisted for their political beliefs (Paul Robeson, Jose Ferrer). Yet in the fullness of time, they all made it into the philatelic pantheon.

My hope is that by studying this national myopia — our failure to acknowledge greatness until it is too late — more of us can learn to cherish and nurture rather than chastise and punish those who, despite their foibles, may be some of the most precious among us.

TO BE CONTINUED

