The Oppressed Must Demand

By Alex Spalding

The world of politics is dirty business, but few would deny that it is a constant factor in our daily lives. From the local to the international level, politicians are always determining the course of action that they claim are in their constituents' best interests, and most of the time all the public can do is give them the benefit of the doubt. But all too often do lawmakers exploit their positions of power to implement bills and ideals that prove to do more harm than good to the very society they were elected to protect. Sadly, politics are ethereal in nature; it is difficult to verify when lawmakers have crossed the line between right and wrong. In fact, it is difficult to plainly see where the dividing line is located. But there are some acts of immorality that cannot go unnoticed, and a more conclusive approach is needed to deal with the darker side of politics: reform. Some look down upon the word 'reform' as unfavorable, but the very definition suggests that reform should be pursued; who would not want a change for the better, corrections of abuses, and the removal of defects in our political system? Not many, save the ones in power who may benefit from doing wrong. So when is it best to reform authority, or at least try, given the difficulties in proving any wrongdoings? Politics and morals are not exactly 'black-and-white', but a good method of examining the question is to view two drastically different opinions on the matter. Coupled with the pragmatic work of George Washington Plunkitt, the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. will provide a more fully developed perspective on the issue of reform.

Plunkitt was a key player in New York politics in the early 20th century who embraced a realistic view on his profession. In Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on
Very Practical Politics, he comes off as an opportunist with keen insight on the political machine in his district, and his strategies to success raise more than a few eyebrows. For instance, Plunkitt openly endorses what he considers 'honest graft' by simply reasoning that career openings are not to be looked over when they do not involve overly inappropriate cases such as blackmails or gambling. He cites an example in which his party has municipal control and tips him off to some prime real-estate: “I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before. Ain’t it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course, it is” (3). Plunkitt makes it abundantly clear that taking advantage of an opportunity (such as this form of obtaining inside information) with no regard for consequences is justified, especially if self-interest is the primary motivation. As well as his questionable guidelines to political success, Plunkitt is in favor of 'party bosses' assuming total state control (“Ignorant people are always talkin’ against party bosses, but just wait till the bosses are gone! (81-82)), but most importantly, he is a proponent of an individualized, noiseless political machine to get things done; nothing would annoy him more than an impassioned group of people lobbying for reform to get in the way of his political aspirations.

As such, Plunkitt views reformers as incompetent, inexperienced gadflies who ruffle the system with little to show for it:

The fact is that a reformer can’t last in politics. He can make a show for a while, but he always comes down like a rocket. Politics is as much a regular business as the grocery or the dry-goods or the drug business. You’ve got to be trained up to it or you’re going to fail. Suppose a man who knew nothing about the grocery
trade suddenly went into the business and tried to conduct it according to his own ideas. Wouldn’t he make a mess of it? He might make a splurge for a while, as long as his money lasted, but his store would soon be empty. (19)

As a lawmaker who considers self-interests to be as much worth as genuine compassion for his constituents, it is no surprise that Plunkitt sees reformers as nothing more than untested politicians who are in the game to make a name for themselves, and this is his crucial mistake. His bullish assumption forgoes the fact that some proponents of political reform are legitimate activists who are in the game to correct illegitimate flaws in the system (beyond self-motivation), and who often start at the local level to make sweeping changes on the political playing field. In short, Plunkitt looks in a mirror when he talks about the ills of reform, never dreaming that someone as righteously motivated as Martin Luther King, Jr. might soon come along, ruffle some feathers, and actually make a difference.

In stark contrast to Plunkitt’s dubiously realistic approach, MLK was an unabashed idealist who created a lot of ruckus during the height of the civil rights era in the 60s, and not without good reason. He recognized that segregation and political injustice against minorities were detrimental to society, but unlike others who idly agreed, he acted upon these injustices by executing non-violent demonstrations all across the country in the name of equality, an example of political reform at its finest. Some saw MLK’s demonstrations as extreme, but he brushed the criticism away by stating that negotiations with local officials had been exhausted, and that direct action would create such a tension that authorities would be forced to improve themselves. In Letter from Birmingham Jail, MLK states simply that, “Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.” He goes on: “Segregation [...] ends up relegating persons to the status
of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful" (121). MLK recognizes segregation as a threat to democracy that will widen the gap between the affluent and the oppressed, and he sees even more evidence to validate his non-violent protests: “An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding unto itself.” He plainly sums up the blatant hypocrisy within the political system in his Letter: difference made legal (122). MLK made it clear throughout his writings that he felt racial discrimination in society was over the line and warranted noisy political reform, something Plunkitt would have preferred to settle quietly under the table, if at all.

These two figures in our history expressed two wildly different views on political reform: Plunkitt was a realist who felt reformers were too incompetent to understand the system he felt comfortable with, while MLK saw his idealistic notion of equality in his demonstrations as a good reason to abolish segregation. Their conflicting outlooks can be attributed to the fact that they came from different ends of the political system. Plunkitt was an opportunistic lawmaker who knew a great deal about the methods of attaining success in the business, and through his Series it is safe to imagine that he made changes to the community with personal gain on his mind. It is understandable why Plunkitt did not like dissent; reformers endanger politicians’ good standings, and Plunkitt was no exception. MLK was an activist pastor in the South who was not directly involved in the political machine at first, but once he took note of the corruption and injustice tearing America apart, he devoted himself to improving the country. Political gain was likely not the foremost incentive in MLK’s push to enact change as it was with Plunkitt, because MLK did not have the hands-on experience, nor a cushy government job he felt obligated to defend. (Although it is worth mentioning both men would have agreed on one issue: the civil
service law at the turn of the century. Plunkitt railed against it because he felt the public’s patriotism was being undermined by the compulsory set of questions. MLK would have seen it as favoring educated white people.)

It is difficult to determine when most political matters deserve reform, but certain conditions (such as racial segregation) must be recognized and dealt with immediately, as Dr. King did: “When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you see hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society [...] – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” (120-121). Many claim that some pseudo-activists do more harm than good in their unfounded pursuit for change, and rightly so. But it is important to note that dissent is the lifeblood of our government, and that the very act of sincere political reform is a testament to the idealism that democracy is structured on: lawmakers must respect the people who elected them to office, or face the consequences. Political reform is difficult to pull off, but once in a blue moon there are people like Dr. King who see the hypocrisy of self-motivated politicians like George Washington Plunkitt, wonder why injustices such as segregation are made legal, and who earnestly work toward finding an answer in a business that could always use improvement.