

5-22-2011

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## Recommended Citation

O'Shea, Aidan Brown, "Worshipping to Control: The Public Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Political Right" (2011). *Dickinson College Honors Theses*. Paper 114.

## **Worshipping to Control**

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### **The Public Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Political Right**

By

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements in the Department of American Studies**

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5/6/2011

“Could it be that Mr. Reagan understood that the *ease-ee-est* way to get rid of Martin Luther King, Jr. is to worship him? To honor him with a holiday he never would have wanted. To celebrate his birth and death without committing ourselves to his vision and his love. It is easier to praise a dead hero than to recognize and follow a living prophet. The best way to dismiss any challenge is to exalt and adore the empirical source through which the challenge has come.”

- Charles G. Adams<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 283.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference announced a plan to march on Washington for a second time in the summer of 1968, a sense of fear pervaded the responses of politicians and the press. A Washington Post article by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak predicted that Black Nationalist Stokely Carmichael would use the proposed Poor People's Campaign as a way to wrest power of the movement away from a "desperate" King permanently, and suggested Johnson administration officials feared this outcome.<sup>2</sup>

The Democratic leadership in the House attempted to pass a civil rights bill dealing with housing discrimination in order to, in the *Chicago Tribune's* words, "mollify" King and deter him from going forward with the rally.<sup>3</sup> *U.S. News and World Report* depicted the March as nothing short of an invasion. It published analyses and stories linking the campaign to communism well in advance and published a map of where the eponymous poor people would be coming from with the headline "TARGET: The Nation's Capital."<sup>4</sup>

Quite obviously, the context of 1968 led Congress and the press to associate the possibility of thousands of dispossessed people being bused into Washington not with the effectiveness or relatively centrist message of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Rather, it was associated with the urban riots of the previous years and the growing influence of Black Power on the civil rights movement. The diminished reputation

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<sup>2</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. "Official Fears Grow That Carmichael Will Seize Dr. King's 'March of the Poor.'" *The Washington Post*. Feb. 19, 1968. A21.

<sup>3</sup> "Unit of House Delays Action on Rights Bill." *The Chicago Tribune*. 20 March 1968. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 312-313.

of King in the eyes of the national, middlebrow media is also vital in understanding the fears that underlie predictions of the event's consequences.

In the four years before his death, Martin Luther King went from being an admired voice for acceptable racial progress in the form of the end of legal segregation among white moderates, to being a figure whose implication of capitalism as the primary agent of American inequality and especially whose opposition to the Vietnam War made him something closer to a truly oppositional figure than he had been previously. The Poor People's Campaign, unlike the 1963 march, was intended to be part of a broad-based, interracial movement with the indisputably leftist goal of securing a government guarantee of full employment, indicative of King's evolving belief that a radical shift in political economy ought to be the purpose of post-Jim Crow civil rights action. The "desperation" to which Evans and Novak refer represents a growing assertion in news analyses that King's advocacy on new issues such as Vietnam and the rise of Black Power had split the civil rights movement beyond repair.

Martin Luther King was assassinated just weeks before the Poor People's Campaign could take place. Regardless of how the context for that assassination is portrayed in public memory, Martin Luther King died dismissed, feared, and even hated, and not just by those with backgrounds similar to that of his assassin. He died a subversive worthy of heavy surveillance in the eyes of his government, partly for putting forth vision of both economic and racial equality that would be as radical in contemporary political discourse as it was in the late 1960s.

Just over fifteen and a half years later, in a White House Rose Garden ceremony Michael Eric Dyson describes as a “spectacle of American collective memory,”<sup>5</sup> President Ronald Reagan signed a bill to make King the only individual besides Christopher Columbus and George Washington to be honored with a federal public holiday. In his remarks afterward, Reagan, who had opposed the 1965 Voting Rights Act on grounds of constitutionality, and had a year earlier reinstated federal tax exemptions for private schools that were segregated<sup>6</sup>, celebrated an America that had supposedly been created chiefly because of King’s work.

“America is a more democratic nation, a more just nation, a more peaceful nation because Martin Luther King, Jr., became her preeminent nonviolent commander”<sup>7</sup> Reagan said, adding that all “right-thinking people” joined in the celebration that day because:

Dr. King had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind... But most important, there was not just a change of law; there was a change of heart. The conscience of America had been touched. Across the land, people had begun to treat each other not as blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Reagan’s soaring rhetoric hid a great deal, but most obviously it hid a more recent change of heart: Republicans switching sides en masse and supporting the very bill he was signing. Reagan paints King in a very specific manner in the several thousand words of the Holiday signing remarks: as messiah-like, as primarily a defender of individual freedoms, as being

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Reagan. “Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday.” *The American Presidency Project* at UC Santa Barbara. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=40708>>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

most honorable for his nonviolent tactics, and generally for reinforcing and not threatening core American ideals. He also depicts a post-King America as a place completed by civil rights: a country where structural racism had been abolished, and it was up to blacks and whites to be friendly and, most importantly, colorblind. Both of these visions say far more about the situation and aims of post-war conservatism than about the work of the late civil rights leader they purport to honor.

In the United States, public memory of the civil rights movement in general, but of Martin Luther King, Jr. in particular, has been constructed to the advantage of the American political right. The radical challenge King made to American capitalism and foreign policy has been largely obscured so that groups and movements outside of the left can attempt to claim his legacy as their own.

This paper will argue that subsequently, over the past twenty-five years, invocation of the public memory of Martin Luther King has done three distinct kinds of work for American conservatism. The first end to which the conservative movement has used King is to shed the costly “radical” tag it earned in the 1960s largely through opposition to civil rights, at a time (the 1980s) in which conservatism was newly ascendant within the Republican Party but yet to solidify support for conservative ideology among white moderates. Secondly, conservatives (academics, politicians, and activists alike) have used King’s rhetoric to frame the American civil rights movement as having conformed to narratives that justify the aims of the conservative movement. Such narratives, for example, place individual political rights above economic equality and deny the persistence of racial

inequality as having a structurally racist basis. These narratives first functioned to obscure the true political nature of King's work during an era in which provisions of 1960s civil rights legislation were under attack, labor unions lacked government protection, the gap between rich and poor widened, and affirmative action came under sustained attack from the right, and have continued into the 1990s and 2000s.

Finally, the right's use of narrow, King-centric narratives have functioned to obscure the true depth and diversity of the civil rights movement, but especially to remove from the contemporary political consciousness the radical challenge the civil rights movement made to fundamental structures of American politics and life, and replace it with something that is "turbulent but ideologically safe, and seemingly impenetrable"<sup>9</sup> to the contemporary observer.

Together, this work is part of a bold hegemonic move on behalf of the right that goes beyond the pale of a simple appropriation of a now popular piece of history for present political gain. Not only have the most dominant-friendly parts of a subordinate movement been appropriated in order to ultimately justify the ideology and authority of a dominant group, but an individual legacy, that of the movement's already most iconic and ubiquitous figure, has been entirely gleaned of its complexity and unique radicalism, and used in service of a contradictory agenda.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward P. Morgan. "The Good, the Bad and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement." In *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Edited by Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 159.

This analysis will begin by explicating the concept of public memory and tracing the development of the post-war conservative movement, in order to provide the specific context for this unique articulation. Then, it will explore the right's attraction to King specifically, given both genuine elements of King's identity and career, and the way his image was selectively constructed between the time of his death and the early 1980s. This is followed by the history of the radical challenge of King's final years against the national structures of racial discrimination and American capitalism and of the War in Vietnam.

A close look at the complicated story behind the establishment of the King national holiday reveals how various groups sought King's commemoration in the form of a holiday to very different ends. It was ultimately conservative Republicans who could claim to be the deciding factor in the establishment of the federal holiday. That claim represents the beginning of an era in which conservative politicians and thinkers began to more frequently fuse King's image and particularly words with their own in order to advocate for a variety of specific policies, but most often in support of measures limiting or making illegal the use of affirmative action programs. The paper will conclude with an examination of what the larger meaning of what the appropriation of King means for public understanding of the civil rights movement as a whole and what it indicates about the way change, protest and the far left are framed in contemporary American political discourse.

The "memory" that forms the basis of this analysis is defined very simply in the introduction to Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford's *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* as "the process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the



past.”<sup>10</sup> Public memory is defined by those same writers as “the subjective, selective and potentially unreliable accounts of the past told by those outside the academy and circulated in the media and popular culture.”<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, public commemorations, language in textbooks, government actions, and political rhetoric ought to be added to the media coverage and representations in popular culture as crucial sites of public memory creation, at least in the case of the American civil rights movement. Although the term “collective memory” is often used interchangeably with public memory, the latter is used here to denote the level to which the national political, media and other institutions have created a common version of King for all Americans.

This paper will generally use conservatism, the conservative movement and the right interchangeably. When referring to the conservative movement, it should be noted, this designation refers very specifically to one of several ideological strains in the Republican Party from the 1950s through the 1970s, and the dominant one in all of American politics since the 1980s. The post-war conservative movement rose in opposition to Democratic and Republican consensus on the New Deal and the welfare state,<sup>12</sup> and in the wake of the dismantling of the mid-century welfare state has continued to push for less regulation and lower taxes. The William F. Buckley-Barry Goldwater-Ronald Reagan conservative movement can most vibrantly be contrasted, for the purposes of analyzing the civil rights era, with an Eisenhower-Nixon Republican tradition which accepted to some degree the existence of a welfare state and emphasized federal government power.

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<sup>10</sup> Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Introduction by Editors. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming. *The Conservative Movement*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. 1.

## The Mythical Moderate: Accounting for the Right's Attraction to King

Though this paper will argue that Martin Luther King's memory has been used in support of policy radical divergent from his own ideologies, that does not mean that the right's appropriation of King is purely a natural choice based upon his superlative fame. The way King's image was controlled during his lifetime and the way his memory was constructed between his death and the early 1980s, as well as aspects of the civil rights leader's own personality and tactics, make his words and actions surprisingly easy to adapt into conservative narratives.

Derrick Aldridge has analyzed how high school textbooks have been an important tool in constructing a narrow public understanding of the breadth of the civil rights movement, and particularly the role of textbooks in constructing King as essentially the whole of civil rights, and as fitting in an "uncritical and celebratory master narrative of American ideals about democracy, patriotism and religion."<sup>13</sup> Public memory, for which textbooks here are something of a proxy, has simply filtered the whole history of the civil rights movement through events in King's life<sup>14</sup> and has created a situation in which any political movement relying on public knowledge in order to create narratives of civil rights must use King. However, the imagery, language and comparisons in these textbooks emphasize King's most traditionally conservative traits and messages. For example, they frequently use images and words which seem to place King as a messiah in a Judeo-

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<sup>13</sup> Derrick P. Aldridge. "Teaching Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in High School History Courses: Rethinking Content and Pedagogy." In *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement*. Edited by Julie Bruckner Armstrong, Susan Hult Edwards, Houston Bryan Robertson, and Rhonda Y. Williams. New York: Routledge, 2002. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian tradition with references to scripture and metaphors “associating King with Jesus and Moses,” very commonly accompanied by the image of King with arms outstretched on the stage during the March on Washington.<sup>15</sup>

Textbooks successfully remove what should be an obvious strain of radicalism within King’s ideology by never failing to cast King as a good alternative to a “bad” or at least wayward civil rights movement generally in the form of Malcolm X or Black Nationalist organizations. “Inspirational,” “moderate” and “magnetic” are common adjectives which are supposed to elicit a snap judgment about the rightness of King in contrast to the relative wrongness of other civil rights voices.<sup>16</sup> While stark differences in tactics for achieving racial equality demand a certain level of comparison on that front, the simplicity of this contrast masks something of a movement-wide consensus on the national and structural nature of anti-black racism and King’s late in life embrace of what Michael Eric Dyson calls an “enlightened Black Nationalism,”<sup>17</sup> still nonviolent in tactics but targeting national institutions and white privilege directly.

Despite the number and diversity of subjects in King’s speeches, textbooks have tended to focus on only several speeches<sup>18</sup>, and in those only phrases about a desire for interpersonal racial harmony (of of which Reagan might have been referring to when he

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

\*If a King passage references the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln or Jefferson favorably, for example, it appears more likely to make the “cut” of official high school history.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Derrick P. Aldridge. “Teaching Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in High School History Courses: Rethinking Content and Pedagogy.” In *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement*. Edited by Julie Bruckner Armstrong, Susan Hult Edwards, Houston Bryan Robertson, and Rhonda Y. Williams. New York: Routledge, 2002. 4-7.

talked about a “change of heart”) while they leave out phrases which allude to the larger structures of racism on which improvement of “race relations” has no bearing. The rhetorical allusions King makes to history seem to fall into two categories: those specifically referencing founding fathers or documents\* or fitting into a “melting pot narrative” which suggests overcoming anti-black racism was an inevitable next step after other groups had overcome de jure discrimination earlier in the century.

These two taken together imply that the civil rights movement only served to overturn Jim Crow, a uniquely “regional deviation”<sup>19</sup> from the standards set out at America’s founding, and that the civil rights movement may simply represent another stage in the same process by which European immigrants become white and achieved full citizenship. Aside from being somewhere from simplistic to flatly inaccurate, these narratives, like the Martin good/Malcolm bad dichotomy and to a lesser extent the King as messiah narrative all leave the consumer of these words and images with the impression that racism has no structural basis in wider American law or culture. Textbooks tend to imply that the “deviation” from American ideals which segregation represented was corrected quickly and completely by a few of Martin Luther King’s words and actions. As will be discussed later, this impression dovetails perfectly with the economic and civil rights proposals of conservative policymakers in the past thirty years.

Consider the two documents relating to King that have endured as a vital part of American public memory, partly through the compartmentalization of history in popular

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<sup>19</sup> Edward P. Morgan. “The Good, the Bad and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement.” In *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Edited by Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 153.

culture and education, “I Have a Dream” and (a very distant second) “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” as not necessarily having risen to the fore because of their unique eloquence but because of the symbolic work they do for the aforementioned narratives. Both, crucially, were written at a time (1963) when civil rights had risen to the height of its acceptability among white moderates outside of the south and among the news media that catered to that population, and directly before the signing of the federal civil rights legislation that ends what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls the “classical”<sup>20</sup> phase of the civil rights movement in dominant narratives. The centrality of this short time period to American public memory led to Vincent Harding’s complaint about “I Have a Dream”: “[King’s] worst imprisonment may be how his own nation has frozen him in that moment in 1963.”<sup>21</sup> “Dream” appeals to the dominant understanding of civil rights because it is steeped in religious imagery, is mostly on the subject of the southern campaign and speaks extensively of racial discrimination as interpersonal.<sup>22</sup> Despite some key passages on economic inequality\* a more abstract desire for “freedom” is the true subject of the speech.<sup>23</sup>

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” is essentially a defense of the moral rightness of nonviolence and inappropriateness of alternative Black Nationalist tactics<sup>24</sup> (an argument

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\*For example, “...the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity”

<sup>20</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *The Journal of American History*. Vol.91, Issue 4 (March 2005). 48.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Edward P. Morgan. “The Good, the Bad and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement.” In *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Edited by Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 141-142.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream.” In *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Claiborne Thompson. London: Abacus, 1998. 223-227.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Claiborne Thompson. London: Abacus, 1998. 188-204.

which fits well with the strict King as acceptable, Nationalism as unacceptable narrative).

When Reagan remembered King as the nation's "nonviolent commander," he may well have been using the nation's familiarity with "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," although he likely would disapprove of the targeting of two other groups in the letter: the white Protestant church and white political moderates whom King believed preferred stability to justice.<sup>25</sup>

Textbooks are not the only indicator of how King's legacy has been popularly constructed. King's unusual relationship with the national news media during his lifetime may account for what speeches, actions and images have risen to the fore, and why there is such a gap in public memory for so much of the rest of his career. Richard Lentz's book on how three influential news magazines covered King (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*) throughout his public life addresses this question directly. Up until 1965, all three magazines had characterized King by using the same framing previously discussed: King was a symbol of a civil rights that matched rather than challenged American ideals. The events of 1965, however, the year of the Chicago Freedom Movement and King's first public pronouncements against the Vietnam War, created a "crisis of symbols"<sup>26</sup> for the news weeklies that resulted in a gradual, although not uniform among the three, switch to skepticism about King's role and goals.

An equal reversal, however, happened upon King's death, when the news weeklies sought vigorously to resurrect the "King the Moderate" symbol and wash away from public memory the animosity between the national media and the post-1965 King agenda. Reports

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 195.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Lentz. *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990. 197.

and remembrances focused on the symbolism of King being killed in the South, by a segregationist.<sup>27</sup> His anti-war work and the Poor People's Campaign went mostly ignored.<sup>28</sup>

Lentz comments on the purpose and symbolic power of King's immediate memorialization: "*Time* and *Newsweek* created a usable past for their readers, resurrecting...a reassuring symbol taken from simpler times and a simpler quest for justice...the centrists could once again honor king as a prophet. By doing so, they could honor America and themselves for what they had done...to liberate their black countrymen."<sup>29</sup> Reframing King in the "1963 moment" kept white moderates from closely examining both King's later work and their own role in the civil rights movement. The content of news magazines are an example of how King's radical period could have been wiped out of public memory so thoroughly upon his assassination, and of how the narratives that would come to define public memory of King had begun the process of being rearticulated, to use Hall's term, away from leftist ideals.

A certain amount of the way Martin Luther King's public memory stands must be taken at face value. For example, he was an unwavering voice for nonviolence, when other elements of the movement were not. He was, though not the entirety of the movement, a central public face of 1950s and 1960s civil rights in a way that few others were. This does not mean that a variety of appropriations of King's legacy are inevitable, but that King represents a powerful and uniquely articulatable symbolic text. Stuart Hall defines

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 293.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 340.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 342.

articulation as the “form of a connection which *can* make a unity of different elements, under certain conditions.”<sup>30</sup>

The agenda King can be linked with can be broadly distributive social justice, but it can very possibly be the primacy of individual rights in the abstract instead. To Hall, a text or idea’s specific articulation is not based on any objective measure, but is dependent on social forces and the particularities of the historical moment.<sup>31</sup> The way popular historical memory is constructed through the narrative framing of institutions of authority, from mass media to popular culture to textbooks, has undoubtedly had a disarticulating effect on the contemporary ideological understanding of King as a political actor. King’s status as an extraordinarily popular figure emblematic of an era but rendered ideologically ambiguous explains why the right would desire to use King’s image in service of its agenda, and think it was even possible for it to do so. Conservatives may have come along to make King speak for them specifically, but some of the work clearly had been done for them, particularly by the news media after his death and by textbooks in following decades.

### **“One of the Most Notorious Liars”: King’s Radical Challenge**

The “crisis of symbols” experienced by the news media in covering King’s later years seems to have been easily resolved by the way institutions facilitating public memory elevated the “1963 moment” and selected moments which preceded it to the fore of conceptions of King’s legacy. This has deprived many Americans of an account of one of the

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<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall. “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 141.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



most remarkable progressive careers in recent United States history. The vision King was moving towards throughout his career, but which was most fully realized in his words and actions from 1965 to his death was one that drew free market capitalism, American militarism and Cold War policy, and national systems of racial discrimination into a single framework. That framework came about when it did so as to explain a larger suffering in America and worldwide than the segregation struggle which American audiences had before associated with King.

This framework is relevant today because it would be as radical or more radical in a contemporary political atmosphere in which the welfare state as it existed in the 1960s has been largely dismantled and in which American geopolitical hegemony has continued into a post-Cold War era. It is also relevant because King's beliefs, for example, that strong labor unions were a key component of both social and racial equality and that racial discrimination was a national, structural phenomenon only dented by the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Acts<sup>32</sup> directly counter the individual rights-based narratives of a completely successful civil rights movement that the right prefers. In many cases this radical vision stands in direct opposition to specific policies King's memory has been used to sell in the past thirty years. Finally, the reaction to King's new critiques from national institutions, particularly mass media and government, reveal the degree to which King's constructed moderate image masks not only King's true place on the political spectrum, but

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 87.

also the determination of those institutions that would later honor King to preserve the status quo in spite of him while he was alive.

King's championing of labor unions as a natural part of the civil rights movement long predates his "radical phase" of 1965-1968. King's 1961 address at the national convention of the AFL-CIO, entitled "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins" represents an early attempt on King's part to draw a connection between the organized labor movement's ideal of a just society and that of civil rights. He noted the large portion of unionized workers who are black and the outstanding support for labor-friendly legislation in states where blacks could vote in higher numbers versus states in which they could not.<sup>33</sup> Most ingeniously, King predicted in this speech the degree to which post-industrialism would be "made to order for those who would seek to drive labor into impotency" and that a conservative alliance between "southern Dixiecrats and northern reactionaries" could serve to greatly diminish the achievements of both organized labor and the movement for racial equality.<sup>34</sup> He was even bold enough to suggest that solidarity between the two causes might "bring about the day when there will be no separate identification of Negroes and labor."<sup>35</sup>

Northern unions supported King's movement financially throughout its southern phase, and King responded by helping to defeat a proposal for "right to work" laws

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins." Address to the AFL-CIO convention reprinted in *A Testament of Hope*. Accessed through Stanford University's *Martin Luther King and the Global Freedom Struggle* site. [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/if\\_the\\_negro\\_wins\\_labor\\_wins](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/if_the_negro_wins_labor_wins)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

\* Even in the context of Johnson's War on Poverty which sought some expansion to the existing welfare state.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

targeting union membership in Oklahoma in 1964.<sup>36</sup> King's belief that organized labor was a vital ally of the civil rights movement never waned, but later in his career he grew disenchanted with the elite of organized labor who did not come out strongly against the War in Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> The sanitation strike in Memphis in 1968, now best known simply as the occasion for which King was in Memphis when he was assassinated, represents in fact something very close to the joint labor/civil rights action King had envisioned seven years earlier in that it brought to bear the organizational capability of both the SCLC and AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees).<sup>38</sup> King's desire to draw together the organized labor movement and civil rights into what he thought would become a common movement for the mitigation of economic inequality matters because it shatters the right's desire to depict the southern civil rights struggle as fair, just and an inevitable part of American progress, while helping to expedite the demise of organized labor power, particularly in the 1980s.

Tying closely into King's position on the importance of strong organized labor is his stark criticism of the American political economy\* as insufficiently distributive to address the large swaths of poverty in the south and in northern cities. King's public and private words in the mid-to-late 1960s indicate a move toward a belief that not only was inequality primarily manifest through economic functions in a post-Civil Rights Act United States, but that capitalism without significant restraints was inherently incapable of reconciling itself with social justice. After King's organization fought a bitter but familiar battle for voting

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<sup>36</sup> Michael K. Honey. *All Labor Has Dignity*. Ed. Michael K. Honey. Boston: Beacon, 2010. XVII.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Speech to Local 1199. March 10, 1968." In *All Labor Has Dignity*. Ed. Michael K. Honey. Boston: Beacon, 2010. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Michael K. Honey. *All Labor Has Dignity*. Ed. Michael K. Honey. Boston: Beacon, 2010. XVII.

rights in Selma, Alabama, his attentions turned to improving conditions in the north's most *de facto* segregated city-Chicago.

The Chicago Campaign beginning in 1965 more than any other single moment of King's career took the focus of King's work off of the achievement of individual rights in the south and toward a primary concern with living conditions and economic equality. Efforts in Chicago, undertaken in tandem with local community organizers, included campaigns against residential discrimination and unfair employment practices by local businesses.<sup>39</sup> King described the effectiveness of improving conditions and dismantling discrimination in a northern context as mildly successful, but the lesson from Chicago for King was that urban poverty was truly the function of "dislocations in the market operations of our economy" which could only be solved through a massive restructuring of American policy and society.<sup>40</sup> This is when King's faith in the ability of "American liberal reform [in that time taking the form of Johnson's policies] to adequately to the needs of the black and poor"<sup>41</sup> was essentially lost. King was more suspicious than other voices in the movement of "black entrepreneurialism," which represented the idea that greater black political empowerment could be achieved through exercising power as consumers and by simply encouraging more black ownership of business, rather than by opposing participation in an unequally distributive capitalist system.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Claiborne Thompson. London: Abacus, 1998. 305-309.

<sup>40</sup> King quoted in Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 83.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

The Poor People's Campaign, the planning for which was among King's final actions, represented the fullness of King's vision for a radical imposition of social democracy in the United States. The SCLC sought to "lead waves of the nation's poor and disinherited" to Washington and intended for them to "stay until America responded."<sup>43</sup> King's drift further to the left during the time in which he was specifically addressing urban northern poverty, his understanding of structural inequality as a function of capitalist distribution of wealth, and the stark diminishing of his credibility among the media as a result are all vital to understanding his appropriation by a movement which seeks to limit regulation, to dismantle the remnants of the welfare state, and to limit understandings of the causes of urban poverty to rejection of personal responsibility or underclass pathology.

While King's radical turn on distribution of wealth happened slowly and was only a contributing factor to King's falling out with white moderate institutions in government and the press, his opposition to the War in Vietnam was relentless and led most directly to vilification from institutions which supported civil rights in its narrower form. It is not just King's opposition that was radical, although he came out against the war when even NAACP officials were advising civil rights advocates to stay out of foreign policy advocacy<sup>44</sup> and when congressmen were threatening to halt further action on civil rights legislation so long

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Claiborne Thompson. London: Abacus, 1998. 346-347.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 55.

as movement leaders continued to oppose the war,<sup>45</sup> but rather because he saw opposition to Vietnam as essentially a front of civil rights in a national and international sense.

His most famous speech relating to Vietnam, his “Beyond Vietnam” statement at Riverside Church in New York in 1967, does nothing less than tie American orthodoxy on foreign policy to the structures which perpetuate racial inequality domestically and also to much of the world’s suffering. King described the United States government as the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,”<sup>46</sup> and quite apart from his patriotic rhetoric by the Lincoln Memorial, said that the anti-war cause “is a cause that takes me beyond national allegiances” and towards concern with “the brotherhood of man.”<sup>47</sup> He predicts the death of Johnson’s War on Poverty as a result of “funds and energies” focused on a more literal war, and decries the disproportionate number of poor and black men forced to Vietnam as a “cruel manipulation.”<sup>48</sup> This address even includes a section in which the spread of US military influence is likened to imperialistic regimes recently disposed of in the third world, and defends the appeal of Marxism in the face of the “arch anti-revolutionaries” that the West had become by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup>

The response of national, middlebrow print media, which Lentz always characterizes as a barometer for white, moderate, middle class public opinion in that era, was to distance itself from King’s anti-war vision more than from any other of King’s controversial stances.

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<sup>45</sup> “Civil Rights Leaders Rapped on Vietnam.” *The Washington Post*. April 16, 1966. A4.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Beyond Vietnam” address at Riverside Church in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Claiborne Thompson. London: Abacus, 1998. 338.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 337-338.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 341.

The general reaction of those news sources was that in attacking the government and society that they believed had “brought freedom to black southerners,”<sup>50</sup> King was deviating from a reasonable role within American political life, and the penalty for this deviance was a mix of dismissiveness and outright anger (until he was restored to his proper place by denouncing the violence of northern riots).<sup>51</sup> A 1967 New York Times news analysis concluded that King’s persistence on Vietnam had fatally fragmented the civil rights movement and warned that “an already disinterested public is growing increasingly disinterested”<sup>52</sup> in civil rights issues. This came after years of *Time* criticizing King’s more tentative moves against the war on the basis that “black leaders had no business speaking on such matters.”<sup>53</sup>

What King’s anti-war activism, his rhetoric on urban dispossession, and his association with “radical” figures served to do in a ‘60s Cold War context was to open himself up to insinuations of communist sympathy. As early as the 1965 Chicago Campaign, Mayor Richard Daley had been using rumors of communist infiltration in southern civil rights activities to try to discredit King indirectly.<sup>54</sup> As mentioned earlier, coverage of the Poor People’s Campaign was full of language and images that cast the protest plan as a subversive plot. But, the merging of the civil rights and anti-war movements that King began to suggest was inevitable was seen as a potential movement threatening to national

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Lentz. *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990. 262.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Gene Roberts. Dr. King and the War. *The New York Times*. 14 April 1967. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Lentz. *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990. 181.

institutions in its size and combined fervor by both the media but the federal government. King's FBI file cites the SCLC president as believing that "he gets more cheers in Negro colleges when he opposes the war in Viet Nam than when he talks about rights. He says they go wild about the Viet Nam issue."<sup>55</sup>

The FBI had been gathering information on civil rights leaders for possible connections to communist infiltrators since the mid-1950s<sup>56</sup>, but by the mid-'60s surveillance of King had become more intense and personal, for a variety of reasons, after FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's famous statement that King was one of the "most notorious liars in the country."<sup>57</sup> Inclusion of King in the FBI's COINTELPRO surveillance<sup>58</sup> points to a larger truth about why these new stances, which King believed to be consistent with positions he held earlier in his career, were seen as so much more threatening: lingering fear among conservatives and liberals alike of communist subversion.

Despite the degree to which public memory of the civil rights movement has been separated from the context of the Cold War, any political program in support of a radical restructuring of American law and society, with the possible exception of ending Jim Crow, was seen in the 1960s as a fundamental threat to both American society and to the state. Taken together, King's wholesale critique of capitalism, his increasing flirtation with ideas of Black Nationalism, and his fervent and galvanizing opposition to American anti-communist

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\*Approved by Robert Kennedy, who had few questions or objections

<sup>55</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 69.

<sup>56</sup> David J. Garrow. *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Penguin, 1981. 52-55.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 228-229.



efforts in Vietnam made him a possible enemy of the state and truly a hate figure in popular discourse, as shown in the middlebrow press' attitudes towards his later ideas and organization.

When Sen. Strom Thurmond cited J. Edgar Hoover's thoughts on King as reason to delay debate on a King national holiday, possibly for decades, he was dangerously outside the bounds of even conservative discourse on civil rights in 1983, but he would not have been considered so in 1967. King was symbolically resurrected in a stunningly quick and thorough manner upon (and only because of) his death, and this was a necessary precursor to the right's adoption of King. What a clear understanding of the reaction to King's late period would provide in public memory is nothing less than a rebuke of the conservative narrative that the whole of the civil rights movement represents an inevitable correction to a regional deviation from core American ideals, achieved by King along with white moderate figures and institutions. Without the creation of that narrative, the "crisis of symbols" surrounding King would have remained, and his image could not have performed constructive symbolic work for the right.

### **Reconstructing the Party of Lincoln: The Achievement of the King Federal Holiday**

On April 8, 1968, just four days after King's assassination, Congressman John Conyers introduced a bill on the floor of the House of Representatives that would make the birthday of the late civil rights leader, January 15, only the third federal holiday established

to honor an individual.<sup>59</sup> In 1968, Conyers must have seemed to be a natural fit to lead the holiday effort in Congress; he was a progressive, black, Detroit politician with close ties to the organized labor movement.<sup>60</sup> In the fifteen years between that initial introduction and President Ronald Reagan signing a bill “to make the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a legal public holiday,” the idea of a holiday was championed by a variety of organizations and interests. These factions differed on whether or not the proposed holiday should honor only one person, what aspects of King’s career ought to be emphasized in celebrations, and, crucially, motive for wanting to honor King in this particular way.

Within those fifteen years, three fairly distinct eras emerge. In the first, from the late 1960s to mid-1970s, organized labor was the primary interest in support of the idea of a holiday (if not explicitly a federal one) honoring King, and enactment of a holiday was more successful in state legislatures than in Congress. In the second, from roughly 1976 through 1981, Coretta Scott King, the King Center and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference turned the idea into a mass movement and gathered millions of signatures in support of a public holiday while garnering greater support than ever in Congress, particularly among Democrats. Finally, in the early 1980s, financial support for the federal holiday campaign began to include corporations and for the first time bridged the whole of the political

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<sup>59</sup> Don Wolfensberger. “The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: The Long Struggle in Congress.” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. Written for the Seminar “The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: How Did It Happen?” 1.

<sup>60</sup> “John Conyers, Jr.: Biography.” Official U.S. House Site.  
<http://conyers.house.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=About.Biography>

spectrum in Washington, even among those previously skeptical about the cost of a holiday or about King's character.

The first era of support for the recognition of a birthday holiday was a great deal more union-based, sporadic, local and African American than the national movement beginning in the mid 1970s. It might be said that the early phase of the King holiday movement was an example of the joint union and civil rights action that King envisioned and was putting into practice when he was killed. In 1969, a few General Motors plant workers threatened to walk out on January 15 if not given the day off. When many more walked out in protest of GM threats to discipline those workers on King's birthday, GM dropped the threats.<sup>61</sup> That is believed to be the first instance of organized labor using the King birthday as a bargaining chip in contract negotiations, a tactic which would become commonplace in the early 1970s.<sup>62</sup> It was union efforts and money, particularly on behalf of public sector employees for whom King had advocated at the very end of his life, which strengthened and nationalized the cause.<sup>63</sup> By 1976, Atlanta's King Day march drew thousands in support of that year's theme of demanding a government guarantee of full employment, then a central tenet of the AFL-CIO's political goals.<sup>64</sup>

That year, enthusiastic labor support for the candidacy of Jimmy Carter was important to Carter's election to the presidency, and he in turn agreed to sign a federal King

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<sup>61</sup> William P. Jones. "Working-Class Hero." *The Nation*. 30 January 2006.  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/workingclass-hero>

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

holiday bill should Congress pass it.<sup>65</sup> In this first labor-centric phase of the movement, no such bills made it to the floor of the House or Senate. Illinois, Massachusetts and Connecticut, however, passed holiday laws in the mid-1970s, and the King Holiday became law in New Jersey after the state Supreme Court ruled that New Jersey must provide a paid holiday in order to satisfy the state's contract with its workers.<sup>66</sup>

The second era in the movement for the King Holiday followed in the wake of labor victories on the issue, but was more national and aimed at a federal holiday, and was now most prominently championed by Coretta Scott King and the King Center rather than public service employees unions.<sup>67\*</sup>

Crucial in this phase is the direction in which the King Center sought to take the meaning of the holiday. The King Center was an institution, from its founding in 1968, separate from both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and organized labor, and as the holiday campaign went on it proved to have a different conception of the holiday. A very public debate took place between the SCLC and Coretta Scott King over whether or not further activism and protest was the best way to honor King (the SCLC's position) or if

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<sup>65</sup> Don Wolfensberger. "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: The Long Struggle in Congress." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. Written for the Seminar "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: How Did It Happen?" 2.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, Touchstone, 2000. 287.

\* This shift was due partly to the diminished organizational and financial capacity of those particular unions in the late 1970s, when leaders made major concessions to city governments during a time of urban financial crisis.

<sup>67</sup> William P. Jones. "Working-Class Hero." *The Nation*. 30 January 2006.  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/workingclass-hero>

establishment of the federal holiday was more important (his widow's belief).<sup>68</sup> The SCLC also advocated that the date of King's assassination, April 4, and not that of his birth be the date on which King should be honored if a holiday were to come about.<sup>69</sup> Had this change been adopted, it might have reframed the era of King's on which celebrations focus.

Closer to the bill's final passage in 1983, the movement for the federal holiday became larger and more a part of the national conversation, all the while seemingly moving further away from the idea's labor roots. Between the first time a federal holiday bill made it to the House floor in 1979, and passage in 1983, a petition was circulated which gathered 6 million signatures in support of a federal holiday.<sup>70</sup> Stevie Wonder recorded a hit single entitled "Happy Birthday" in the hopes of generating greater support for the holiday<sup>71</sup>, and in 1982, just before the movement's final victory, the King Center began receiving corporate donations from the likes of Coca-Cola and the Miller Brewing Company.<sup>72</sup> The final repudiation of organized labor's role in promoting a King holiday came the year the holiday bill would pass, when the King Center's theme for the 1983 birthday was: "Free Enterprise: An Agent for Nonviolent Social Change."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Derek H. Alderman. "Street Names as Memorial Arenas." In *The Civil rights Movement in American Memory*. Edited by Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 73.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Don Wolfensberger. "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: The Long Struggle in Congress." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. Written for the Seminar "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: How Did It Happen?" 5.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, Touchstone, 2000. 287.

<sup>72</sup> William P. Jones. "Working-Class Hero." *The Nation*. 30 January 2006.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/workingclass-hero>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

The decisive phase in the movement for the King birthday holiday takes the form of the debate and success of the bill in Congress in 1983. Ultimately, it was neither organized labor nor the King Center which made the bill's passage possible. Congressional Republicans, in many cases distancing themselves or their colleagues from previous positions on the issue, were most responsible for the 1983 victory. The record shows that their motive was different from that of the workers who originated the birthday holiday, the SCLC, or the King Center: it was politically expedient for the Republican Party and the conservative movement more generally to switch sides.

In 1979, a bill to establish a paid federal holiday on Martin Luther King's birthday first reached the House floor. Ever since Conyers' introduction of the first bill in 1968, the idea of a commemorative day or legal holiday had had some Republican support<sup>74</sup> as well as Democratic opponents. The relatively short 1979 debate in the House, however, made the issue more strictly partisan than it had previously been. Despite the fact that eight Republicans co-sponsored the Senate version of the bill, mainly Republican opposition to the bill in the House narrowly killed the effort.<sup>75</sup>

Opposition in the House tended to conform to one of two arguments: either the holiday would cost the federal government too much money (\$212 million, according to Congressman Taylor of Missouri) or that it ought to be replaced with, at most, a "commemorative day," or that "it was against the longstanding tradition" of the nation to

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<sup>74</sup> Don Wolfensberger. "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: The Long Struggle in Congress." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. Written for the Seminar "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: How Did It Happen?" 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

use a federal holiday as a method of honoring a private citizen.<sup>76</sup> Before the floor vote, seven of the eight Republicans who spoke on the bill spoke in opposition. Under the rules for the vote, a two-thirds majority was needed, and the supporters of the bill fell five votes short, 252-133, which had the effect of at least delaying the holiday bill to another session.<sup>77</sup>

For a variety of reasons, the 1983 effort in Congress took place in an entirely different context. The movement was more popular and high-profile than ever, having collected millions of petition signatures. As previously mentioned, the King Center's campaign now had corporate financial backing. In 1983, the Republicans controlled the Senate having controlled neither house in 1979 when conservative attitudes toward the bill were tepid. Perhaps the most crucial difference in 1983, however, was that the newly empowered Republicans were forced to react to a right-wing line of attack more personal and sensationalistic than the staid financial arguments which formed the previous opposition.

The career of Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina serves as a tremendous allegory for the post-'60s rise of the conservative movement, in that he is a product of the southern strategy: an anti-civil rights Democrat who defected to the Republicans in the early 1970s when he first ran for a Senate seat. Throughout his career, he not only opposed civil rights legislation, but foreign aid, gay rights, and government subsidization of

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<sup>76</sup> Remarks of Congressman Gene Taylor, Martin Luther King Birthday, Congressional Record, Nov. 13, 1979. 32136-32137.

<sup>77</sup> Don Wolfensberger. "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: The Long Struggle in Congress." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. Written for the Seminar "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday: How Did It Happen?" 3.

contemporary art.<sup>78</sup> When he filibustered the 1983 bill, however, the comments and actions of his Republican colleagues suggest that Helms' actions and rhetoric endangered a newly empowered conservative movement that had previously been brought low by opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Helms' objections did not focus on the cost of a federal holiday or on how unorthodox a holiday for an individual would be; rather, Helms and his few Republican allies sought to convince their colleagues that giving King a holiday would mean elevating a womanizing, communist sympathizing, enemy of the state to a privileged position in American history. Helms objected to King based on a suspicion that he could not have had an innocent desire for domestic civil rights because he "kept around him... principal advisers and associates who were taking their orders and direction from a foreign power"<sup>79</sup> and was himself an "action-oriented Marxist."<sup>80</sup>

Helms' staff reportedly did not know what the individual or collective electoral consequence of the filibuster would be: enthusiastic support from like-minded whites or desertion by moderates.<sup>81</sup> Judging by the reaction of other members of Helms' party, the consensus was that it would be the latter for sure. This objection proved far more troubling for congressional Republicans than fiscal arguments. Helms' dragging of the King name through the mud, as well as his assertion that King's career amounted to something closer

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<sup>78</sup> Stephen A. Holmes . "Jesse Helms Dies at 86; Conservative Force in the Senate." *The New York Times* 5 July 2008 [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/05/us/politics/00helms.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/05/us/politics/00helms.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&hp)

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 230.

<sup>80</sup> Francesca Polletta. "Legacies and Liabilities for an Insurgent Past: Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr. on the House and Senate Floor." *Social Science History* Vol.22 No.4 (1998). 482.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 481.



to sedition than a struggle to reconcile American ideals with policy, ran counter to the grand narrative which was just starting to be put forth by Republicans supportive of the bill.

Thirty-five House members who voted against a federal holiday in 1979 voted for the 1983 bill, and twenty-six were Republicans. One prominent convert, Jack Kemp of New York, explained his decision this way:

I have changed my position on this vote because I really think that the American Revolution will not be complete until we commemorate the civil rights revolution and guarantee those basic declarations of human rights for all Americans and remove those barriers that stand in the way of people being what they are meant to be.<sup>82</sup>

With regard to the meaning of the GOP being ultimately responsible for the bill's fate, he added:

I want to see my party stand for that. If we lose sight of the fact that the Republican Party was founded by Mr. Lincoln as a party of civil rights, of freedom, and hope, and opportunity, and dreams, and a place where all people could be free; if we turn our backs we are not going to be the party of human dignity we want as Republicans to be known for.<sup>83</sup>

Kemp draws King into a narrative that accepts the civil rights movement as commensurate with core patriotic ideals, and suggests that Republican commemoration of King will afford the party a sole claim as the defenders of those ideals, while failing to do so will be a costly missed opportunity. In the wake of Helms' crusade in the Senate, other Republicans echoed Kemp's concerns. One Republican Senator admitted to having switched

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<sup>82</sup> "Designation of the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Legal Public Holiday." Congressional Record, August 2, 1983. 22229-22230.

\* Helms was eventually assuaged from continuing the filibuster with a promise to pass unrelated legislation.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

sides because “the symbolism [of a Sothern conservative railing against a beloved civil rights hero] has just become too heavy.”<sup>84</sup> Pro-holiday Republican Howard Baker of Tennessee excitedly remarked that rarely did a piece of legislation have more “potential for good” nor “a greater symbolism for unity.”<sup>85</sup> The final, affirmative, vote in both houses was overwhelming: 338 to 90 in the House, with a narrow Republican majority in favor and all but thirteen Democrats voting yes, and 78 to 22 in the Senate with thirty seven Republican yes votes.<sup>86\*</sup>

Public remarks invoking “symbolism,” rather than genuine belief in the rightness of a national commemoration as the reason for supporting the proposed federal holiday abounded not only among Republicans in Congress. The day the bill passed the Senate, President Reagan remarked at a news conference: “Since they seem bent on making it a national holiday, I believe the symbolism of that day is important enough that I would—I’ll sign that legislation when it reaches my desk.”<sup>87</sup> Further betraying Reagan’s personal hesitation about the appropriateness of memorializing King is a now somewhat infamous response to a question about whether he believed, as Helms did, that Martin Luther King was a communist sympathizer: “We’ll know in about thirty-five years, won’t we?”, said the

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<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Francesca Polletta. “Legacies and Liabilities for an Insurgent Past: Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr. on the House and Senate Floor.” *Social Science History* Vol.22 No.4 (1998). 482.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.* 481.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

\*What’s sealed, little did Reagan know, is only surveillance related to King’s extramarital affairs. His politics-related files were already public.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

president, referring to the length of time before part of King's FBI file was due to become public.<sup>88\*</sup>

The debate and establishment of the federal holiday is a vital moment in the history of the right's appropriation of King. Republican acquiescence to (and fear of) the power of the "symbolism" that had come to surround the debate over official memorialization does indicate a distinct fear of alienating moderates. Contrary to what Helms staffers feared, however, this was not a strictly electoral fear. The conservative movement's rhetorical adoption of King, which has its genesis in the collective change of heart over the federal holiday, can be seen as part of a larger hegemonic negotiation. A newly empowered right embraced and accentuated the progressive social change of the past, albeit through the indirect medium of public commemoration, both to stake a claim that any further push for equality was unnecessary, and to atone for conservatism's unpopular and costly 1960s. This help represents the first type of work the symbolic King did for conservatism.

Conservative adoption of King can be called hegemonic because it represents a dominant cultural and political group affording not only representation but glorification to the elements of subordinate culture it finds the most agreeable (non-threatening to the dominant), for the purposes of retaining authority at a time when authority is tenuous. If one looks at differing representations of King and the civil rights era as cultural texts on par with a novel or photograph, and this paper argues that that is perfectly reasonable, then

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<sup>88</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff and Stephen R. Goldzwig, "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no.4 (2005). 669.

this strategy conforms to Steve Jones' understanding of one of the hegemonic strategies identified by Gramsci: "...texts attempt to reach into the culture of the subaltern in order to fashion an image of the dominant bloc as speaking in the name of, or making common cause with, those it rules."<sup>89</sup> Jones uses the phrase "symbolic concessions" to describe generally what is offered in cultural hegemony<sup>90</sup>, and that is exactly what previously holiday-skeptical Republicans implied was necessary in the wake of the Helms filibuster.

Whose consent, however, does the right's negotiation over the memory of King and '60s civil rights actually seek to obtain? What makes this cultural and political negotiation unique is that it appears to be an indirect one: the conservative movement didn't need any form of significant African American support to maintain hegemony; it needed to *appear* accommodating to the legacy of the civil rights movement in order to consolidate support among the faction that turned away the conservatives in the 1960s: white moderates.

In Paul Gottfried's history of the post-war conservative movement, Reagan's election in 1980 is the "*anno domini* of American conservatism"<sup>91</sup>, a sharp division between a time in which conservatives were just one of a group of factions within the Republican Party and when the conservative ideology was the dominant force in American politics. Barry Goldwater's loss of the presidential general election of 1964, then, could be seen as the nadir of the movement, when conservatism appeared to have been rejected flatly by the electorate as overly radical.

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<sup>89</sup> Steve Jones. *Antonio Gramsci*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 69.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming. *The Conservative Movement*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. 96.

Although southern whites and northern urban ethnic whites (a coalition which would form the basis of Nixon's southern strategy only four years later) had already appeared to be moving slowly to the right during this part of the 1960s,<sup>92</sup> particularly the latter constituency was cool to Goldwater conservatism in 1964 for two main reasons. The "new right" attacked wholesale the still sacred New Deal and Great Society welfare programs championed by Democrats, and Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the grounds that the public accommodations provision was a constitutional violation of property rights.<sup>93</sup>

That non-southern, white moderate population that had supported as common sense the Civil Rights Act\* overlaps significantly with the voting blocs now also remembered as "Reagan Democrats" after 1980, now as openly disdainful of the welfare state as Goldwater had been in 1964. The Reagan Administration may have made conservatism the dominant force in the Republican Party, but in the early 1980s that was hardly assured, and the Reagan years were only twenty years removed from a conservative failure which is due at least in part to small government-based objections to civil rights.

One purpose of the right's hegemonic control over King's legacy, from the 1980s to the present, has been to make the civil rights movement appear more consistent with conservatism in public memory than it was in history. Arguments for right-wing policy that invoke King have tended to freeze the late leader during the "I Have a Dream" moment in

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\*In that brief window between when civil rights was considered a regional issue and when its perceived radicalism alienated the center.

<sup>92</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 20.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming. *The Conservative Movement*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. 29.

1963 and the conservative narratives into which King has been weaved place southern segregationists, and not both segregationists and most conservatives, as the true opponents of (agreeable) racial progress. This is a distortion, according to Michael Eric Dyson, because “whatever racial enlightenment” came to the post-1960s right came likely because of successful black opposition to the “conservative ideology” of race, and not just opposition to segregationists.<sup>94</sup> For a president who had publicly opposed the 1965 Voting Rights Act and its extension<sup>95</sup>, the symbolism of Reagan having the chance to sign a bill giving Martin Luther King, Jr. an unprecedented honor on behalf of the government was not only advantageous, it was in many ways necessary.

The acquiescence to the King Holiday only began the right’s adoption of King for this purpose. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, rhetorical adoptions of King would become progressively more commonplace and policy-specific.

### **After the Holiday: Reagan’s King**

By the time Reagan signed the bill establishing Martin Luther King’s birthday as a national holiday, his administration had already done an impressive job of enacting policies that contradicted the spirit or the letter of King’s vision for government policy on achieving equality. The resolution of the PATCO air traffic controller strike of August 1981 signaled to the already weakened organized labor movement, public and private sector alike, that it would have no friend in the White House while Reagan was there. When more than half of

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff and Stephen R. Goldzwig, “History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan’s Rhetorical Legacy.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no.4 (2005). 675.

PATCO's members went on strike, Reagan followed through on a bold threat to reassign military air traffic controllers as strikebreakers, and fired more than 11,000 controllers, and thus he effectively broke the union for good.<sup>96</sup>

Broader trends such as deindustrialization were already diminishing the capabilities of organized labor by the time Reagan took office, but a policy of “weakening and nonenforcement” of union protection laws during the Reagan and G.H.W. Bush administrations made organization more difficult and collective bargaining rights harder to obtain or retain.<sup>97</sup> When King had so headily predicted an inevitable merger between organized labor and civil rights institutions, the unionization rate in the nonagricultural private sector workforce was near a record high of 35 per cent, but by 1990 it had fallen to 12.1 per cent.<sup>98</sup> The attempted acceleration of organized labor's decline takes on a racial dimension when one considers that black membership in unions actually increased slightly from 1986 to 1994 and that black men and women are today the two groups most likely to be represented by unions.<sup>99</sup>

Cuts to social spending were an equally thorough rebuke to King's conception of the just political economy. In Reagan's first year in office, the government programs cut significantly were disproportionately ones aimed at alleviating poverty, including job training, public assistance, food stamps, and school lunches.<sup>100</sup> The top bracket tax rate, by

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<sup>96</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 142.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 277.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Manning Marable. *Black Leadership*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 189.

<sup>100</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 144.

the end of the 1980s, was less than a third of what it had been under Eisenhower, and thus the tax burden had shifted downward significantly.<sup>101</sup>

Effects of cuts throughout the Reagan/Bush era had a disproportionate effect on African Americans. Cuts in health care programs coincided with a sharp rise on asthma deaths among blacks,<sup>102</sup> just one treatable disease among several that became more life-threatening in this era.<sup>103</sup> An almost 75 per cent cut in federal housing allocations between 1981 and 1986<sup>104</sup> cut off African Americans from a government program which had been an engine of upward mobility and escape from de facto residential segregation in previous decades.

The question of renewal, interpretation, and exceptions to the federal civil rights protections put in place in the 1960s was a constant point of tension between the Reagan administration and civil rights activists. The administration line on civil rights appeared to be that extensions should limit the role of the federal government and only punish racial discrimination in the strictest and most de jure sense of the phrase. William Bradford Reynolds, the assistant attorney general for civil rights during both of Reagan's terms wanted to let the 1965 Voting Rights Act expire<sup>105</sup> and when a deal was struck to renew it, proceeded to ignore reported violations.<sup>106\*</sup> Reagan himself dismissed members of the U.S.

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\* Actions which ultimately doomed his 1985 nomination for attorney general.

<sup>101</sup> Manning Marable. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America*. Third Edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 203.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 204.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 204-205.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 206.

<sup>105</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 181.

<sup>106</sup> Manning Marable. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America*. Third Edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 194.



Commission on Civil Rights with whom he had ideological differences,<sup>107</sup> and the immediate influence of his high court nominees prompted Thurgood Marshall to claim in 1989 that the Supreme Court had “truly come full circle” on civil rights.<sup>108</sup>

Undermining affirmative action programs was a central focus of Reagan’s civil rights policy. When replacing the liberal members of the Civil Rights Commission in 1983, he hailed his new appointees: “They don’t worship at the altar of forced busing and mandatory quotas. They don’t believe you can remedy past discrimination by mandating new discrimination.”<sup>109</sup> Reynolds sought to have President Lyndon Johnson’s executive order requiring government contractors to employ affirmative action hiring policies overturned.<sup>110</sup> Reagan’s civil rights policies may have commanded less attention than his economic ones, but they were a potential political liability. Wilentz notes that along with laissez faire enforcement or opposition to extension of 1960s civil rights policy came criticism that “the White House was not simply conservative, but actively siding with the die-hard segregationists.”<sup>111</sup> Reactions to this liability included the recruiting of the first generation of black conservative political candidates,<sup>112</sup> and especially a campaign of rhetorical allusion to the public memory of Martin Luther King.

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.* 196.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Denise M. Bostdorff and Stephen R. Goldzwig, “History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan’s Rhetorical Legacy.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no.4 (2005). 675-676.

<sup>110</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 183-184.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 182.

<sup>112</sup> Manning Marable. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America*. Third Edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 197.

Reagan's invocation of King's memory tended to happen when Reagan was making one of two arguments that reconciled his administration's policies on civil rights issues and economic policy with the aims of the civil rights movement. One was that equality of opportunity had been achieved and any government interference that aimed at remedying the equality of outcome or even the accrued disadvantage of past discrimination was counterproductive, and another was that individual efforts of exemplary leaders and not mass movements bring about structural change.<sup>113</sup>

Often when making the first argument, Reagan implied that the racial "change of heart" brought about in America by King meant that the fabric of America had changed so completely that policy could not bring back racial injustice. He used adjectives like "irrevocably" to describe how King's efforts had improved American society<sup>114</sup> and thus distanced the considerable amount of opposition to extension of 1960s civil rights protections his administration mounted from a present-day return to the effects of pre-1960s discrimination. Reagan invoked King very specifically when he wanted to contrast him with recognized 1980s civil rights leaders whose interpretation of the government's role in alleviating discrimination differed from his own. In a 1985 interview, Reagan said that such leaders are "reluctant to admit how much they have achieved, because it might reveal then that there's no longer a need for that particular position, which would mean no longer a

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<sup>113</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff and Stephen R. Goldzwig, "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no.4 (2005). 669.

<sup>114</sup> "Proclamation 5760- Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 1988. 12 January 1988. Accessed through the University of Texas Reagan Archives <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/011288c.htm>

need for [their] job. So there's a tendency to keep the people stirred up as if the cause still exists."<sup>115</sup>

As for government's role in diminishing the "traces of bigotry" that Reagan conceded still existed in the United States in the 1980s, cutting government programs and promoting black entrepreneurship was said to actually fit more with King's vision than any liberal or leftist approach did. In a 1987 speech to minority entrepreneurs, he conflated the limiting of individual rights which existed under Jim Crow with government regulation of the free market: "[at the same time the federal government interfered with civil rights legislation], the Government was steadily encroaching upon other individual freedoms, and the regulatory apparatus reached out to touch every aspect of economic life."<sup>116</sup> Addressing the NAACP at the beginning of his presidency, Reagan used the language of slavery to describe how previous social programs had made needy people "government-dependent": "[politicians] have created a new type of bondage" and only an "economic emancipation" akin to the Emancipation Proclamation can free poor minorities from dependence on government benefits, he said.<sup>117</sup>

When answering the question of what could be done to honor King's memory in the present, Reagan's remarks usually minimized the efforts of other members of the

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<sup>115</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Interview with Representatives of Independent Radio Networks." 26 January 1985. *Public Papers of the presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989*. Washington: Government Printing Office. Book 1, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Remarks at a White House Briefing for Minority Business Owners." 15 July 1987. *Public Papers of the presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989*. Washington: Government Printing Office. Book 2, 828.

<sup>117</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." 29 June 1981. *The American Presidency Project* at UC Santa Barbara. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44016&st=&st1=#axzz1JM2Wfd4n>

movement while encouraging individual fulfillment of potential over collective action on issues of racial inequality. King's example to future generations was, as Reagan expounded in a King birthday address, "what a single life, well led, can accomplish."<sup>118</sup> High school students in 1987 could honor Dr. King's legacy, according to the president, not by becoming activists on issues of discrimination and poverty, but by "taking advantage of the great opportunities available to [them]" that involved "being diligent in [their] studies" and avoiding "temptations" such as drugs.<sup>119</sup>

Throughout these statements, Reagan put forward a vision of civil rights history that sought to distance contemporary Americans from what he saw as a wholly complete era of civil rights, and even from the idea of collective action in addressing discrimination. He also disconnected King and a supposedly individual rights-based civil rights ideology from 1980s efforts to combat the effects of racial inequality through government means, particularly distributive means and strategies that required restrictions on business. Perhaps most important, Reagan ingeniously employed the abstract concepts of "freedom" and "equality" as a common denominator between King's civil rights movement and the conservative movement as represented in the anti-regulation economic policies of his administration and its opposition to affirmative action programs and the extension of some 1960s civil rights protections, respectively.

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<sup>118</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Radio Address to the Nation on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Public Papers of the presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 15 January 1983. Book 1, 61.

<sup>119</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Address to High School Students on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday." *Public Papers of the presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 15 January 1987. Book 1, 25-26.

Reagan needed King's symbolic image to work for his agenda so that conservatism would no longer be seen as a hostile reaction to the popular social changes of the 1960s, but rather in the same spirit of egalitarianism and liberty as those changes. Wilentz rightly contrasts the backward looking "old right" with Reagan's GOP, which "claimed to be the party of hope and newness, and not memory- leaving the liberals as the exhausted, clueless, corrupt defenders of an outmoded era."<sup>120</sup>

Reagan's high-profile invocations of King throughout his presidency served to complete the articulation between memory of King and a specific conservative policy agenda, representing the second type of work King's invocation has done for the right. The articulation of the symbolic King with support for core conservative policies would be made even narrower and more explicit by conservative writers and campaigners of the 1990s also interested in ending affirmative action, and indeed in ending government attempts to address racial inequality altogether.

### **The 1990s: The Colorblind King and Beyond**

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

If Martin Luther King has been imprisoned in the "I Have a Dream" moment from 1963 in the public's memory of him from his death through the present, it was in the 1990s that conservative writers and activists tried to condense King's whole career into these thirty-five words specifically. The chapter of Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* entitled "A Dream Deferred: Who Betrayed Martin Luther King, Jr?" begins with the "content of their

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<sup>120</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 92.

character” passage as the epigraph. Shelby Steele’s book arguing for the end of affirmative action and the defense of colorblindness is entitled *The Content of Our Character*. Anti-affirmative action activist Ward Connerly’s successful campaign to end California’s use of affirmative action in California in 1996 used only that passage of “I Have a Dream” in one of its ads. For D’Souza, Steele and Connerly, juxtaposing these thirty five words with interventionist, race conscious ideas of how to address the effects of discrimination was enough to make the powerful symbolic image of King stand against affirmative action.

With Reagan no longer able to make the reconciliations between the change of the civil rights era and the mission of the conservative movement as he could when his presidential duties involved frequently honoring King, the mission to further articulate King towards individualism, small government, and an end to race-conscious policy was diverted away from Republican politicians and was taken up by conservative academics and black conservative writers and activists. Dinesh D’Souza’s *The End of Racism*, Shelby Steele’s *The Content of Our Character* and *A Dream Deferred* and Ward Connerly’s Proposition 209 campaign are 1990s texts which invoked King to comparatively discredit contemporary civil rights leaders, argue that affirmative action and other race-conscious strategies for allaying discrimination run contrary to the aims of 1960s civil rights actions, and in Steele’s case, dismiss the idea that government policy should ever be a means to address past inequalities.

The arguments in the 1990s texts analyzed here all conform to an ideology that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Tim Wise and many others have called colorblind racism, defined by

Bonilla-Silva as the explanation of “contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics,” such as “market dynamics,” and “imputed racial limitations.”<sup>121</sup> Bonilla-Silva sees colorblindness as having replaced Jim Crow as the primary enforcer of a system of white privilege in the years since the 1960s, calling it “the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era.”<sup>122</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall sees colorblindness as having arisen with the 1970s conservative “War of Ideas” because it combined the “ideological victories of the civil rights movement [that no racial hierarchy should exist in law]” with the “creed of free-market individualism.”<sup>123</sup> In that way colorblindness both appeared forward-looking and confirmed that individual freedom from government, rather than social equality guaranteed by the government, was the goal of a post-civil rights society, making it perfect for conservative ends. Although Reagan-era invocations of King might be seen as colorblind, it was with these self-identified colorblind conservatives in the 1990s that a wholesale assault on race-consciousness in forming public policy began.

D’Souza’s book *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (1995) as a whole represents an argument that racism, though still existing in the ideology of individuals, “no longer has the power to thwart blacks or any other group in achieving their economic, political and social aspirations.”<sup>124</sup> Any counterargument citing racism as

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<sup>121</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Second Edition. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 2.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>123</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *The Journal of American History*. Vol.91, Issue 4 (March 2005). 13.

<sup>124</sup> Dinesh D’Souza. *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1996. 525.

“responsible for black failure,” according to D’Souza, or any figure who advocates “institutionalizing race as the basis of job hiring, voting, law, and education” demonstrates “intellectual and moral bankruptcy.”<sup>125</sup> In arguing his colorblind vision, the author makes dozens of references to Martin Luther King, always contrasting a skewed version of a colorblind and individual rights-centric career with race-conscious programs and 1990s civil rights leaders clinging onto ideas which 1960s civil rights leaders such as King himself would have supposedly rejected as unfair.

As Reagan did, D’Souza aims to discredit post-1960s civil rights voices through contrast with King, and through this *ad hominem* tactic, seeks to delegitimize their grievances about the persistence of racial discrimination in American life and their proposed methods for addressing it. *The End of Racism’s* chapter “The Race Merchants: How Civil Rights Became a Profession” echoes Reagan’s assertion that advocacy for government intervention in addressing inequality is not a function of a sense genuine urgency for action, but a function of a “civil rights establishment” trying to maintain jobs and influence any way it can. D’Souza minimizes the authenticity and civil rights credibility of attendees of the 1993 March on Washington commemoration for being middle class, in contrast to a supposed homogeneously working class crowd in 1963, musing that “people whose condition is economically and socially desperate do not fret over speaker schedules and hotel bookings.”<sup>126</sup> Class divisions, which the author attributes largely to middle class creation as a result of 1950s and 1960s civil rights successes, have in D’Souza’s mind

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* 202.



prompted a civil rights establishment desperate for legitimacy to cling to a manufactured “black solidarity” and a “one-drop rule.” These have supposedly been employed by civil rights activists to maintain the allegiances of upper and middle class blacks and of people of multiracial backgrounds.<sup>127</sup> The struggle of the civil rights establishment to stay relevant, according to the author, has led to “a new civil rights program that is substantially different to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

In order to frame King’s civil rights program around the “content of their character” line, D’Souza uses a narrative that obscures large parts of King’s career. The three great victories of all of the civil rights movement, according to D’Souza, are the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act and Fair Housing laws of 1968<sup>128\*</sup> a contention that frames the whole movement around the South and King very specifically. Any opposition to access to the vote, to housing and to discriminatory institutions in the South that this legislation provided is attributed to “Southern conservatives” and later Southern “radicals,” and no mention is made of the ideological conservatives such as Goldwater and Reagan who opposed such legislation on constitutional and small government grounds.<sup>129</sup> D’Souza acknowledges a turn in King’s late activism, but he does not make the connection between King becoming “embroiled in the antiwar and Third World causes” and a definition of civil rights which was shifted away from a presumption of legal segregation as the main agent of racial discrimination.<sup>130</sup> Rather than conceding a focus on a belief in the inherently discriminatory

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 204.

\*Which were passed to “mollify” King and prevent him going forward with the Poor People’s Campaign.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 196.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

product of American militarism and capitalism in King's final years, he describes "the second dimension of [King's] project" as "a concerted effort to raise the civilization level of the black population."<sup>131</sup>

D'Souza may have been closer to being correct when he stated that "all [King's] rhetoric was based upon the...assumption that Americans were basically opposed to racism," but King's admission a year before his death that "the majority of white Americans are racists, either consciously or unconsciously"<sup>132</sup> is important in understanding King's emerging consciousness of the benefits to whites of structural, national racism. Rather than recognizing the fact that King's public life served to weave together different threads of the civil rights movement- southern and northern, segregation and structural racism-based, leftist and centrist- D'Souza prefers a King who "never abandoned his principled position of colorblindness"<sup>133</sup> from "I Have a Dream." This is how he creates a King that will work against affirmative action for the rest of the book.

It should come as no surprise that the debate over the use of affirmative action programs, of all contemporary political debates, is one with the public memory of the civil rights movement, and King in particular, at its heart. The inter-movement ideological tensions which King's career straddled mirror the tension between freedom and equality inherent in the affirmative action question. It is a debate in which individual freedom (the right of an individual to not be judged on the basis of race) becomes most diametrically

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

<sup>132</sup> Quoted in Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 40.

<sup>133</sup> Dinesh D'Souza. *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society.* New York: The Free Press, 1996. 199.

opposed with social equality (a historically disadvantaged group of people seeking present-day relief from the effects of past discrimination).

King's articulation away from social justice and towards individual rights in American public memory thus opened him up particularly for use in service of an anti-affirmative action agenda. Having just established King as the source of virtually all of the civil rights era's victories, and capitalizing on King's synonymity with racial utopianism in public memory, D'Souza's placement of King as an opponent of affirmative action seriously undercuts any claims by contemporary civil rights advocates that affirmative action is an acceptable strategy for achieving racial equality. As he lays out his case against the use of affirmative action, D'Souza makes sure to cite King's name or the phrase "the content of their character" regularly.

The 1996 "Proposition 209" campaign succeeded in having the California constitution amended to ensure that "the state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting."<sup>134</sup> This major anti-affirmative action victory took the arguments of *The End of Racism*, including the invocation of the civil rights struggle and King in particular, and put them to the public. Michael Eric Dyson described Proposition 209 as the "crowning achievement"<sup>135</sup> of black conservative writer, activist and University of California regent

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<sup>134</sup> California Secretary of State. "Proposition 209: Text of Proposed Law."  
<http://vote96.sos.ca.gov/Vote96/html/BP/209text.htm>

<sup>135</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 25.

Ward Connerly, who has devoted the bulk of his career to opposing affirmative action programs in books, legal action, and campaigns such as the one in California.

Seemingly everything about the campaign was an attempt to identify opposition to affirmative action with the letter and spirit of early 1960s civil rights, particularly the Civil Rights Act. The text of Proposition 209 even took some of the language of the 1964 act word for word in order to make the connection all the more obvious.<sup>136</sup> According to Connerly, the pro-209 campaign was not ideologically appropriating a figure by invoking King; rather, the campaign was “acknowledging what he wanted this nation to become, and [his organization was] going to fight to get the nation back on the journey that Dr. King laid out.”<sup>137</sup>

The most notorious use of Martin Luther King’s image specifically during the Proposition 209 campaign indicates the degree to which conservatives had begun to feel comfortable about using public memory of King in service of specific policy initiatives, but also indicates the strictly enforced limits of the right’s articulation of King with conservative ideas. The California Republican Party aired an ad in support of 209 which included video of King delivering, unsurprisingly, the “content of their character” line at the March on Washington.<sup>138</sup>

While this was obviously not the first time conservatives had invoked King when arguing for a particular policy, particularly the anti-affirmative action cause, here the

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* 26

connection was too overt: both King's words and his visual image had been used not to support an abstract idea of what civil rights is or a conservative vision of racial equality as with Reagan and D'Souza, but instead they were used by a political party in what was explicitly a campaign advertisement. The distinction is very small, but a line had clearly been crossed. It was not just the maligned "civil rights establishment" that was upset, but also Coretta Scott King and the King estate, which threatened to sue the California Republicans. This threat caused the party to pull the ad.<sup>139</sup>

Ward Connerly personally objected to the use of the King footage in the Republican advertisement,<sup>140</sup> perhaps realizing that associating King's image with a whole political party rather than an individual policy was bending the articulation past what the public was willing to accept. Nonetheless, Connerly didn't concede that it was more ideologically appropriate for some causes to invoke King's memory than others in the face of criticism from 1960s civil rights figures: "It is outrageous for Jesse Jackson and all those from the past...to somehow suggest that it is inappropriate for any of us to use Dr. King's memory...He belongs to all of us."<sup>141</sup> Connerly continued to use the symbolic power of King to advance the anti-affirmative action cause after the victory in California by officially opening the National Campaign Against Affirmative Action on the King holiday in 1997.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* 27

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Introduction by Editors. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006. Xx.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 25.

The telling failure of the pro-209 commercial aside, conservatives in the 1990s clearly saw the need to use King's symbolic power as the face of civil rights and his "glittering moral authority"<sup>143</sup> as they focused on ending the public use of affirmative action. As with any specific appropriation based on thirty-five words from a long and complicated career, King's view on the prospect of using race as a factor in hiring, admissions, etc. is not as simple as D'Souza and Connerly would suggest. Affirmative action had yet to crystallize into a single political issue by the mid-to-late 1960s, but it is worth consulting King's writings from that period on the value of race consciousness in addressing inequality. Greg Moses writes that throughout King's career, he had been "wary of theories which assumed that the social order is already operating to develop and acknowledge individual merit in a milieu of good will."<sup>144</sup> King wrote in 1967 that in creating a just society out of a discriminatory one, "giving a man his due may often mean giving him *special treatment*."<sup>145</sup>

As early as 1964's *Why We Can't Wait*, King vaguely outlines an ideal policy that would address centuries of discrimination "in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law."<sup>146</sup> Dyson notes that this is actually a more radical stance than most contemporary visions of affirmative action.<sup>147</sup> On yet

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>144</sup> Greg Moses. "To Begin Where We Have Not Yet Reached: Affirmative Action in the Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. *NWSA Journal* Vol. 10, no.3 (Autumn 1998).

<sup>145</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon, 1967. 90.

<sup>146</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. *Why We Can't Wait*. New York: New American Library, 1964.1 137.

<sup>147</sup> Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000. 128.

another issue, reconsidering King's lesser known stances from late in his career reveals the degree to which he was beginning to value achievement of equality at the risk of individual freedom, which undermines the rights-centric and colorblind ideology attributed to King by 1990s conservatives.

Lastly, Shelby Steele's *The Content of our Character* (1990) and *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (1998) also represent important artifacts in the history of the right's appropriation of King. Both carry on the same affirmative action arguments as Steele's fellow conservatives do but both go a step further by criticizing *any* effort to address persisting inequality from past discrimination as futile, a product of guilt, and past the purview of civil rights action.

*The Content of our Character*, which invokes the "thirty-five words" in *I Have a Dream* in its very title, begins with familiar conservative 1990s arguments about the nature of civil rights. The "early and middle years" of civil rights had the right idea of ending "the corrupt union of race and power,"<sup>148</sup> work which Steele believes has been undone by succeeding generations of race-conscious civil rights activists. Martin Luther King has no equivalent today, Steele believes, because those generations have not resisted "the seductions of racial power" the way that he did.<sup>149</sup> In his essay "White Guilt," Steele attributes support for "too many of our social policies" (implicitly, support for reparations and affirmative action) to black power's successful ploy to provoke "the guilt of white self-

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<sup>148</sup> Shelby Steele. *The Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 17.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

preoccupation and escapism.”<sup>150</sup> Steele seeks to discredit the authenticity of even more of his ideological opponents than D’Souza does. He is not just casting 1990s civil rights leaders as inauthentic by comparison with King, but implying that any white supporters of government strategies for addressing past inequality are only supportive because of a self-interested sense of guilt.

Shelby Steele continues this line of attack in *A Dream Deferred*, in which he states that post-King liberalism’s “all-consuming goal was the expiation of American shame rather than the careful development of equality between the races.”<sup>151</sup> This is contrasted with an acceptable “‘freedom-focused’ liberalism” of the early civil rights era<sup>152</sup> that supposedly “demanded only constitutional rights.”<sup>153</sup> Steele argues that “the Civil Rights movement should have initiated Americans into a healthy fatalism- the recognition that we cannot ‘fix’ all the bad things as a way of re-establishing our lost innocence,”<sup>154</sup> that race will “never enter public life except to excuse people from the responsibilities of democracy”<sup>155</sup> and that “race can never be a pretext for activism; it has to be a pretext for discipline.”<sup>156</sup>

Only fifteen years separate the conservative appropriation of Martin Luther King beginning in earnest with Republicans hoping to take credit for passage of the King Holiday bill and Steele’s *A Dream Deferred*. In those fifteen years, King’s symbolic authority had been called upon in service of a variety of right-wing causes including deregulation, the

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* 86-87.

<sup>151</sup> Shelby Steele. *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998. Xiii.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* 114.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*



discrediting of latter civil rights leaders, and opposition to affirmative action programs. Steele takes it the furthest by placing King in opposition to any government action which recognizes inequality as a racial phenomenon or tries to “fix” problems created by laws and systems of the past. It was in the 1990s that the symbolic King was made to stand against race-based political action and progressivism altogether.

**“A Usable Past”: Where Has the Right Left Memory of the Civil Rights Movement, and How Might the Left Use King?**

If there’s a single common strategy in most invocations of King for the purposes of defending conservative ideas and policies, it is always to create as much distance as possible between the civil rights era and citizens engaged in contemporary politics. Contemporary civil rights voices are always sharply contrasted ideologically and tactically with King, whether they were in fact part of “classical” civil rights or not. In the narratives Reagan, D’Souza, and Steele all prefer, legal discrimination ended with the bestowal of individual rights by the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Acts, and as a result anything that came afterward and particularly anything involving “big government” cannot qualify as an issue of civil rights.

The emphasis on King as an exceptional individual emblematic of the whole civil rights struggle serves to minimize the contributions of other civil rights actors and voices for the contemporary consumer of these conservative narratives, and perhaps even separate citizens from believing a mass protest movement is a viable and effective form of political action. This separation represents the third type of work King’s symbolic image has done for

conservatism. Although related to the first two, the careful setting apart of King is not about support for specific policies. It is about how the right's rhetorical strategies have functioned to diminish the connection between the divisions and issues of the 1960s civil rights era and the United States' present political situation, a connection which might otherwise be of use to the left.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's essay "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" puts forth the idea that strict periodization of the civil rights movement into a time from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s (as all the conservative invocations of King do) rather than treating civil rights as an ongoing movement including victories and reversals since the 1960s "prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time."<sup>157</sup> Hall attributes the success of conservative narratives of the civil rights movement to both their constant repetition and the fact that they help to "avoid uncomfortable questions about the relationship between cumulative white advantage and present social ills,"<sup>158</sup> thus removing white privilege from the mainstream post-1960s political discourse surrounding issues of racial inequality.

Edward Morgan, writing on the related topic of mass media recollections of the civil rights era, sees not only political discourse being limited by narrow depictions of the civil rights movement, but also possibilities for continued political action being limited as well. The focus on King indicative of so-called "great man" histories has "obscured a movement

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<sup>157</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History*. Vol.91, Issue 4 (March 2005). 4.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

built on the courageous and determined efforts of thousands upon thousands of everyday people - a revision of the past that removes the struggle for justice, and its potential continuity with today's world, from the realm of what 'the people' can do."<sup>159</sup> This type of historical revision produces what Morgan calls "spectator democracy," which is contrasted with "active, discursive democracy" because the former "renders the past turbulent but ideologically safe, and seemingly impenetrable"<sup>160</sup> whereas the latter might encourage parallels between the possibilities and challenges of the past and present and might present "context-relevant forms of political action."<sup>161</sup> The right's widely-spread version of civil rights history, with a narrow version of King's career at its center, has presented to a modern citizenry a movement for racial equality that was important, but is now ultimately remote and quaint. A resistant presentation of civil rights as a vibrant and relevant mass effort might revive belief in the efficacy of radical democratic movements for equality, which would work to the detriment of conservatism.

Articulation is never over. A symbol is able to be articulated towards an ideology only under the right social and political conditions, and when it suits the needs of a group at a particular juncture in that group's history. The use of King's public memory to support a conservative agenda came at a time when the right needed to separate itself from its past rejection of popular civil rights, needed to exclusively take up the mantle of individual rights and freedoms and use it in defense of perpetually smaller government, and needed to

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<sup>159</sup> Edward P. Morgan. "The Good, the Bad and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement." In *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Edited by Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 141

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

dismiss criticisms of laissez faire economic and civil rights policies based on the enduring fact of racial inequality as “race-conscious” and therefore against the spirit of the civil rights struggle. The moral authority and centrality to a mythologized civil rights movement of the symbolic King made him ideal under these circumstances.

The unprecedented reaction to the use of King’s image in the Republican pro-Proposition 209 ad shows that even articulations entrenched in a particular ideology for decades have limits. In that case, the limit was King’s deployment by a political party as opposed to an individual or organization and his deployment in service of a very specific political campaign rather than in making a more abstract argument about affirmative action. More recently, the reaction to conservative commentator Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor” rally, which took place at the Lincoln Memorial on the 2010 anniversary of “I Have a Dream”, also indicates the limits of articulation. Even when a symbol’s use is not in service of a specific issue, a particularly high-profile and blatant symbolic appropriation can provoke resistance in a way that the many lesser known and more metaphorical invocations might not.

Beck openly said that a purpose of the rally was to “take back the civil rights movement”<sup>162</sup> and a rally on August 28<sup>th</sup> at the Lincoln Memorial is a more obvious allusion to King than almost anything else in this paper, besides possibly the Proposition 209 ad. If an intended effect was to further normalize, or even revel in, the idea that King’s image could be brought to bear in service of a conservative agenda, it was not successful. Beck’s

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\*The Lincoln Memorial, August 28, and even an appearance by King’s pro-life niece.

<sup>162</sup> Liz Halloran, “Glen Beck Comes to D.C., Controversy Follows.” NPR.  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129449408>

status as a media lightning rod and the obvious symbolism of the borrowed setting\* had the opposite effect of making more visible the larger pattern of appropriation and giving an opening to groups wishing to challenge the prevailing articulation.<sup>163</sup> Civil rights campaigners from Washington, D.C. and elsewhere staged a countermarch entitled “Reclaiming the Dream” as a protest against the use of King’s image by the right, although the conceptions of King’s “dream” articulated by the counterprotesters appeared more moderate than radical.<sup>164</sup>

How then, might the left reclaim King, and what would such a move accomplish? The recent cracks in the articulation of King with a conservative conception of individual rights reinforce the tenuousness of any particular articulation. There is a question, however, unaddressed in Hall’s theory of articulation, of whether it is desirable for a faction to undertake the difficult task of rearticulating a symbol that has been so gleaned of its original ideological connotation. After all, the rearticulation of King not only served to realign the symbol of King with a rightist ideology for the center and the right, but also to generations of those on the left and center left, who have found other more vibrantly radical symbols to use.

Despite the challenge, undertaking a program of rearticulation might yield tremendous benefit to the American left at this juncture in its history. A major function of the right’s use of King was to seriously limit what could be referred to as a “civil rights issue”

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Avis Thomas-Lester, Hamil R. Harris and Knissah Thompson. “Sharpton’s ‘Reclaim the Dream’ Event Brings Thousands to Honor MLK.” *The Washington Post*. 28 August 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/28/AR2010082802564.html?sid=ST2010083005103>

to policy dealing with mid-1960s protections, to the exclusion of any number of issues which have a racial component in terms of who is affected and in what way. King's enduring status as the authoritative symbol of all civil rights makes any proposal successfully connected to his words or actions instantly seem in keeping with the aims of popular civil rights policy, and so his use by left-of-center activists and politicians might help to refute the claim that the civil rights proposals of liberals and leftists make them "corrupt defenders of an outmoded era." Emphasizing the King who espoused a socially democratic political economy as a necessary component to any just society makes cuts to social programs, the downward shift of the tax burden, and other perpetual results of the new right's rise appear plainly to be contributing to the fact of racial disparity in a supposedly colorblind age.

An organized labor movement even weaker and more representative of minorities than it was in the Reagan/Bush era, and now experiencing something of an assertive and public revival in Wisconsin and elsewhere, is much in need of an ideological figurehead like King. Labor could emphasize King's understanding of civil rights and the organized labor movement as a joint venture to show that struggles to retain the rights to unionize and to bargain collectively are the basic rights of workers and do not represent a special privilege subject to the whims of employers or to market forces. The primary target of conservatives who have invoked King has now for decades been affirmative action, but a way to confront the colorblind, individual rights-centric narratives of civil rights which prop up affirmative action opposition might also come with a rearticulation of King. A simple way to argue in favor of affirmative action would be to make King's barely known statements about the

regrettable necessity of special treatment in allaying the effects of discrimination and his comparatively radical proposal for direct compensation a consistent part of the debate.

There are various signs a rearticulation may already be under way. The work in the last decade by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Edward P. Morgan, Manning Marable, and particularly Michael Eric Dyson shows that appropriation of King has been recognized as a consequential trend by historians and scholars of African American studies, and that there are those in academia who see reviving understanding of the radical King as vital to an understanding of both the civil rights era and the present. The polemical title of Dyson's book *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* represents an unqualified statement that the right has turned one of the most justifiably popular figures in American history into a fabrication. Activists for left of center causes, particularly gay rights, have in recent years used language from 1960s civil rights to draw a direct connection between the rights and equality desired in that era and that which is demanded by gays and lesbians today.<sup>165</sup> Ironically, it was just two decades ago that prominent Christian right organizations were using the same language to paint conservative Christians as victimized in American politics and life.<sup>166</sup> The right's articulation of King away from social justice and towards individual rights began with politicians. What's notable about attempts at rearticulation is that politicians from the left and center-left themselves appear to be the group most disinclined or unwilling to make rightist distortions of King's memory a

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<sup>165</sup> Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Introduction by Editors. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006. Xx.

<sup>166</sup> David John Marley. "Riding in the Back of the Bus." In *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006. 346-362.

consistent issue or to invoke King's words or career in anything but a commemorative context.

Conservative invocations of Martin Luther King from the past thirty years are remarkable because of what they say about the rhetorical needs of the right in that era, and especially for their level of simplicity and lack of context. The left might well use some of King's words and actions simplistically and out of context as well in a program of rearticulation, because that is the nature of making a complicated figure speak for a specific set of contemporary issues. King is the nation's most potent symbol of a racial utopia, a fact proven by the right, and so he is of the utmost political value. The left's utopia may be one of equality through distributive means rather than of optimal freedom through individual rights, but it's a utopian vision nonetheless. As long as America feels a deep longing to permanently put race and inequality behind it, and continues to look to the political sphere for relief, Martin Luther King will not be allowed to exist solely in the realm of history.



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