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Jermaine M. McDonald Date

The Canonization of Martin Luther King Jr.:
Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Reconstruction of an American Hero

By

Jermaine M. McDonald
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Division of Religion
Ethics and Society

_____

Steven M. Tipton
Advisor

_____

Elizabeth M. Bounds
Committee Member

_____

Dianne M. Stewart
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

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By

Jermaine M. McDonald
Master of Divinity, Virginia Union University, 2006
Bachelor of Science, University of Virginia, 2001

Advisor: Steven M. Tipton, PhD

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Ethics and Society
2015

Abstract

The Canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. :
Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Reconstruction of an American Hero

By Jermaine M. McDonald

Today we commonly accept that Martin Luther King Jr. is a national hero who embodies America as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. This has not always been the case. According to a Gallup poll, in August 1966 King had a 33% favorable to 63% unfavorable rating. By contrast, his popularity rating in August 2011 was 94% favorable, a complete reversal.[1] This dissertation explores the "canonization" of King in American society by tracing the process by which he has been elevated to the status of an unquestionable national hero. I use and refine theories of collective memory and civil religion to evaluate four critical cultural moments that have established and reaffirmed this elevation. Those critical moments are, first, the thirteen-year public debates that resulted in the establishment of a national holiday in King's honor; second, the Reagan-inspired, conservative reimagining of King as a colorblind priest; third, the creation of the National King Memorial in the pantheon of American heroes; and, fourth, the dedication ceremonies of that memorial which sought to remind the nation of King's commitment to economic justice and equality. Taken together, these critical cultural moments in the canonization of Dr. King reveal the discursive, contested nature of collective memory and civil religion in American society as individuals and groups struggle to name and shape shared social and moral values.

[1] Jeffrey M. Jones. "Americans Divided on Whether King's Dream Has Been Realized." http://www.gallup.com/poll/149201/Americans-Divided-Whether-King-Dream-Realized.aspx. Last accessed August 26, 2011.

The Canonization of Martin Luther King Jr.: Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Reconstruction of an American Hero

A Dissertation

By

Jermaine M. McDonald
Master of Divinity, Virginia Union University, 2006
Bachelor of Science, University of Virginia, 2001

Advisor: Steven M. Tipton, PhD
Towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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The Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. King's home church, welcomed me with open arms and allowed me to serve them as their minister for Christian Education for two years. I did not know when I started my program that I would be writing about their former co-pastor. Nevertheless, this work is dedicated to that beloved community that continues to strive for justice.

This work began from a lecture I gave to the students at Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia. I am thankful to Dr. Linda Tucker for inviting me to speak in the Kathleen Mallory Distinguished Lecture Series and for the thoughtful questions asked of me by the students of SAU.

Having moved away from the comfortable confines of Emory University and Atlanta so that my spouse could pursue her dreams, I depended on the libraries at Harvard University and Georgetown University to complete my work. The Episcopal Divinity School allowed me to teach courses that corresponded with this work. Additionally, Lucia Hulsether patiently listened to me working out the details of my analysis and gave me feedback on a late draft that has me pondering book revisions. Thank you.

My parents, Wilbur and Odessa McDonald, nurtured within me a thirst for knowledge, a love of books, and a dedication to community that continues to sustain me to this day. My grandmother, Edna Moss, has an inspirational survivor's spirit that teaches me to never give up. My sister, Nicole, herself pursuing a terminal degree in religion, pushes me to pursue excellence so that I will always be worthy of her admiration.

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Chapter 1

Revisiting the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

> We recognize here that in the midst of the amazing truth that an African-American preacher who never held public political office is recognized here among the fathers of the country. Indeed, he has become a father of the country. For his leadership gave birth to a new America.[1]
>
> Reverend Joseph Lowery at the King Memorial Dedication Ceremony

The Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington, DC officially opened to the public on Monday, August 22, 2011. An estimated 400,000 sojourners were expected to flood the nation's capital in anticipation of the dedication ceremonies scheduled to take place on the following Sunday.[2] As late as Friday morning, those of us who had made the journey to Washington remained steadfast in our hope to join in immortalizing Dr. King on the National Mall as scheduled. Alas, Mother Nature had other plans: Hurricane Irene forced the National Park Service to postpone the dedication ceremony for a later date.

This disappointment did not dampen the spirits of those who came to witness the King Memorial during its opening week. These enthusiastic visitors endured 90+ degree weather to walk through the memorial, entering through the "mountain of despair," reading the quotations on the inscription wall, listening to the rushing sounds of the memorial's streaming waters, viewing the "stone of hope," and gazing upon the thirty-foot statue of Dr. King that looks out towards the Jefferson Memorial. However one judges the actual King Memorial itself, the occasion of its opening was truly telling in

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[1] Reverend Joseph Lowery from "Martin Luther King Memorial Dedication," *C-SPAN.org* 16 October 2011, http://www.c-span.org/video/?302020-1/martin-luther-king-memorial-dedication, last accessed February 17, 2015.

[2] Melanie Eversley. "Fewer expected at Rescheduled King Memorial Dedication". *USA Today*. Published October 16, 2011. Last accessed June 13, 2012. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-10-15/mlk-memorial/50764056/1

welcoming Martin Luther King Jr. to the national pantheon of heroes memorialized on the National Mall, America's front yard.

The King Memorial stands out for a variety of reasons. It is the first monument on the Mall dedicated to a figure of peace, the first to honor a person of color, and the first to honor a non-politician. Its location on the Tidal Basin adjacent to the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials symbolizes a third great step in America's journey towards justice and equality: Thomas Jefferson declared that all people are created equal, Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves, and Martin Luther King Jr. secured the freedom and equal rights of all citizens. With the creation of a national memorial alongside George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jefferson, and Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr.'s importance in the American cultural landscape literally has been set in stone.

Today, we commonly accept that Dr. King is a national hero who embodies America as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all, but this has certainly not always been the case. In 2011, Gallup reissued polls that measured King's popularity in the 1960s to ascertain the difference in King's popularity between then and now. The results are extraordinary. In August 1966, King's popularity rating was 33% favorable to 63% unfavorable. By contrast, his popularity rating in August 2011 was 94% favorable to 4% unfavorable, a complete reversal.[3] Two days after King delivered his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, William Sullivan, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) chief of intelligence during King's lifetime, declared in a memo to J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, that Martin Luther King Jr. "stands head and shoulders over all other Negro

[3] Jeffrey M. Jones. "Americans Divided on Whether King's Dream Has Been Realized". http://www.gallup.com/poll/149201/Americans-Divided-Whether-King-Dream-Realized.aspx. Last accessed August 26, 2011.

leaders put together when it comes to influencing great masses of Negroes. We must mark him now . . . as the *most dangerous Negro* of the future in this Nation."[4] By the end of his life, many of King's allies in the Civil Rights Movement—White liberals *and* middle-class African Americans—would no longer stand in solidarity with him as he turned his attention towards the oppressive poverty and militarism that he saw plaguing both the United States and the entire world. For thirteen years after his assassination, a vigorous debate ensued over whether Dr. King deserved to be honored with a national holiday. Yet today King's status as an American hero is very much a settled question. How did this come to be?

Though some still view Martin Luther King Jr. negatively, as Gallup reported in 2011, most people in America admire him as an iconic figure in American history. Political movements across the country and around the world claim kinship with his philosophies. King's "Dream" has been used by liberals to defend affirmative action *and* by conservatives to dismantle it. Conservative talk show host Glenn Beck held a "Restoring Honor" rally on the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech and echoed its lines, while members of the Occupy Wall Street movement organized their own activism in keeping with King's nonviolent social action. The fact that so many groups with apparently opposing views claim kinship with King reflects the divergent, competing constructions of King's legacy hidden beneath the broader, often superficial, public recollections of his life and work today.

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[4] W.C. Sullivan to A.H. Belmont, August 30, 1963, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Communist Party, USA – Negro Question," republished at http://www.npr.org/assets/news/2013/mlk-fbi-memo.pdf, last accessed December 30, 2014. Emphasis mine.

Such divergent uses of King's memory by opposing political groups, coupled with the differences between the way American society in general remembers Martin Luther King Jr. and the full body of King's work lead me to pose the following questions to guide this inquiry: *How is the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. reconstructed in American society? What functions does this reconstruction serve, and what are its social and moral implications?*

The construction and public dedication of the National King Memorial provides a ripe opportunity on which to reflect on the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. In particular, this dissertation explores the "canonization" of King in American society by tracing the process by which he has become an unquestionable national hero. While plenty of scholarly works detail King's biography, interpret his theology, and analyze his nonviolent social action, few works weigh how and why American society has come to remember and regard Martin Luther King Jr. This work aims to fill that gap in scholarship. It does not seek to reclaim or uncover the "true King," but to explore how King's legacy has come to be shaped as it now stands in the American public sphere.

The story of the shaping and reshaping of King's legacy is a tale of twists and turns, with unlikely protagonists and deeply committed antagonists. The narrative is complex enough to belie any single line of explanation. Though some may wish to reduce its course to a simple logic of "domestication," the process of King's public remembering exalts some aspects of his life and ignores others as it unfolds in history through specific social circumstances and settings of recollection by specific communities of collective memory and hope.

This study brings theories of collective memory to bear on this history. Yet collective memory alone, with its sharp focus on how groups employ the past to make sense of the present, cannot fully explain the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. Theories of collective memory tend to focus on how the past shapes the present, but not how the present reshapes the past. This leads such theories to conceive a group's collective values as *rooted* primarily in the past. The canonization of King, however, reveals how collective values may emerge in the present as a *response* to the past, a response that aims to reshape or even discard that past. While collective memory helps us understand the establishment and maintenance of memorials that highlight what a nation *ought* to remember, theories of civil religion and religious legitimation better capture the fluidity of the meanings of these fixed "sites of memory"—*lieux de mémoire*[5]—as well as the contestation of values carried out in their ongoing reinterpretation. To grasp the full significance of King's canonization, therefore, we must delve into theories of collective memory and civil religion alike.

Collective Memory

Pierre Nora argues that the "acceleration of history" represented by the "rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good," has resulted in a rupture in the balance between history and memory.[6] While earlier societies relied on the lived experience of tradition, custom, and ritual to remember and make meaning of the past, contemporary society moves at such a rapid pace that it has developed a historical sensibility to organize the past in order to propel change in the present.[7] Whereas history

[5] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Reverberations*, Spring 1989, 7.

[6] Nora, 7.

[7] Nora., 8.

was once located in collective memory and bound by societal traditions, rituals, customs, and the like, it has now broken free of memory and seeks to eradicate it. Nora, therefore, conceives memory and history as oppositional forces. The extended quotation below fully explains this opposition:

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. … Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic–responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. … Memory is blind to all but the group it binds—which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority.[8]

Nora frames such abstract history as antithetical to and perpetually suspicious of living memory. He suggests that the ultimate aim of a universal history is to forge a completely historicized society that will suppress and destroy the partial and particular reality of collective memory.

Arising from the remnants of this cosmic battle between memory and history are what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. These symbolic objects of a society's memory (libraries, museums, monuments, communal celebrations, and the like) are "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because [society] has abandoned it."[9] Society creates sites of memory to preserve, transform, and renew itself (somewhat

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[8] Ibid., 8-9.
[9] Nora, 12.

narcissistically, in Nora's analysis) because this preservation no longer happens organically. Without sites of memory telling society what to think about itself and what to remember about its own past, an abstract and universal history would wipe out any collective memory of a society unified in specific, plural, yet individual terms.

Nora categorizes this modern memory as archive-memory, duty-memory, and distance-memory. Modern memory is "archive-memory" because it relies on "the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, [and] the visibility of the image."[10] Society records so much data that it is impossible for it to remember in the manner that it used to. Further, Nora suggests that society's esteem for this archive makes it impossible for historians or anyone else to predict what should be remembered.[11] Nora's concern for predicting what *should* be remembered is misguided. It stems from his insistence that the historian's primary goal is to set the record straight objectively and universally. This may be the historian's goal, but Nora readily acknowledges the impossibility of accomplishing this task. Every narrative is subjective, no matter the aims of the person crafting it. Additionally, the historian cannot dictate *what* society chooses to remember and *why*. At best, a historian can contribute her carefully crafted narrative to the public archive and participate in the social (presumably democratic) construction of memory. Rather than seeking to predict what should be remembered, this study uses the memorialization of Martin Luther King Jr. in America to evaluate *how* and *why* society determines *what* to remember.

Nora also describes modern memory as "duty-memory" because it is atomized and no longer experienced collectively in a meaningful way. Instead, memory has been

[10] Ibid., 13.
[11] Ibid., 14.

privatized to the point that the obligation to remember is "a power of internal coercion."[12] Nora suggests that the increasing number of people reconstructing their personal histories in the form of genealogies and the like exemplify this private duty of memory. Because memory is no longer everywhere, each individual must take the opportunity to personally capture memory to "protect the trappings of identity."

Finally, Nora describes modern memory as "distance-memory." In the history-memory of old, continuity existed between the present and the past such that the present was "a sort of recycled, up-dated past."[13] Members of a group could confidently assume to know "to whom and to what [they] owe [their] existence." In other words, collective identity *was* a given, rooted in a people's past, but modern memory has created distance in this continuity. Instead of connecting the collective to its past, modern memory, as distance memory, shows how far society has progressed from its past.

Lieux de mémoire, or "sites of memory," circumvent the effects of modern memory and reinstate some semblance of traditional memory. They circumvent archive-memory by highlighting what from the past is important enough to be remembered by the group. They circumvent duty-memory by de-privatizing memory, allowing it to be experienced collectively again. Finally, *lieux de mémoire* circumvents distance-memory by informing the group to what and to whom in the past they owe their present existence.

The example of Martin Luther King Jr.'s post-assassination ascension to the status of national saint confirms many of Pierre Nora's ideas about history and memory. Both the national holiday and the national memorial are *lieux de mémoire* that figuratively stand between historical recollections of King's life and the social memory of his

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[12] Nora, 16.
[13] Ibid.

significance to American society. They jointly work to circumvent modern memory in the same manner specified above. The holiday reminds us that the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. changed American society forever, highlighting King as one of the most important figures in the nation's history. It also sets up a specified time each year for Americans to transcend atomized duty-memory and collectively reflect on the meaning of that change. The national memorial elevates King to the same exalted status as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the Founding Fathers, reminding Americans that we owe our present condition to his past work, circumventing distance-memory by tangibly connecting the past to the present.

Nora's *lieux de mémoire* operate materially, symbolically, and functionally to reconnect memory and history. Their most fundamental purpose is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial … in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs."[14] Their resiliency and enduring relevance lies in "their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning, and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications."[15]

The example of the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. bears this out. The holiday sets aside a specified time for collective remembrance. The national memorial immortalizes King and "materializes" four abstract principles commonly attributed to his legacy (hope, democracy, justice, and love). Both the holiday and memorial are abstract and flexible enough to have their meanings and ramifications altered by time, circumstance, and audience. The holiday, therefore, can simultaneously signify how

[14] Nora, 19.
[15] Ibid.

much U.S. society has changed from its racist past (which is perhaps its original intent, according to the congressional debates on the merit of the holiday; see chapter two); declare a national commitment to the colorblind thesis that negates social consideration based solely on race, as suggested by President Reagan in the 1980s (see chapter three); or set aside a time for individuals to serve their communities, as re-imagined by President Bill Clinton in the 1990s (not discussed in this text).[16] Further, the memorial can exist as a creative materialization of King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and symbolically elevate King to the same status as Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson (see chapter four), even as the dedication ceremony of the National Memorial transforms it into a site of protest against unabated capitalism and militarism (see chapter five).

Nora is correct in his assertion that a dichotomy exists between history and memory. His perspective as a Frenchman and a historian of the history of France, leads him to conclude that history introduces doubt and "run[s] a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history," interrogating the myths and interpretations that undergird memory and seeking to understand the past beyond the "sacred objects" of national tradition.[17] For Nora, history threatens to undermine the myths and narratives that help define the collective memory of a group. However, in speculating on the endgame of history, Nora overstates the impact of the acceleration of history on memory, lends too much credence to the ability of the historian to pursue objective truth, and underestimates the resiliency of memory to withstand the challenge of history. He insists

[16] See William J. Clinton, "Remarks on Signing the King Holiday and Service Act of 1994," delivered on August 23, 1994, online at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=49010.

[17] Nora, 10.

that *lieux de mémoire* exist because society has a "will to remember."[18] Yet he is vague on why a collective will to remember exists or what informs it. Indeed, if modern memory is as individually atomized as Nora suspects, and if the ultimate aim of history truly is to eradicate memory, why would society invest in *lieux de mémoire* at all? In other words, why does a collective go to such great lengths to remember despite the challenges offered by history? Perhaps other theories of collective memory help us answer this question.

Barry Schwartz faults Nora's analysis of the relationship between history and memory for reducing collective memory to a "distorted version of history."[19] He criticizes Nora's dichotomy for failing to see the reciprocal relationship between history and memory. For Schwartz, history and memory do not oppose each other; rather, *history* and *commemoration* comprise the two sources of collective memory. He writes, "collective memory is a representation of the past embodied in *both* historical evidence and commemorative symbolism."[20] A more extensive quotation further details how history and commemoration work together to inform collective memory:

> Commemoration and history perform work so differently that we confound both by assessing them in terms of one another's techniques and achievements, but they are highly interdependent. History always reflects the ideals and sentiments that commemoration expresses; commemoration is always rooted in historical knowledge and can only be intellectually compelling when it symbolizes values whose past existence history documents. The making of monuments, shrines, paintings, and statues, the naming of places and observance of anniversaries connected with the life of a historical figure, become more meaningful if the virtues and achievements they celebrate are factually confirmed. Just so, history is morally compelling when it documents extraordinary events, for the chief function of commemoration is to select out of the welter of history the events that

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[18] Nora, 19.

[19] Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 11.

[20] Ibid., 9. Emphasis Schwartz's.

> are politically and morally most significant. Many historians take an interest in events in the first place because they have been commemoratively distinguished.[21]

According to Schwartz, commemoration only makes sense when it is rooted in historical evidence, historians often follow the lead of the sentiments of the collective when determining which historical accounts to create and revise, and commemoration identifies the artifacts of history that the collective holds most important.

This study on the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrates at least the first and third of these ideas. Each of the stages of the American collective memory of King—the discussion of whether King merited a national holiday, the Reagan re-imagining of King in the service of a conservative colorblind vision, the planning and implementation of the National King Memorial, and the opening ceremony for the memorial itself—relied on differing historical accounts to make often competing claims about King and his importance (or lack thereof in some cases) to American society.

For example, the proponents of the National King Holiday used historical evidence to refute charges that King was not worthy of such an honor. When some of the opponents of the holiday used a different set of evidence (King's alleged communist ties and his harsh words about the U.S. effort in Vietnam, to name two) to challenge King's worthiness, the holiday proponents had to refute those claims and assert that King's civil rights work, his Nobel Prize, and his historic speech at the Lincoln Memorial outweighed any alleged associations King may have had or harsh words King may have used in the name of peace. Along the same lines, the Reagan-led reimagining of King as a champion of the conservative colorblind thesis owes its endurance to a truncated factual claim. The fact that King indeed dreamt of a society that judges persons on the content of their

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[21] Schwartz, 11-12.

character not on the color of their skin makes it challenging to sustain the counterclaim that the colorblind thesis is a too simple reduction of King's life and work.

Commemoration allows the collective to identify with and connect itself to the subject of the commemoration and exercise the collective's sense of group identity. Commemoration also transforms the historical facts about the subject into objects of attachment by defining the objects and explaining how the members of the collective ought to feel about the objects.[22] Such is the case for the commemorations of Martin Luther King Jr. Yet the definition Schwartz provides does not account for the discrepancies regarding the effectiveness of historical evidence in shaping collective memory. As noted above, an abundance of historical information about King's civil rights work outweighed the counterclaims with limited evidence of his alleged associations, but evidence that King supported federal intervention for racial equality failed to negate the popular claim that King did not want race to be considered in distributing social goods or rights. Clearly historical evidence is not the key factor in determining what a group choses to highlight in its collective memory. This still leaves us with the question: who determines what historical facts are most relevant and how?

Some theorists answer this question by reference to the power politics of memory, arguing that political elites exercise power to dictate how past events are remembered in order to manipulate the present. Michael E. Geisler argues in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities* that national symbols, such as the National King Holiday and Memorial, act as catalysts for the formation and maintenance of national identity and are

[22] Schwartz, 12.

critically important for "fusing a *nation* to a *state*."[23] The creation and maintenance of a nation is critically important for a pluralistic state in which few of the inhabitants can consider the state their "ancestral homeland."[24] Despite lingering questions of causation—are national symbols more a product of the organic collective memory of citizens or the product of state power—collective memory creates a shared mythic past to help shape national identity. James Fentress and Chris Wickham go even further when they argue in their work *Social Memory* that the bearers of national memory in Western capitalist societies come chiefly from the upper middle classes and professional strata to compose the political and intellectual elites that articulate for everyone the terms of national memory, which other groups rarely contest.[25] They suggest that the function of national memory, then, is "less to analyse the 'pastness' of the past than to give an objective veneer to the preoccupations and self-legitimizations of national bourgeoisies."[26] Barry Schwartz, however, finds this line of reasoning "monotonous." For him, past events were

> defined for us by adults while we were still children and adolescents; we did not determine for ourselves what to make of them. This defining does not mean that our instructors were consciously or unconsciously manipulating us. It does not mean that officials planned commemorative celebrations in order to get us to do their bidding or to make us loyal to a political system against which we would have otherwise rebelled: Collective memory is in truth an effective weapon in contemporary power struggles, but the battlefield image of society, taken alone, distorts understanding of collective memory's sources and functions, leaving out,

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[23] Michael C. Geisler, "Introduction: What are National Symbols–and What Do They Do to Us?" in Michael E. Geisler (ed.) *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative* (Middlebury, VT: Middlebury College Press, 2005), xv. Author's emphasis.

[24] Ibid.

[25] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 127.

[26] Ibid.

as it does, the cultural realm within which the politics of memory is situated.[27]

The politics of memory is simplistic because it only imagines collective memory as a tool of the powerful to re-inscribe their power and further the oppression of the powerless. It fails to acknowledge the plethora of examples in which a minority has used collective memory to bolster its own cause or successfully challenge and alter a nation's collective memory. Nevertheless, Geisler's account combined with the account of Fentress and Wickham accurately informs us that the national bourgeoisie works with the state to *establish* national *lieux de mémoire*. Yet, the meaning of these sites as well as the construction of national identity does not remain static or go uncontested. The status of Martin Luther King Jr. as a national hero reveals that the shared mythic past can be "rewritten." Rather than symbolizing that the nation affirms all of Martin Luther King Jr.'s values, American collective memory has instead determined that King best symbolizes the truism "liberty and justice for all."

James Young adds a needed corrective when he writes that the relationship between the state and its sites of memory, namely memorials, is not one sided.

> On the one hand, official agencies are in position to shape memory explicitly as they see fit, memory that best serves a national interest. On the other hand, once created, memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions. In some cases, memorials created in the image of the state's ideals actually turn around to recast these ideals in the memorial's own image. New generations visit memorials under new circumstances and invest them with new meanings. The result is an evolution in the memorial's significance, generated in new times and company in which it finds itself.[28]

Young leaves open the possibility that *lieux de mémoire* such as national memorials and the like, may shift from their original understandings to meet the challenges of

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[27] Schwartz, 16-17.

[28] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

contemporary circumstances. Our analysis here suggests that the meanings within these sites are actually in a constant state of contestation as multiple groups representing multiple competing interests participate in public discourse about the social and moral meanings of both the national polity and the subject commemorated in a particular site of memory.

Schwartz eschews the politics of memory, preferring to view collective memory as a cultural system, à la Clifford Geertz, which acts as a symbolic filter through which we understand our experience collectively.

> The past is matched to the present as a model *of* society and a model *for* society. As a model *of* society, collective memory reflects past events in terms of the needs, interests, fears, and aspirations of the present. As a model *for* society, collective memory performs two functions: it embodies a *template* that organizes and animates behavior and a *frame* within which people locate and find meaning for their present experience. Collective memory affects social reality by *reflecting, shaping,* and *framing* it.[29]

Schwartz's analysis casts *lieux de mémoire* as cultural artifacts that help people filter the past to find meaning in the present. Collective memory most obviously can be used to reproduce and affirm existing power dynamics, but the function of *reflecting* means that it may also subvert these dynamics. Paul Connerton locates social memory in commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices, arguing that these ritualized performances sustain images of the past for present-day meaning.[30] He provides insight into our examination of Schwartz when he writes, "Our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects."[31] The past and the

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[29] Schwartz, 18.

[30] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39-40.

[31] Ibid., 2.

present mutually influence and distort each other to the point that neither can be extracted from the other. Therefore, the past often acts to legitimize the present social order, but it can also be used to contest and subvert the present order.

The example of the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies both of these realities. President Ronald Reagan, for instance, reimagined King's social impact to cast King as a champion of colorblind policy. This allowed Reagan to employ King in support of Reagan's own policies that sought to eliminate or reduce the consideration of race in American social policy. In particular, President Reagan frequently reduced King's message to a "gospel of freedom," then miscast King's understanding of freedom to conform to Reagan's own vision that sought to unburden the populace of the responsibility of funding federal social programs, reduce the presumably heavy regulatory burden on businesses, and eliminate race-based policies.[32] Before it became evident that the National King Holiday would become a reality, some political conservatives justified their support of the holiday by appropriating the positive image of Martin Luther King Jr. to affirm America's racial progress. Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), for one, expressed the sentiment that the holiday would "recognize and appreciate the many substantial contributions of Black Americans and other minorities to the creation, preservation, and development of our great Nation."[33]

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. also demonstrates that collective memory can challenge the existing power structures, best illustrated by the dedication

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[32] See Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King, Jr.," delivered on January 15, 1983, online at http://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speeches/31-archives/speeches/1983/2024-11583d.

[33] "Congressional Record of the Senate – Monday, October 3, 1983," October 3, 1983, 26880.

ceremony for the National King Memorial. While the memorial itself celebrates King as a vicar of the all-American values of justice, peace, hope, and righteousness (see chapter four), speakers at the dedication ceremony sought to trouble that tame narrative. For example, Rabbi Israel Dresner highlighted the irony that multinational corporations funded the creation of the monument in million dollar increments but refused to fund the actual civil rights movement. Dresner reminded the attendees of King's vocal opposition to excessive materialism, economic exploitation, and the military industrial complex, all terrible byproducts of unfettered capitalism. Dan Rather bemoaned the corporatization of the news media as being antithetical to King's fight for economic justice. Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson connected the Occupy Wall Street movement to King's Poor People's Campaign that sought to organize masses of dispossessed Americans to shut down the federal government as an anti-poverty initiative. All of these comments served to help the nation remember King's commitment to economic justice and to challenge the social and political power of multinational corporations.

Nevertheless this collective public emphasis on King's commitment to economic justice poses a challenge to the theory of collective memory that we have constructed thus far. King's commitment to economic justice, though a historical fact, is not a significant part of the American collective memory of Dr. King. The debates on whether King merited a national holiday hardly considered King's economic agenda, celebrating instead his efforts to end racial segregation. The themes celebrated in the National King Memorial tangentially touch on economic justice. The King Center in Atlanta, developed by King's widow Coretta, focuses on King's philosophy of nonviolence. Taken together, the *frame* by which U.S. society understands Martin Luther King Jr.'s importance and

relevance only peripherally includes economic justice. Yet, the speakers at the memorial dedication ceremony, *reflecting* on the contemporary situation of growing income inequality and corruption on Wall Street, attempt to *shape* a response to the present by *reframing* our collective understanding of King to better incorporate his agenda of economic justice. This broader framing of King allows them more effectively to enlist King's legacy to address their own concerns about contemporary issues of economic justice.

Reflecting, shaping, and framing/reframing, however, seem to be rather tame ways of explaining collective memory. The example of the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. suggests that the establishment, maintenance, and revision of collective memory can be a much more disruptive and combative process. A politics of memory is over-determinative, as Schwartz insists, because it can only imagine collective memory as an agent of the powerful. Nevertheless, the struggle between ideologically opposed social groups within a nation to proffer the best interpretation of the *lieux de mémoire* can rightly be conceived as a battle. Collective memory works well for explaining how social groups connect the past to the present. However it does not provide an adequate explanation for how and why differing collective memory accounts compete in public discourse. Collective memory helps us to understand what different actors are doing when they invoke Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy to interpret the present, but it cannot help us explain, for example, how King can be remembered as both a colorblind priest *and* a color conscious social prophet at the same time. Perhaps answers to these questions may be found with a turn to civil religion.

Civil Religion

Robert N. Bellah argues that there exists in the United States alongside traditional organized religion, namely Christianity, a "clearly differentiated" institutional religion that requires the same analytical care.[34] Using President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address as an example, Bellah suggests that despite the principle of separation of church and state as institutions each governed by its own members, the public realm nonetheless incorporates a religious dimension of moral depth:

> Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. The inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority.[35]

Bellah's initial conception of civil religion, particularly in its notion of a set of expressive beliefs, symbols, and rituals, encompasses *lieux de mémoire* in Pierre Nora's conception of collective memory. Collectively held beliefs are crystalized as symbolic representations embedded in sites of memory such as memorials and national holidays, and enacted in rites celebrated at these sites and elsewhere on these days. In the case of the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr., the sites of memory are the Martin Luther King national holiday, the King Center in Atlanta, and the National King Memorial. Rites celebrated at these sites include the signing ceremony for the national holiday, the

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[34] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* Vol. 96, No. 1 (1967), 1.

[35] Ibid., 3-4.

dedication ceremony of the National Memorial, and the "day of service" designation of the national holiday.

In *The Broken Covenant*, his most historically detailed account of civil religion, Bellah defines civil religion as "the religious dimension, found … in the life of every people, through which [the nation] interprets its historical experience in the light of *transcendent reality*."[36] I focus on the reflexive and critical dialogue that carries out this process of interpretation and reinterpretation, particularly in its delineation of collective virtues and values out of concern for what it means to be a good citizen in a good society, and who it is that shall be considered an "authentic" or recognizable member of the citizenry.[37] Instead of construing civil religion as fixing a unitary moral foundation in the form of a consensus settled once and for all, or fragmented by the culture wars, I emphasize civil religious dialogue as a democratic process in which the state certainly exercises legislative, executive, and judicial authority—for example, in creating national *lieux de mémoire*—but the citizenry can challenge, contest, and alter the state's actions

[36] Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 1975), 3. Emphasis mine.

[37] I explore this idea in greater detail in Jermaine M. McDonald, "A Fourth Time of Trial: Towards an Implicit and Inclusive American Civil Religion," *Implicit Religion* 16.1 (2013), 47-64. There, I draw upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau's prescription for republican citizenship as outlined in Book Four, Chapter VIII of *The Social Contract* to declare that the state has a vested interest in nurturing a civil religion to produce responsible, loyal citizens who transcend their religious and ideological differences. This account views the contemporary setting as a fourth time of trial in which U.S. society is making room for the inclusion of Muslims in the United States as full-fledged citizens in much the same way that Blacks gained entry during the third time of trial. A key difference between Bellah and Rousseau lies in Rousseau's view of civil religion framing the moral judgment of the state and the state's moral formation of citizens in the larger public square of the polity.

through public argument over their reasons, means, and ends in light of the moral visions, values, and modes of discourse developed in its civil religion.

Bellah's account of civil religion turns on three times of trial in which conflict over the nation's meaning and purpose arise—the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Vietnam War / Civil Rights Movement era.[38] However useful this theoretical framework, these "times of trial" illustrate the inherently dynamic and arguable nature of competing moral visions of the nation's meaning and purpose in its ongoing history, not just in moments of great national crisis. Particularly in a democracy such as ours, there is always contestation, and consensus is always being remade and reformed. The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. clearly demonstrates this truth. Although public debate over the King holiday hammered out a social consensus on the meaning of King's legacy, the actual implications of that consensus varied greatly. Agreeing that King is a national hero because he led the nation away from racial injustice means one thing to political conservatives who advocate for colorblind, race-neutral public policies to replace affirmative action, and quite another thing to political liberals who defend affirmative action in the face of growing economic hardship and the massively disproportionate incarceration of African Americans.

Martin E. Marty offers an account of "two kinds of two kinds" of civil religion that enables us to see how moral visions of America can be defined and contested from different perspectives:

> In practice there are not 230 million civil religions, one each for every citizen in America. Citizens tend to concentrate at any time on only several subspecies or sects of such religion. But before we notice these, it is important to regard for a moment the particularist survivals that work against the idea or practice of civil

[38] Bellah, 1967, 16.

> religion. … With that in mind, it is possible to judge civil religion in the context of what it sets out to do and not what scholars think it should do. … Many articulators of civic faith appear in a different light when we understand their roles, self-concepts, and intentions. In [my] reading there are two kinds of two kinds of civil religion.[39]

The first kind of civil religion sees the nation standing "under God." The second stresses a "national self-transcendence" in terms of the overarching ideals of liberty and justice. Each of these two kinds of civil religion feature two approaches: a priestly approach that is "celebrative and culture-building" and a prophetic approach that "will tend to be dialectical [but] with a predisposition toward the judgmental."[40] These are, of course, not hard boundaries, and one can easily find occasions where a "priest may judge and a prophet may and often does integrate people into a system of meaning and belonging."[41] Nevertheless we can find examples of each kind of each kind of civil religion in the canonization of King.

Marty argues that the "priestly" approach to American civil religion "under God" often fuses an historic faith with "autochthonous national sentiments." The president of the United States will stand as its high priest and the president's discourse will be inclusive of all citizenry and invoke symbols of power. Marty uses two examples to make his case. First is President Dwight Eisenhower's reflection that "America is the mightiest power which God has yet seen fit to put upon his footstool. America is great because she is good." Second is President Ronald Reagan consistently drawing a "Manichean portrait of good and evil in the world, with America representing God's good instrument against

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[39] Martin E. Marty, "Civil Religion: Two Kinds of Two Kinds" in a collection of his essays, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 81-82. Republished from a 1976 essay.

[40] Ibid., 82.

[41] Ibid., 83.

… the 'evil empire' of the Soviet Union."[42] Chapter three of this volume will demonstrate in greater detail how President Ronald Reagan employed the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. to just this effect. For example, in his remarks at the signing ceremony for the King Holiday bill, Reagan insists that the nation can take pride that it "recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it"; thus the proper way to celebrate the King holiday is to "not only recall Dr. King, but rededicate ourselves to the Commandments he believed in and sought to live every day: Thou shall love thy God with all thy heart, and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself."[43]

The prophetic approach to American civil religion "under God" happens much less frequently than the priestly approach. It is far easier to deliver a message that God is on the nation's side than it is to deliver a message that God has found the nation lacking. Yet, Marty identifies three "under God" prophets who invoked God's judgment to inspire change. Jonathan Edwards chastised the nation that God had higher expectations for God's "chosen people." Abraham Lincoln reminded a nation torn asunder by civil war that both sides pray to the same God and that both sides should try to conform their wills to God's mysterious will. Reinhold Niebuhr used the Bible to reprimand a prideful nation too assure that it acted in the name of God.[44] The key characteristic to this approach to civil religious discourse is its dialectical, "both/and" nature. It is an insider critique that appeals to the shared values of the collective and does not pit faith in the civil religion against faith in a transcendent deity. Thus, at the dedication ceremony of the National

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[42] Marty, 84-5.

[43] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday," November 2, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40708.

[44] Reagan, 86.

King Memorial, Reverend Joseph Lowery, one of King's lieutenants during the civil rights era, can invoke King's favorite hymn, "Precious Lord," to assert that the national memorial rightly celebrates the nation's progress on human rights but should also prophetically remind the nation that progress yet remains.

The priestly approach to the "self-transcendent" kind of American civil religion shifts the discourse from a *promise to* America by a transcendent deity to the *promise of* America as a self-transcendent nation.[45] In this approach, the vocabulary of the church—faith, trust, hope, and the like—gets applied, not to God, but to the nation itself. In other words, the nation is implored to trust in a particular vision or specific universal values that make the nation great. The most egregious such value is perhaps the worship of the nation as wholly good in and of itself. The canonization of King does not go nearly that far, but in the National King Memorial one can find a call to trust in a particular set of universal values allegedly embodied in the ethos of the nation. The Memorial celebrates the "all-American" values of hope, democracy, justice, and love, seeing them as embodied both in the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and in the life of the nation.[46]

The prophetic approach to the "self-transcendent" kind of American civil religion rejects the idolatrous worship of the state. Yet it sees the values embedded in the experiences of the American people as universal, valuable, and transcendent, embracing biblical believers and non-believers alike and reaching beyond references to a biblical or deist God. For Marty, this may become a problem when it bleeds into a conception of certain American values as potentially applicable and transportable to the entire world as the basis for a global civil religion. However, these problems aside, Marty argues that this

[45] Ibid., 89.
[46] Ibid., 90.

type of civil religion has the promise of being the most worthwhile because it can adhere to Reinhold Niebuhr's sense of irony while encompassing the largest coalition by refusing to root its foundations solely in Christianity. The National King Memorial exemplifies this last kind of a kind of American civil religion. The quotations on the National King Memorial's inscription wall invoke the aforementioned transcendent themes embedded in the ethos of American society. Quotations such as, "I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as a moral example of the world" and, "Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies" provide ample warning that there is a high standard for the nation to reach.

In "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic," Bellah clarifies the dialectical inner logic of civil religion by suggesting that civil religion can mediate the American polity's dual commitment to antithetical ideals of civic republicanism (stressing unselfish public participation and civic virtue in service to the commonweal) and Lockean liberalism (stressing individual rights and economic self-interests coordinated by a fair social contract):

> Not only are these political ideas—republicanism and liberalism—different, they are profoundly antithetical. Exclusive concern for self-interest is the very definition of the corruption of republican virtue. The tendency to emphasize the private, particularly the economic side of life in the liberal state, undermines the public participation essential to a republic. The wealth that the liberal society generates is fatal to the basic political equality of a republic. And yet the American regime has been from the beginning a mixture of republican and liberal concepts. However, the republican moment emerged first, out of the revolutionary struggle itself, and crystalized in a document, the Declaration of Independence. The liberal moment emerged second, during the complex working out of interests in the new nation, and crystalized in the Constitution. Even that division is too simple, for there are liberal elements in the Declaration and republican elements

> in the Constitution, but it does suggest that from the very beginning the balance has never been easy or even.[47]

Bellah locates the tension between republicanism and liberalism in the founding documents of the nation. This mixture of antithetical concepts has not always been easy to balance. Contemporary political debates regarding the proper direction of the nation bear this out, as does the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. In mediating between the nation understood as a religious republic and a liberal constitutional state, Bellah sees civil religion situated in "two vital locations" in American public life: the superstructure and infrastructure of the American republic.[48]

For Bellah, religion, in its superstructural location, provides "a locus of sovereignty taken to be above the sovereignty of the state."[49] References to a God who stands above the state, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and invoked in presidential inaugural addresses thereafter, make clear the political institutionalization of American civil religion. But it is also "formal in the sparsity and abstraction of its tenets" and "marginal in that it has no official support in the legal and constitutional order."[50] The absence of civil-religious provisions in the Constitution and its guarantees of religious freedom make clear that "belief in the tenets of the civil religion are legally incumbent on no one and [that] there are no official interpreters of civil theology."[51] The religious needs of a genuine republic to define its ultimate purpose and inspire its

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[47] Robert N. Bellah, "Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic," *Society* January/February 1998, 196.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid, 197.

[51] Bellah, 197.

underlying virtues cannot be fully met by the formal, yet marginal, civil religion that has been institutionalized in the American republic.[52]

The religious superstructure of the American Republic "has been provided mainly by the religious community entirely outside any formal political structures," backed by its crucial infrastructural role as a school of republican virtue in forming publicly engaged citizens.[53] Religious communities and civic groups within American society carry competing construals of civil religion and contrasting public theologies into the ongoing moral argument of American public life to sustain the soul of the republic and shape the nation's destiny. "Every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has grown out of some form of public theology, from the abolitionists to the social gospel and the early socialist party to the Civil Rights Movement under Martin Luther King Jr. and the Farm Workers' Movement under Caesar Chavez. But so has every expansionist war and every form of oppression of immigrant groups."[54]

Bellah is "not prepared to say that religious communities, among which [he would] include humanist communities, are not capable even today of providing the religious superstructure and infrastructure that would renew our republic."[55] Instead, he would continue to look to these communities for the moral revival every genuine republic needs in the face of its vulnerability to corruption by luxury, dependence, and ignorance.[56] In Bellah's view, for America in 1978, "the empirical question as to whether

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[52] Ibid., 197.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 198.
[55] Ibid., 200.
[56] Bellah, 201.

the moral capacity is still there on a sufficient scale seems [open].”[57] That question is all the more pertinent now in twenty-first century America, where the role of religion in the public sphere is constantly contested.

Without foreclosing such questions in America today, I see the competing iterations of civil religion in dramatic dialogue as the best way for Americans to sustain, judge, and reform the nation as a moral community. Increased cultural and religious pluralism make it more difficult to use primarily Christian religious symbolism to define American moral identity. Diverse religious and humanist communities can deepen individual commitments to shared values, but these values themselves must be open enough to interpretation to inform multiple communities and broad enough to span the liberal-republican divide. These values must be adaptable enough to engage republican or liberal sensibilities whenever the circumstances call for it and draw them together in coherent argument if not consensus.

Another way of thinking about this interplay is to consider Michael Walzer’s reflections on moral argument in the public sphere. Walzer declares that “moral terms have minimal and maximal meanings [for which] we can standardly give thin and thick accounts … appropriate to different contexts, serv[ing] different purposes.”[58] Thick, maximal accounts of morality, deeply integrated and fully resonant within particular

[57] Ibid.

[58] Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 2.

communities, form the basis of thin, or minimalist, accounts that can resonate across communities.[59] Using justice as an example, Walzer writes:

> Whatever the origins of the idea of justice, whatever the starting point of the argument in this or that society, people thinking and talking about justice will range over a mostly familiar terrain and will come upon similar issues—like political tyranny or the oppression of the poor. What they say about these issues will be part and parcel of what they say about everything else, but some aspect of it—its negativity perhaps, its rejection of brutality ("grinding the face")—will be immediately accessible to people who don't know anything about the other parts and parcels. Pretty much anybody looking on will see something here that they recognize. The sum of these recognitions is what I mean by minimal morality.[60]

People bring their maximalist moral arguments to public discourse, but others find commonality with them when something within their own maximalist understanding connects. These connections, however slight they may be, form the minimal morality.

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. reveals that we can think of American civil religion as a uniquely American minimalist morality. For example, during the debates on whether King merited a national holiday, constituents brought their maximalist moral meanings to bear as they evaluated the case for King's elevation to national hero. For some, King violated their moral sensibilities by affiliating with alleged communists, criticizing the Vietnam War, and fomenting violence rather than working within the parameters of the system to create social change. For others, King's nonviolent social action for racial equality, prophetic call for peace in Vietnam, and commitment to the eradication of poverty made him a moral exemplar for the nation. In the debates that marked the contestation of these opposing views, a general consensus developed that

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[59] Ibid., 4. This is in contrast to how philosophers tend to account for moral argumentation, according to Walzer. Accounts that suggest that morality starts thin and thickens with age are backwards, he says.

[60] Walzer, 5-6. The "grinding the face" quotation references the prophet Isaiah's admonishment that God will harshly judge the people for taking advantage of the poor. See Isaiah 3:13-15.

acknowledged King as the symbol of the nation's newfound commitment to racial equality.

What's In This Text

Today we commonly accept that Dr. King is a national hero who embodies America as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. To understand fully how we have come to this conclusion, we must examine how Americans employ collective memory and civil religion to shape and contest the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in American society. To that end, I explore four critical cultural moments that mark how we commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. today. Chapter two, "Thirteen Years in the Making: The Struggle for a National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday," details the arduous, but ultimately successful attempt to institute a national holiday in honor of Dr. King. This chapter reviews the history of congressional hearings and debates, as well as the many newspaper and magazine editorials published on the subject to sketch out the contestation of King's legacy. Chapter three, "The Colorblind Priest: Martin Luther King Jr. as Conservative Cultural Icon," picks up at the signing ceremony for the King National Holiday bill in which President Ronald Reagan completely reverses his opinion of Dr. King's merit for a national holiday and gives King the conservative stamp of approval. Reagan's short yet stirring speech recasts King as a paragon of conservative virtue and invites a sea change in political conservatives' regard for Dr. King. With that die cast, other conservatives have laid claim to King's legacy in support of conservative projects and policies. Chapter four, "Set in Stone: The Making of the National King Memorial," examines the creation of the National Martin Luther King Memorial, strategically located in the pantheon of American heroes: the National Mall in the nation's capital. Conceived at a dinner table by five fraternity brothers from King's

fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc., the memorial, particularly its conception, planning, development, and construction, offers insight into how the nation tends to recollect its hero. The controversies that accompanied the myriad of design decisions suggest that while there are broad themes associated with King's legacy, the details and importance of those themes are still a matter of contestation. For example, although there may be great pride that an African American has finally been memorialized as a national hero, the virtual absence of race in any aspect of the memorial seems to contradict the very principles for which King stood. This chapter argues that the King Memorial, indeed any national memorial, reflects the shared ideals and values of the nation and the memorialized subject. More specifically, King's ideals and values exalted in the King Memorial (democracy, justice, and hope) align with the way the nation chooses or wishes to see in its own self. The absence of other values, such as King's tripartite commitment to absolute nonviolence, antiracism, and economic justice, thus become all the more telling. Chapter five, "Recovering the Prophet of Social Justice: Remembering King at the King Memorial Dedication Ceremony," is a cultural analysis of the dedication ceremony for the national King Memorial. The invited speakers, including President Barack Obama, celebrated King's legacy and the symbolic meaning of the memorial while also reclaiming King's commitment to economic justice. They made this turn in reflection of the nation's attempt to recover from the "Great Recession." The recasting of heroes in response to contemporary challenges is a feature of collective memory. The past gets reimagined, repurposed, and re-evaluated for its relevance in the present day. The attempt to look at a figure such as Martin Luther King Jr. to garner insights on how to address present day concerns makes sense, even if one has to move beyond the

"official" narrative. Finally, Chapter 6, "Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr." summarizes my findings on the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. and draws upon them to concretize my reflections on collective memory and civil religion. In order to garner a national holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., proponents had to construct an image of King that imagined him as the symbol of a movement that transformed America. Though many remained committed to King's ideas regarding economic justice and pacifism, they primarily used King's civil rights work as the evidence of his worthiness for such a national honor and recast King as the symbol of America finally overcoming its greatest sin. Nevertheless, King's legacy remains contested today, as is evidenced by the differences between the narrative in the National King Memorial and narratives told in the Memorial's dedication ceremony. This tension suggests that collective memory is perhaps never a completely settled question and is always subject to interpretation and change. The fluidity of collective memory provides interesting insight into how nations use and interpret their national symbols to shape national values and meet present day challenges.

The esteemed Reverend Joseph Lowery summarized Dr. King's legacy best when he declared at the National King Memorial dedication ceremony, "We recognize here that in the midst of the amazing truth that an African-American preacher who never held public political office is recognized here among the fathers of the country. Indeed, he has become a father of the country. For his leadership gave birth to a new America."[61] The

[61] Reverend Joseph Lowery from "Martin Luther King Memorial Dedication," *C-SPAN.org* October 16, 2011, http://www.c-span.org/video/?302020-1/martin-luther-king-memorial-dedication, last accessed February 17, 2015.

following pages explore in intimate detail what this new America chooses to celebrate and remember about the man it now honors in its pantheon of national heroes.

Chapter 2

Thirteen Years in the Making:

The Struggle for a National King Holiday

> The ultimate weakness of Communism is that it robs man of that quality which makes him man. Man, says Paul Tillich, is man because he is free. This freedom is expressed through man's capacity to deliberate, decide, and respond. Under Communism, the individual soul is shackled by the chains of conformity . . . Never can we, as Christians, tolerate the philosophy of Communism. [63]
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> *Strength to Love.* 99.

A democratic society creates and maintains *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) such as holidays, monuments, communal celebrations, and the like, to highlight and commemorate the parts of its history it deems important. These sites help to preserve, transform, and renew society by identifying and celebrating communal values that also cohere with those embedded within these sites. Sites of memory in a democratic society often emerge organically from the imaginations of the citizenry and subsequently receive official sanction from the state. Therefore, both the state and its citizens have a hand in establishing and maintaining official sites of memory, allowing the sites to both affirm and challenge state authority simultaneously.

While it may seem that Martin Luther King Jr. would naturally become part of a site of memory in American society (indeed, multiple sites), especially given his near universal acclaim today, a positive American consensus on Dr. King was far from a certainty after his assassination in 1968. At the time of his death, King was shuttling back and forth between a sanitation worker's strike in Memphis and his Poor People's Campaign in the District of Columbia. Many believed his planned, provocative social

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[63] Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength To Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963), 99.

action in the nation's capital for economic justice would incite violence and rioting. Further, his opposition to the Vietnam War led many of his allies in civil rights to distance themselves from him. Thus, although it was clear that Martin Luther King Jr. was an important historical figure, his legacy was indeed contentious. The establishment of the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. as a national holiday required controversy and contestation. Not only was there controversy over how King should be honored, certain factions in the nation contested whether he should be commemorated nationally at all.

Early Advocacy for a King Holiday

On April 8, 1968, Representative John Conyers (D-MI), a mere four days after King's assassination, introduced H.R. 16510: "A bill to designate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., as a legal public holiday."[64] Conyers's bill never made it out of committee that day. Instead, members of both houses of Congress vacillated between voicing sadness at King's death, urging America always to remember the dream, encouraging the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, castigating the rioters who took to the streets after the assassination, calling for a return to law and order, and declaring an unwillingness to be blackmailed into passing legislation by violent reactionaries.[65] Undeterred by the initial lack of interest, Representative Conyers would make passing the King Holiday bill a key part of his legislative agenda, re-introducing it repeatedly until it became law in 1983.

Representative Conyers was not the only figure interested in honoring Martin Luther King Jr. by commemorating his birthday. Many of King's allies and supporters, as

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[64] From the transcripts of the official Congressional Record of Monday, April 8, 1968, the first day Congress was in session after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

[65] Ibid.

early as 1969, began treating it as a holiday. On that day, the King Center in Atlanta, founded and directed by Coretta Scott King (Dr. King's widow), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) hosted ecumenical worship services and called for nationwide commemorations of King's birthday. Mrs. King used the occasion to announce her plans for the King Center, insisting that the center would be "no dead monument, but a living memorial filled with all the vitality that was his, a center of human endeavor, committed to the causes for which he lived and died."[66] That same day, sixteen hundred autoworkers at a General Motors (GM) plant in New York chose to commemorate King's life by refusing to work.[67] In October, fifteen hundred New York City hospital workers went on strike for six hours, earning an increased minimum wage for nonmedical workers (porters, orderlies, kitchen workers, and the like) and securing the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. as a paid holiday.[68] This alliance of labor unions and civil rights activists was a precursor to future collaborations between these two forces to make a National Martin Luther King Jr. holiday a reality.

In January 1970, Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and longtime King confidante, wrote an op-ed calling for a National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. Rustin argued, "Dr. King achieved a stature comparable to that of our Founding Fathers . . . he remade the First American Revolution in its own

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[66] James T. Wooten, "Memorial Center at Two Sites Will Honor Dr. King in Atlanta," *The New York Times*, January 16, 1969.

[67] Laura T. McCarthy, *Coretta Scott King: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 66. After GM disciplined the absentees, additional workers staged a "wildcat walkout" in solidarity, causing the plant to shut down; see Joseph Novitski, "Tarrytown Plant Penalizes Absentees Honoring King," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1969.

[68] Arnold H. Lubasch, "$125-A-Week Pact Won in Hospitals." *The New York Times*, October 4, 1969.

best image."[69] If King's birthday were to be made a national holiday, Rustin reasoned, "This would be a symbolic recognition by all Americans of the contribution of black people to American society."[70] In the same month the National Distributive Workers union instructed their 30,000 members in New York City to take King's birthday off "regardless of contractual obligations or permissions of employers" and attend a commemorative rally led by Mayor John Lindsay and SCLC President Ralph Abernathy.[71]

In January 1971, Coretta Scott King formed a "citizens" committee dedicated to creating a National King Holiday. The committee, featuring seven senators, sixteen congressional representatives, and the presidents of the National Council of Churches, the SCLC, and several national unions, proclaimed at a press conference, "We come together not merely to review the accomplishments of the person we would honor, but rather to encourage those who share our views to make public their belief that Dr. King's example is of singular importance for our country."[72] Spurred on by Ralph Abernathy's declaration that King's birthday was "the people's holiday," the committee delivered, in a "mule train," millions of signed petitions in support of a national King holiday to a handful of congressional representatives waiting on the steps of the U.S. Capitol.[73]

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[69] Bayard Rustin, "Dr. King's Birthday – A National Holiday," *Sacramento Observer*, January 8, 1970: 5.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Peter Kihss, "Union to Observe King's Birthday," *New York Times*, January 8, 1970. Coretta Scott King sent the organization a telegram celebrating their commitment to the cause.

[72] "Committee for National King Holiday Announced," *New Pittsburgh Courier* January 2, 1971.

[73] "Holiday Urged for Dr. King," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 1971. A second, unrelated, committee led by community activist Howard Bennett delivered six million signatures in support of the holiday to Representatives Shirley

These early arguments for a national Martin Luther King Jr. holiday cast King as an exemplary figure and champion of the people. A national holiday on his behalf would signal to Blacks and the entire world that America was committed to its highest ideals, best represented by the "I Have a Dream" speech. Early advocates for the holiday insisted upon the symbolic importance of recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. nationally. They understood that they sought for him one of the greatest civic honors a person could receive, one that had only been given to Christopher Columbus and George Washington.[74] The early advocates of the holiday also anticipated one of the primary arguments against the King holiday by insisting that King was a hero for all of America, not just for Blacks. Labor union support would only help bolster this particular argument.[75]

Chisholm (D-NY) and John Conyers (D-MI). See "Committee for National King Holiday Announced," *New Pittsburgh Courier* 2 January 1971. Upon receiving the signatures, Representative Abner J. Mkva (D-IL) declared, "Dr. King made an immeasurable contribution to the cause of justice and equality for all men by his inspired and dedicated leadership of the contemporary civil rights movement. We should all honor his greatness by making Jan.15, Dr. King's birthday, a national legal holiday." See "Sponsor MLK Holiday Bill," *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 30, 1971.

[74] Columbus and Washington had national holidays, while Abraham Lincoln's birthday was also a holiday in many states. With the eventual creation of the National Martin Luther King Holiday, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln would come to share a day of honor, as most states combined the celebrations of their legacies to the Presidents' Day holiday in February, making room for Martin Luther King Jr. to have his own holiday in January. This worked because both Lincoln and Washington were born in February.

[75] Many labor unions saw multiple benefits in supporting the holiday. First, it would assist their efforts to recruit Blacks into their membership. Second, it would honor King's historical support of labor. This led the National Education Association (NEA) to declare January 15, "Human Relations Day" at their annual convention in June 1971. See "Human Relations Day Proclaimed on Dr. King's Birthday," *Los Angeles Sentinel* January 13, 1972, B7.

Over the next four years, Illinois,[76] Michigan,[77] Kentucky,[78] and Massachusetts[79] became the first states to designate King's birthday a state holiday. Despite that, the holiday did not gain much political momentum until September 1975 when the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service of the House of Representatives held the first congressional hearings to consider a National King holiday bill. Several witnesses testified in support of the holiday, including the president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) who reminded the committee that King died in Memphis while supporting striking sanitation workers, exemplifying his "commitment to human dignity."[80] The United States Civil Service Commission, which opposed the holiday, expressed concern that so honoring a private citizen was "contrary to long-established tradition."[81] While the congressional hearings were a positive step, they only portended a long battle yet to come.

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[76] Illinois Governor Robert Ogilvie refused to sign the bill unless it contained the condition that the state did not have to formally implement the bill until Congress passed a national holiday, reasoning that the "severe impact" to government and commerce in Illinois was not warranted unless the entire country was sharing the experience. His reasoning was a variation of what would become a frequently expressed theme for opposing the King holiday nationally: the excessive economic cost of shutting down economic productivity. The Illinois state King holiday did not become a reality until 1973 after Governor Ogilvie was voted out of office. See John Elmer, "Veto Legal Holiday to Honor King" *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1971, B1.

[77] "Michigan is First with King Holiday" *New York Amsterdam News*, February 16, 1974, B7.

[78] "Ky.'s King Holiday Law is Inspiring," *Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1974, 8.

[79] "King Holiday Designated," *New York Times*, July 9, 1974, 79.

[80] "AFSCME for King Holiday," *Afro-American*, September 20, 1975, 8.

[81] "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service House of Representatives," Serial No. 94-84, September 10, 1975, 2.

Congressional Hearings in 1979

Notwithstanding the September 1975 subcommittee hearings, early efforts to turn Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday into a holiday did not garner much support, attention, or debate in Congress. Ten years after King's death, Representative Conyers's bill remained stuck in a subcommittee for lack of a "groundswell of public support for making Dr. King's birthday a national holiday."[82]

The Democratic Party included support for a National Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in its 1976 party platform, but President Jimmy Carter did not make it a priority until challenged in the Democratic primary by Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy (D-MA) in 1979. On January 12, Senator Kennedy, in a rousing address from the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta (the home church of Martin Luther King Jr.), pledged to introduce legislation in the U.S. Senate for a national King holiday, repeatedly declaring: "Now is the time!"[83] Two days later, speaking from the same pulpit on what would have been King's fiftieth birthday, President Carter answered Senator Kennedy's rousing address with a more solemn address of his own, calling on Congress to designate King's birthday a holiday and remarking that King "called out to the best in people . . . [and] spoke of the America that had never been, of the America that we hope will be."[84]

Patrick Buchanan, suspicious of the political motivations behind the Kennedy and Carter endorsements, warned against passage of the proposed legislation. He insisted, "A national holiday 'in honor of Dr. King's principles and accomplishments' would be an act

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[82] Maurice White, "Discussions Ongoing to Have M.L. King Jr.'s Birthday Declared National Holiday," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 14, 1978, 3.

[83] Jeff Prugh, "Kennedy, In King's Pulpit, Urges Making Rights Leader's Birthday a U.S. Holiday," *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1979, 12.

[84] Terrance Smith, "President, in Atlanta, Asks Congress to Vote Holiday for Dr. King," *New York Times*, January 15, 1979, A1.

of polarization."[85] While many believed King represented the best of America, according to Buchanan, "millions of others" considered him to be "the most divisive figure in the [twentieth] century's most divisive decade." In defense of those who questioned the "secular canonization of Dr. King," Buchanan declared that the nation ought to "find some other way than forcing innocent disbelievers to burn incense at his altar."[86]

Buchanan's missive demonstrates the oft-contested nature of collective memory. He questions King's legacy (as saint or scoundrel), labels King's use of civil disobedience and mass demonstration as illegitimate in a democratic republic, accuses King of cavorting with alleged communists, and blames King and the antiwar movement for the morass in Vietnam. While many within American society believed that King's actions were indeed heroic, legitimate, and consciousness-raising, Buchanan voices the opinion of those who disagree. If King represents the best of America, yet the values for which he stood, the tactics he used to support those values, and the coalitions he built to sustain them are unacceptable, what does that say about American values? At stake for Buchanan are the very values that define what it means to be American.

The national King holiday effort gained further momentum when Stevie Wonder and Coretta Scott King led a march from Ebenezer Baptist Church to the Georgia State Capitol in support of the holiday. Wonder linked the passage of a King holiday to the extension of the fulfillment of King's dream, declaring, "We all say we want [his dream] to come true, but words are only verbiage… January 15 should be a holiday that we all

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[85] Patrick Buchanan, "Some Would Not Honor Dr. King," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan 23, 1979, B3.

[86] Ibid.

want. If we cannot celebrate a man who died for love, then how can we say we believe in it?"[87]

Finally both houses of Congress decided to take action by holding joint hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee and the House of Representatives Post Office and Civil Service Committee on March 27 and June 21, 1979. These hearings offer an excellent representation of the compelling arguments for and against the King holiday. In her remarks at the March 27 hearings, Coretta Scott King explained the reasons supporters for a King holiday have taken public action:

> Our reasons for taking this action go beyond personal feelings, for we deeply believe, along with millions of Americans of good will, that, in the interest of improved human relations in our country, there should be a national holiday honoring a Black American. A national holiday each January 15 would be much more than a focal point for honoring the contributions of Blacks to American history. In addition, it would serve as an annual reminder to Americans of all races that there is a vital relationship between nonviolent protest and the promise of democracy.[88]

Here, Mrs. King declares that honoring Martin Luther King with a national holiday would improve race relations, set aside a specific time for the nation to honor the accomplishments of Blacks to American society, and celebrate nonviolent protest as a key function of a democratic society.

In the same address, Mrs. King also refuted many of the primary arguments against the holiday. Regarding the expense of the holiday, she suggested that setting aside one holiday for the contributions of a Black man is the least the country could do "given the hundreds of years of economic sacrifice and involuntary servitude of America's

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[87] "Stevie Wonder Plans April 4 Concert Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 4, 1979, 5.

[88] "Joint Hearings before the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate and the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service House of Representatives" Serial No. 96-14, March 27 and June 21, 1979, 18.

Blacks."[89] Regarding Martin Luther King Jr.'s impact on American society, she cited the tenfold increase in Black voting in the South, the effects of desegregation (particularly in education), and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam as proof that Dr. King had an enduring impact on society. Finally, she declared that a Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday "would be a signal that America does indeed respect the legitimate aspirations and contributions of Black people."[90]

Reverend Joseph Lowery opined that recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. would "contribute to the designation of America as a land whose national resolve is to seek justice, cherish peace, offer equality of opportunity, and hold in highest esteem a man whose life characterized and epitomized such resolution."[91] He characterized King as one who embodied the best of American ideals and suggested that if America so chose to honor King with a national holiday, it would signal to the world that King's values are values that American society wished to uplift. Lowery, however, warned that the holiday itself would not be enough, that the "dream" remained woefully unfulfilled. For Lowery, the holiday would only signal the nation's commitment to King's struggle, not that the nation had realized King's dream.

Not all of the testimonies at the joint hearings positively affirmed Martin Luther King Jr. as a national hero. E. Stanley Rittenhouse, of the 26,000-member Liberty Lobby, testified that a National King Holiday was a bad idea. He cited the FBI's surveillance of King to accuse King of being a subversive instigator of violence who, under the influence of communist agents, praised the North Vietnamese leader and mass murderer Ho Chi

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[89] "Joint Hearings," 22.
[90] Ibid., 23.
[91] Ibid., 26-7.

Minh, and accused the nation of being the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world." For this distinction alone, Rittenhouse declared that King deserved to have his "ashes removed from American soil."[92] Rittenhouse also saw King's "Poor People's Campaign" as an attempt to blackmail the nation into meeting his demands or risk King's supporters burning down American cities. Rittenhouse's version of Martin Luther King promoted anarchy to the detriment of American democracy.

In the subsequent June 21 hearings of 1979, Senator Strom Thurmond (R-NC) and Representative Larry P. McDonald (D-GA) invited several former FBI informants who had infiltrated various chapters of the U.S. communist party to testify in opposition to the holiday. These former informants testified to the communist party's adoration of King, King's work with the alleged communist-training Highlander Folk School in Tennessee,[93] and the accused communists that made up his advisory team. Additionally, they accused King of consistently disrespecting the rule of law, potentially plunging the United States into anarchy. Clifford J. White III, National Director of Young Americans for Freedom, argued against a national King holiday using a more respectful approach. White celebrated King's patriotism but questioned whether King ought to be elevated higher than Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln in American lore.[94] White worried that honoring King in this matter would incorrectly signal that the nation embraced his

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[92] "Joint Hearings," 35.

[93] Ibid., 42. The Highlander Folk School was an intentionally integrated training school in Tennessee, which developed a citizenship program in the 1950s to teach African Americans about their rights as citizens. It was responsible for teaching many of the civil rights movement organizers about civil disobedience and was closed in 1961 by the state of Tennessee on falsified charges. The school relocated to Knoxville that same year, reopening as the Highlander Research and Education Center. See http://highlandercenter.org/.

[94] Ibid., 75.

entire agenda, including decreased military spending and increased spending on social welfare programs.[95] White also worried that creating a holiday for King so soon after his death (only ten years prior) would set a precedent for each subsequent generation to prematurely recognize its own contemporary heroes.[96]

White deserves credit for more fully engaging the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. On the surface, his analysis, that a national King holiday would signal affirmation of all the values for which King stood, seems well reasoned. However, White did not anticipate the power of collective memory to reshape the legacy of national heroes. He suggested that a National Brotherhood Day should replace a National King holiday,[97] ironically prefiguring what has symbolically happened contemporarily to King's legacy. He declared, "Perhaps after several years, after the vagaries of contemporary politics are behind us, maybe then we can proclaim that Martin Luther King and his dream . . . is a national treasure never to be forgotten."[98] Rather than waiting until "the vagaries of contemporary politics" concluded, forces in American society would move towards a consensus that celebrated the "dream" as the most accessible and agreeable portion of King's legacy, allowing the idea of a national holiday to become more palatable to the broader American population.

In summary, supporters of the holiday pointed to the symbolic effect of nationally recognizing a Black leader and celebrated King's leadership in the nonviolent fight against legalized segregation. For them, Martin Luther King Jr. represented the best of

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[95] He was right. Military and social programs spending is still a hotly contested issue in the United States.

[96] Ibid., 75.

[97] "Joint Hearings March and June 1979," 75.

[98] Ibid., 76.

American ideals. Opponents of the holiday questioned whether *all* of King's values fully aligned with American ideals, whether enough time had passed to measure King's historical impact accurately, and whether a national holiday (and the associated expenses) was the proper way to honor King. From their perspective, King had a questionable legacy in need of more public discussion. Additionally, the charge that King consorted with or received counsel from communists prevented many dissenters from agreeing to the idea of a King holiday.

In July, the Senate Judiciary committee voted by a margin of 10-6 to approve the holiday bill.[99] The House of Representatives' Post Office and Civil Service Committee followed suit in October.[100] Despite these victories, the joint hearings revealed a Congressional stalemate regarding the King holiday. Senator Strom Thurmond (R-NC), who cast one of the dissenting votes, declared in a memo to the committee, "national holidays should be reserved for people whose place in history is beyond controversy."[101] Cementing Martin Luther King Jr.'s "place in history" would become pivotal in establishing a national holiday in his honor.

House of Representatives Debate King Holiday Bill in 1979

In the wake of the joint hearings, Representative John Conyers (D-MI) wrote an op-ed in anticipation of Congress voting on his proposed King holiday bill, declaring:

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[99] "Judiciary Committee Backs King Holiday," *Atlanta Daily Word*, July 1, 1979, 1. At this point, King's birthday is officially observed in Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and South Carolina.

[100] "Holiday in Honor of King Advances," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1979, B12.

[101] Ibid.

"Dr. King lived and died for our ideals of justice, human dignity, and freedom."[102] Representative Conyers's belief that King's nonviolent, citizen action "embodied the political tradition in America that originated with the Pilgrims [and] continued with the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution" aligns King's social witness with recognizable and celebrated revolutionary actions in United States history. This was not an accidental comparison. Representative Conyers knew that the barrier to a national celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. was the belief that King did not faithfully represent the values that define America. His op-ed positions the civil rights movement as yet "another giant step forward in reconciling the lives and aspirations of all peoples who compose the American nation" and insists that commemorating King's birthday would "honor the profound spirit of love and concern for humanity" that guided King's life and conforms to the best of American society. The test of Representative Conyers's thesis about King would come in the debates on the floor of the House of Representatives on whether to designate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. a legal public holiday.

On November 13, with Coretta Scott King in the audience, the House of Representatives debated bill H.R. 5461 under the "suspension of the rules" procedure.[103] H.R. 5461 stated:

> Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That subsection (a) of section 6103 of the title 5, United States Code, is amended by inserting immediately below "New Year's

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[102] John Conyers, "To Honor a Man and a Spirit," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1979, A-27.

[103] The suspension of the rules procedure allows for a maximum of forty minutes of debate (twenty minutes for each side) and does not permit floor amendments. At the end of the debate, the legislature votes, requiring a two-thirds majority to pass the measure. "Suspension of the Rules in the House of Representative," *Open CRS: Congressional Research Service Reports for the People,* https://opencrs.com/document/RL32474/ (Last accessed April 4, 2013).

> Day, January 1" the following: "The birthday of Martin Luther King, Junior, January 15". Sec. 2. The amendment made by this Act shall take effect on January 1 of the first calendar year beginning more than twenty-four months after the date of the enactment of this Act.[104]

Twenty-seven representatives debated the merits of the bill: sixteen in support, eleven in opposition. Most of those who opposed the bill expressed admiration for King but worried about the economic costs of the bill.[105] Some recommended other measures such as moving the holiday to a weekend, placing a bust of King in the Capitol building, or simply designating January 15 a day of commemoration. Representatives Larry McDonald (R-GA) and John Ashbrook (R-OH) expressed sharper opposition. McDonald condemned King's nonviolent social action as an exercise in "confrontation politics" intended to nurture hatred and violence.[106] He compared King's tactics to terrorism and accused King of consorting with communists. Representative Ashbrook cynically joked that "sneaking" the King holiday bill under "suspension of the rules" was perfectly fitting for Martin Luther King Jr., whose record could not stand the light of day.[107] Ashbrook proudly asserted his long-time opposition to King, going back to a congressional hearing in October 1967, and questioned why the nation would want to honor someone who had violated the tenets of Christianity, frequently used "anti-American rhetoric," and had a "penchant for violence."[108]

Though receiving an overwhelmingly majority of votes (252 yeas to 133 nays with 48 abstentions), H.R. 5461 failed to garner the two-thirds majority needed to pass

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[104] "Congressional Record of the House of Representatives – Tuesday, November 13, 1979," November 13, 1979, 32136.

[105] "Congressional Record...November 13, 1979". The estimated cost to give federal workers the day off and pay overtime for essential services was between $185 and $212 million annually.

[106] Ibid., 32139.

[107] Ibid., 32140.

[108] Ibid., 32140.

the House of Representatives. Undeterred, sponsors re-introduced the bill (under different rules) a month later with King's widow in attendance.[109] In addition to the same tonal arguments from the previous debate, this debate featured discussion on two surprise amendments. The first amendment, offered by Representatives Robert McClory (R-IL) and Peter Rodino Jr. (D-NJ), sought to modify the bill to establish the holiday on the third Monday in January.[110] Upon offering the amendment, Representative McClory argued that the increased economic activity of a Monday holiday would reduce the economic detriment of creating the holiday and suggested that a three-day weekend, consistently occurring on the same weekend each year, would allow for enhanced participation in holiday observances.[111] The second substitute amendment, offered by Representative Robin Leo Beard (R-TN), an opponent of the King holiday on the basis of the cost, would have made the third *Sunday* in January a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. His amendment would also deny paid leave on the holiday to Federal employees.[112]

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[109] The House of Representatives debated H.R. 5461 under House Resolution 497 which stated, "That upon the adoption of this resolution it shall be in order to move that the House resolve itself into the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union for the consideration of the bill (H.R. 5461) to designate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Junior, a legal public holiday, and he first reading of the bill shall be dispensed with. After general debate, which shall be confined to the bill and shall continue not to exceed one hour, to be equally divided and controlled by the chairman and ranking minority member of the Committee of Post Office and Civil Service, the bill shall be read for amendment under the five-minute rule. At the conclusion of the consideration of the bill for amendment, the Committee shall rise and report the bill to the House with such amendments as may have been adopted, and the previous question shall be considered as ordered on the bill and amendments thereto to final passage without intervening motion except one motion to recommit." See, "Congressional Record of the House of Representatives – Wednesday, December 5, 1979," December 5, 1979, 34747.

[110] "Congressional Record…November 13, 1979," 34755.

[111] Ibid., 34756.

[112] Ibid., 34575. After striking out the date "January 15," the amendment adds the clause, "For the purpose of statutes and Executive orders relating to pay and leave of

Not only was the cost too high, Beard declared, but the special treatment afforded King's memory would open the door for numerous other notable Americans to be honored in the same way, something the nation could ill afford to do.

The McClory-Rodino amendment passed with an overwhelming majority (291 yays, 106 nays with 36 abstentions), but parliamentary procedure required a vote on Beard's substitute amendment. When the Beard amendment also passed (207 yeas, 191 nays with 35 abstentions), Representative Garcia asked to remove the bill from consideration rather than proceed with establishing the holiday on a Sunday. His request passed (231 yes, 164 no with 38 abstentions), effectively tabling the King holiday bill for a later date. Representative John Jacob Rhodes (R-AZ) chided the sponsors of the original bill for pulling the legislation when the House had finally agreed to some resolution, saying, "It would have been a national holiday in memory of a great American on a day, a Sunday, and certainly the fact that he was a minister of the Gospel would indicate that that would be a very propitious day upon which to have that holiday."[113] Representative Parren Mitchell (D-MD), on the other hand, applauded the move to table the bill, declaring it duplicitous for Congress to move the holiday from King's birthday to Sunday, effectively making it not a holiday at all.

Some congressional supporters of the bill blamed President Jimmy Carter for failing to round up the votes necessary for passage.[114] Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), sensing the opening and seizing the opportunity to strengthen his Democratic primary

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employees, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Junior, the third Sunday in January, shall not be considered a legal public holiday."

[113] "Congressional Record…November 13, 1979," 34764.

[114] "Holiday Bill Honoring King Sidetracked in House Again," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 9, 1979, 1.

challenge to President Jimmy Carter's re-election, visited a predominantly Black church in Washington, DC. Calling King "the modern prophet of our age," Kennedy declared, "In return for the dream he gave us, our priority now is to enact the law declaring his birthday a national holiday in all of these United States."[115]

Congress's inaction stirred up emotional responses from supporters of a national King holiday. The editors of the Los Angeles Sentinel declared the idea to move the King holiday to a Sunday, "the most ridiculous proposal that has come down the pike since the days of prohibition." They insisted that the nation pay proper "homage to a man whose quest for peace and justice was so great that he was given the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts."[116] William Raspberry wrote that a real King holiday could go a long way towards healing the nation.[117] James J. Kilpatrick, however, saw congressional inaction as a good thing. He celebrated King's civil rights work and commitment to nonviolence, but questioned King's perceptions of communism and King's activism against the war in Vietnam. Kilpatrick reiterated the argument that not enough time had passed to put King's accomplishments in perspective and that honoring him could become an enduring embarrassment to the nation. For Kilpatrick, the Beard amendment, which he rightly understood as failing to declare a real national holiday, was honor enough.[118]

Public Activism for the King Holiday 1980-81

Public activism for the King holiday began to gain steam in October 1980 when legendary singer Stevie Wonder announced his plan to pressure Congress into creating

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[115] Thomas Morgan, "Kennedy Invokes Dreams of Past at Church Visit," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 1979, B8.

[116] "The Shame of It," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 13, 1979, A6.

[117] William Raspberry, "A Holiday for Healing," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1979, A21.

[118] James J. Kilpatrick, "A National Holiday for Dr. King: Some Unfinished Business Should Be Left That Way," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1980, C5.

the holiday. At a Los Angeles press conference with his record label, Motown, Wonder called for a January 15 rally in the District of Columbia, remarking that it was time to "respectfully demand that Congress take action ... [because] proclaiming the holiday would symbolize this nation's commitment to peace with honor, universal brotherhood through love and freedom and unity for all people."[119] Wonder further reasoned:

> Like no other American, Black or White in recent American history, Martin Luther King Jr., stood for, fought for, and died for, these great principles. No other national holiday has ever been declared commemorating the enormous contributions of Black people… Declaring January 15 a national holiday would be a symbolic way of honoring these two great omissions in our national record.[120]

Wonder's effort to properly memorialize King presents King as the greatest embodiment of America's democratic principles and the chief representative of the contributions of Blacks to the progress of American society. Thus, a celebration of Martin Luther King Jr., particularly this version of him, celebrates the best principles of America, what makes America itself great. For Wonder, an America that honors Martin Luther King Jr. with a national holiday properly appreciates its African American citizens.

Wonder would further emphasize these ideas about King and American democracy in a November 25 press conference announcing that he, Coretta Scott King, and the King Center had joined forces to plan the rally.

> It is important that we as Americans have a day to reflect on the goals of our Constitution and remind us of our responsibility to make those goals and basic principles become a reality in our lifetime. The goal of unity and peace and brotherhood is something we've heard on countless occasions. Most believe it can

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[119] "Stevie Pressing Congress for a MLK National Holiday," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 25, 1980, 8.

[120] "Stevie Pressing."

> never happen. Our purpose in marching January 15 will be to exert some positive energy to tell those of us who think that it cannot happen, that it can.[121]

Wonder leaves some ambiguity whether he is addressing the idea that a National King Holiday can become a reality, or whether the "goal of unity and peace and brotherhood" can become a reality. Perhaps, the consecration of January 15 as a national holiday in King's honor would signal the possibility of unity, peace, and brotherhood in American society. The confluence of the two is, nevertheless, telling. So long as Congress refused to grant a national holiday in King's honor, the much-longed-for era of unity, peace, and brotherhood could *not* come to fruition.

Convinced that America needed to honor Martin Luther King Jr. with a national holiday, Stevie Wonder wrote and produced the song, "Happy Birthday" (1980) in celebration of King. In the song, Wonder questions how anyone could take offense to a national celebration of King ("You know it doesn't make much sense, there ought to be a law against, anyone who takes offense, at a day in your celebration."), declares the holiday necessary to keep the dream from becoming an illusion ("Because it should never be, just because some cannot see, the dream as clear as he, that they should make it become an illusion"), and suggests that the holiday would celebrate King and all who waged the battle for civil rights ("It should be a great event, and the whole day should be spent, in full remembrance, of those who lived and died for the oneness of all people").[122]

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[121] "Stevie Wonder to Lead March for King Holiday," *New Journal and Guide*, December 17, 1980, 9.

[122] "Stevie Wonder Lyrics: Happy Birthday," http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/steviewonder/happybirthday.html (Last accessed April 29, 2013).

An estimated twenty-five thousand marchers braved snow, ice, and freezing temperatures to participate in the DC rally to persuade Congress to act on the King holiday bill.[123] To the assembled masses, Stevie Wonder declared:

> Public holidays in the United States should be, and normally are, reserved for celebrating great traditions in the nation's history and our highest ideals and leaders who have shaped our common destiny. Dr. King lived and died for this nation's ideals of justice, honor, dignity and freedom. By practicing non-violent citizen acts, he embodied the best of the America political tradition with the original pilgrims of New England, continuing on with the Boston Tea Party and right through the American Revolution. Martin Luther King and the founding fathers had more than their basic equity as men in common. They were men of vision and courage. They were about the business of making a noble dream a reality and they have made our lives all the better because of it. … Oppression against one group is oppression against us all. His efforts reflected a moral drive to improve the life of all human beings. By commemorating Martin Luther King's birthday, we do more than honor one man, however extraordinary: we honor the profound spirit of love and concern for humanity that give[s] us life and inspires us all.[124]

Wonder linked King to the broader American political tradition and imagined King's dream as the natural evolution of the ideals of the Founding Fathers. He considered a national holiday in King's honor to be the proper way to "honor him and reaffirm the ideals he lived and died for."[125]

Stevie Wonder's sentiment that America ought to make King's birthday a national holiday was not universally shared in the Black community. Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, publicly declared that a national King holiday would only serve to co-opt King within the White power structure, a cooptation Blacks should reject. He proclaimed, "We don't give a skip if you [White America] recognize it or not, if we

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[123] Monroe Anderson and Barbara Reynolds, "50,000 March in D.C. Seeking King Holiday," *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 1980, 5.

[124] Stevie Wonder, "Speech Advocating A National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday," January 15, 1981. http://www.avoiceonline.org/mlk-holiday-edu/assets/speech-text_stevie-wonder.pdf (Last accessed April 29, 2013).

[125] Ibid.

[Black America] say it is, then let it be! … [Blacks] give the White man too much power over [their] life!"[126] Minster Farrakhan rejected many of the very premises that holiday supporters were making about the holiday. He insisted that Martin Luther King Jr. belonged to Black people and they do not need permission or legitimization to celebrate him appropriately. Farrakhan further insisted that the energy spent marching for a holiday would have been better spent building up the Black community.

Similarly, in Chicago, former mayoral candidate Charles Bowser expressed concern that the holiday movement was distracting attention from more pressing concerns in the Black community. "If [Dr. King] were alive today, he would not be concerned about whether or not his birthday was a holiday, but he would be concerned about the condition of poor people and Black people in America. … [King] didn't need the government's approval to change this nation."[127] James H. Cleaver, Executive Editor of the Los Angeles Sentinel, lamented in an editorial, "[Blacks] have waited until the 'Great White Father' has declared a national holiday before we celebrated the life or death of some great or allegedly great person."[128] He further encouraged Blacks to "stop waiting for someone else to declare a holiday for us and recognize that Martin Luther King Jr., may be the greatest Black hero Modern Black America will ever see."[129] Farrakhan, Bowser, and Cleaver rejected elevating King to the status of national hero

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[126] Ed Davis, "Farrakhan Criticizes MLK Day Drive," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 8, 1981, A4.

[127] Norris P. West, "King Birthday Dedicated to Defense of Black Leadership," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 9, 1981, 3.

[128] James H. Cleaver, "Jan. 15 MUST Become OUR Holiday!," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 14, 1982, A1.

[129] Ibid.

because they saw that elevation as the dominant social power structure co-opting a legitimate Black hero for its own purposes.

While some in the Black community refused to seek the White legitimization of Martin Luther King Jr., Patrick Buchanan maintained his defense of certain segments of the American population who refused to give it. In March 1981, Buchanan defended the governor of Virginia's veto of a King holiday bill, writing:

> To a majority of Black Americans, Dr. King is their preeminent political champion, an apostle of unity and peace and love, cut down in his prime in Memphis in the service of the black and the poor. A martyr to justice…
>
> Dr. King, in the estimation of millions, was also something else: a deeply divisive figure, whose contribution to his country cannot remotely compare with Lincoln's or Jefferson's, a man who preached an indiscriminate civil disobedience which often led to violence, who, finally, sought to channel the civil rights movement into opposition to the Viet Nam war as a racist enterprise.[130]

Buchanan continued the argument he made one year prior. He conceded that Martin Luther King Jr. legitimately meant a great deal to some within American society, but not to all. Buchanan argued that this lack of consensus indicated that King's birthday should not be a national holiday.

Perhaps heeding Buchanan's warning, Congress did not take any significant action on the bill in 1981. This prompted Stevie Wonder to coordinate a national plan of action to include a second march on Washington.[131] Explaining the need for further action, Wonder wrote in a January 1982 op-ed:

> It is amazing that a man who received the Nobel Peace Prize is not duly recognized for his contributions that liberated not only minorities, but all people: white, black, yellow, and brown. Our nation's inability to honor Dr. King with a national holiday echoes the very ills of society he refuted. … Certainly, America

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[130] Patrick Buchanan, "A Birthday That Does Not Call For a Holiday," *Chicago Tribune*, March 31, 1981, A4.

[131] "Wonder Planning 2nd March on Washington," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 19, 1981, 7.

> can be proud of a man who represented the great principles, the great teachings of the heroic messengers of mankind down through the ages, teachers who delivered the message of peace, brotherhood, love, basic human dignity and freedom. … I believe in Dr. King's dream. I encourage all of us who believe in the fulfillment of that dream to be present this Jan. 15 in Washington. Then we will march again to support the legislation sponsored by Rep. John Conyers (D., Mich.) to make the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. birthday Bill a lawful reality, to demand that our nation acknowledge Jan. 15 as a national holiday. Join us. Help us to continue that perpetual spirit that Dr. King inspired in all of us. Let us prove that Dr. King's life–and death–was not in vain.[132]

Wonder's activism resulted in petitions with seven million signatures in behalf of a national King holiday, which he delivered to the next hearing of the House subcommittee, held in February 1982, to consider the King holiday bill.

House Subcommittee Hearing – February 23, 1982

The House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Census and Population held hearings on the proposed King holiday bill on February 23, 1982. The petition for which Stevie Wonder and Coretta Scott King collected seven million signatures read:

> We the undersigned believe that in the interests of improved human relations in our country, there should be a national holiday in honor of a Black American. We believe further that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., dedicated his life to justice, equality, and brotherhood for all Americans of all races and that Dr. King's life and work represent the highest patriotism and the very spirit of democracy. We, therefore, hereby petition the United States Congress to enact legislation providing for the establishment of January 15th, the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., as a national holiday.[133]

The petition made two claims about the need for a national King holiday: that the country needed to honor a Black American to improve race relations, and that Dr. King was the most deserving of the honor because his lifelong pursuit of justice, equality, and

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[132] Stevie Wonder, "A Holiday for Dr. King," *Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 1982, 11.

[133] "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service House of Representatives," Serial No. 97-38, February 23, 1982, 10.

brotherhood for all, best represents patriotism and democracy. The second claim gained the most traction in the hearings.

Representative John Conyers pointedly refuted disparaging charges about King's lack of commitment to America, saying:

> Dr. King was a patriot and sometimes that is lost in the fact that he was a great Black American civil rights leader. I think that history will show that he has done more to extend the principles of democracy, around which we particularly in the Congress ought to hold especially sacred, than any man in American history.[134]

Coretta Scott King enumerated her husband's contributions to American society:

> The Voting Rights Act of 1965 … was passed as a direct consequence of the Selma to Montgomery march and other nonviolent campaigns led by Martin Luther King Jr. … In reality free elections for all citizens only came to America because of the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership. If this was his only major contribution to our nation, his birthday would still deserve consideration as a national holiday. However, Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership greatly strengthened and improved American society in many other ways. The desegregation of public accommodations and educational institutions achieved during the civil rights movement has revolutionized the way Americans of different races relate to each other, for all time.[135]

Challenging the notion that a King holiday would only be for Blacks or would serve to exacerbate the divisions in society, Mrs. King offered:

> Some of the critics of Martin Luther King Jr. say they oppose a holiday on his birthday because it would be divisive. They say this is a time for unity in our nation. But the truth is that they fail to understand the civil rights movement. Martin worked tirelessly to achieve the same national unity of purpose they claim to seek. The difference is that he knew that there could be no national unity without equality and justice. He believed that eliminating inequality and segregation was the first step toward national unity of purpose. In fact, one of the simplest and clearest ways to explain the civil rights movement is to say that all we wanted was to participate freely in the American society and to share in the American dream. What could be more consistent with a unified America?[136]

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[134] "Hearing Before," 6.
[135] Ibid., 8-9.
[136] Ibid., 10.

Finally, Mrs. King echoed the sentiments of Representative Conyers about her husband's patriotism when she expressed:

> Everything Martin did in his career was motivated by the deepest patriotic feelings. … The vision that Martin described on that historic day in August 1963 remains perhaps the clearest statement of the American dream ever articulated. Martin saw racism and violence as a rapidly advancing cancer which was destroying the country he loved. Instead of just worrying and complaining about it, Martin dedicated his life to action against these evils and took the initiative. America is a better nation today, more safe and secure, and closer to Jefferson's image of democracy because of Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership.[137]

Coretta Scott King lifted up Martin Luther King Jr.'s dual commitments to nonviolence and eliminating state sanctioned racism as evidence of his patriotism and merit for a national holiday. For her, Martin Luther King Jr. exemplified the best of the American democratic tradition. He led a movement that fundamentally transformed the nation, forcing it to live up to its founding ideals. Absent from her testimony before this subcommittee were her previous declarations of what the King holiday would mean for Blacks. In fact, she rejected the idea that the holiday could be justified as a day for Blacks alone.

The sophistication of her new arguments astounds: Martin Luther King Jr. is a legitimate, all-American hero who transformed America for all. The holiday would celebrate that legacy and give the nation an annual opportunity to reflect on how it could better "realize its destiny as the world's leading model of justice and democracy."[138] The adjustment she makes to her testimony demonstrates that she understood that her husband could not become a national hero unless his legacy implied something tangible and worthwhile about national identity. She asserted in her concluding paragraph, "By carefully choosing which heroes and heroines to honor, a nation begins to shape its

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[137] "Hearing Before," 12.
[138] Ibid.

history and its destiny."[139] If the nation were to choose to honor Martin Luther King Jr., then it would signal to society that his ideals and values aligned with the nation's ideals and values, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is telling that Mrs. King situated her husband's legacy primarily from a racial equality lens garnered by means of nonviolent social action. By portraying King as a national leader seeking equal opportunity and fair treatment for all, Mrs. King recast her husband in a framework that would make it easier to accept and support for a Congress led by advantaged white males and an administration led by a President averse to a race-based public policy to support. This suggests that while many considered King a national hero even in this early pre-holiday stage, the reasons for this consideration were under contestation.

Evidence of that contestation abounds at this hearing of the House subcommittee. Marion Barry, mayor of the District of Columbia, suggested that a national King holiday would not just honor Martin Luther King Jr., it would honor the entire civil rights movement for which Dr. King was merely the symbol. The holiday would recognize "this great movement [and we would be] committing ourselves to the high ideals for which [Dr. King] stood."[140] Hyman Bookbinder of the American Jewish Committee gave a stirring account of his personal experience at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom:

> I felt it was going to be a memorable day and I wanted to be up there in front, seeing and hearing every civil rights leader, every religious leader, every political leader who was going to speak to us in support of jobs and freedom. But after 15 or 16 speeches, I must confess, I was tired. I went off about 30 feet from the front ranks of the crowd, lay down on the grass, and closed my eyes. I was tired. I didn't even get up after Martin Luther King had been introduced. But then he started to speak. And, ironically, it was the hushed silence that ended my half-

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[139] Ibid.
[140] "Hearing Before," 17-18.

> sleep. I strained to hear every word. And soon I was on my knees, anxious to see the man who was saying those marvelous things. I couldn't see him well enough, so I got up and got as close as I could to the platform. It was clear that this wasn't going to be just another speech, not just another sermon. This was one of God's great creatures, spelling out a dream for all of God's creatures. It was not a dream for Black people alone, it was not a dream for Jewish people alone, it was not for White people. It was a dream for all people. And in case some would not understand that that was what he was talking about, freedom for all people, Martin Luther King ended that memorable speech with words that were plain for all to understand.[141]

In supporting a national King holiday, Bookbinder deified Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream," making it the preeminent vision of a just society. He concluded by suggesting that the national holiday would "compel us to ask the simple . . . question: What have we done this past year to bring us closer to 'one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.'"[142]

Stevie Wonder's statement provided yet another image of King's impact and merit for a national holiday. Using his blindness as an extended metaphor for colorblindness, Wonder asserted that King offered a "vision, without color, [to become] the objective force for us all."[143] By framing King's dream as a colorblind vision for American society, Wonder followed Coretta Scott King's lead in making Martin Luther King Jr. more palatable for American conservatives. Wonder even quoted from President Reagan's 1982 declaration on King's birthday to drive the point home that King was a hero for all Americans:

> He dreamed of an America in which 'our children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character' and he reminded us that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' His time among us was cut tragically short, but his message of tolerance, nonviolence and brotherhood lives

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[141] Ibid., 35.
[142] "Hearing Before," 35.
[143] Ibid., 45.

> on … Let us all rededicate ourselves to making Martin Luther King's inspiring dream come true for all Americans."[144]

For Wonder (though not for President Reagan at this moment in time), a national holiday for King was essential to rededicating ourselves to making King's dream come true.

The reasons given for why Martin Luther King Jr. merited a national holiday illustrate two principles of collective memory. First, collective memory involves contested memories and images that potentially blend a variety of thick descriptions into a thin consensus. King is a hero worthy of a national holiday for any combination of reasons including the belief that Black Americans deserve national recognition and King is the cream of the Black American crop; King's colorblind vision which all Americans can and should support; King's support of the economic egalitarian goals of labor unions; and King's embodiment of the founding principles of patriotism, justice, democracy, and the like. One does not have to agree with all of the various reasons (or even a majority of them) to concede that King is worthy of "secular canonization." The multiplicity of reasons provides King's legacy the flexibility needed to stand the test of time. Thus, Martin Luther King can stand for one thing as an American hero in one contemporary historical moment and for something else in another historical moment (or group, cause, and the like), while maintaining his status as national hero. This explains why King can be a political hero to liberals and conservatives alike: he means something different to each group.

Second, collective memory, contested narratives and all, work towards establishing a collective identity by identifying and celebrating the values and virtues that define the people and their society. Patriotism, justice, and democracy are values

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[144] Ibid., 46. Stevie Wonder quotes from President Reagan's proclamation on January 15, 1982, commemorating the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

considered vital to the American republic. King must be the embodiment of those values and have contributed in an extraordinary way to the establishment or preservation of those values in order to become a national hero. The supporters of the King holiday sought to establish this premise without question. King's detractors sought to establish just the opposite. Nevertheless, they agreed on the values themselves.

Representative Larry McDonald (GA-R), reasserted his dissenting opinion by accusing King of wedding himself to violence and working with "America's violent enemies to achieve his goals."[145] According to McDonald, Martin Luther King Jr. intentionally antagonized racists to commit public acts of violence in order to curry political favor and "deliberately violated the laws by holding marches without parade permits, by violating court injunctions, and provoking law enforcement officials."[146] The Birmingham campaign exemplified King's lawlessness, said McDonald. McDonald accused King of intentionally courting violence in order to produce martyrs to further his cause.[147] McDonald preferred to recognize George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington as Black Americans who "literally rose up from slavery and epitomize the American spirit and determination to rise above poverty and adversity."[148] These figures embodied the American values of self-uplift and hard work that McDonald wished to celebrate. McDonald also questioned King's affiliations, suggesting that the FBI's intense surveillance of King was proof enough that he had unsavory Communist affiliations. Finally, in the question and answer period after his remarks, Representative McDonald made clear that he did not support a holiday dedicated for any particular race. "I think if

[145] "Hearing Before," 20.
[146] Ibid., 21.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., 22.

we are going to have a Black American holiday, to me that is racist… We are supposed to be *e pluribus unum*, one from many, but it looks like from that type of logic we must have a Black hero, we must have a yellow hero, we must have a red hero, or what have you, to me that is divisive and going exactly counter to our principle of *e pluribus unum*…"[149] This last statement framed the holiday as one exclusively for Blacks, suggesting that even if one disagreed about King's heroic status to the majority of Americans, if the motive was to assuage Blacks with a holiday, then the holiday itself ran counter to American values.

McDonald's framing of the proposed holiday seemed to resonate with President Ronald Reagan. At a May 10 press conference, Reagan expressed ambivalence about the King holiday while touring successful inner-city schools in Chicago. "I haven't taken a stand one way or the other, and I certainly understand why the black community would like to do that … [but] we could have an awful lot of holidays if we start down that road." Claiming that he wanted to study the issue more, he nonetheless warned, "it might be that there's no way that we could afford all the holidays" that various groups might want to create to honor their heroes.[150] President Reagan essentially saw King as little more than a Black hero and worried that all ethnicities would want their heroes similarly honored if the nation honored King with a national holiday.

Columnist Richard Cohen took Reagan to task for this viewpoint even as he left open the question of whether the time was right to enact a national King holiday.

> But where [President Reagan] misses the boat is in failing to realize that King is not just a Black hero, any more than George Washington is just a White hero. Not

[149] Ibid., 28.

[150] "Reagan Sympathetic, But Cautious on King Holiday," *New York Times*, May 11, 1982, B13

> only did King lead a civil rights crusade (not to mention antiwar and antipoverty movements) that was racially integrated itself, he did it [on] behalf of an entire nation. The immediate beneficiaries of his civil rights activities, of course, were Black. But in the end, the whole nation benefited. We are all better off because of what King did. … Maybe not enough time has passed to evaluate King's contribution and see whether he measures up to the likes of Washington or Lincoln … But whatever the decision, it is just plain insulting to King's memory and to people who revere him to refer to him as some sort of token, and to trivialize the attempt to memorialize him as yet another bizarre demand made by "those people."[151]

Perhaps because of President Reagan's ambivalence, Congress did not consider the holiday bill in 1982. The next debate on the holiday bill occurred in June 1983 at a hearing of the Subcommittee on Census and Statistics of the Committee on the Post Office and Civil Service of the House of Representatives. Both Coretta King and Stevie Wonder testified to their frustration about Congress' delay in enacting the holiday; other than that, their remarks did not deviate much from their previous testimonies.

One interesting development did occur, however. Representative Dan Lungren (R-CA) gave a statement that perhaps best encapsulates the change in many conservative politicians' views on the merits of the holiday. As you may recall, during the ill-fated attempt to pass a King holiday bill using the suspension of the rules procedure in November 1979, Representative Lungren had voted for the King holiday to be observed on a Sunday, leading the bill architects to pull the bill from the floor rather than risk enacting a meaningless holiday. Three years later, Lungren co-sponsored the bill seeking to make King's birthday a national holiday, explaining his change of heart this way:

> But upon reflecting on it over this last year I have come to the conclusion that the importance of the occasion, the importance of the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and all that symbolizes is such that if it takes a national holiday that takes place on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or whatever, then it seems to me we ought to go ahead and do that…I had to look within myself and ask whether I, as a fiscal conservative, got so hung up on the question of cost that I lost sight of the

[151] Richard Cohen, "Dr. King," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1982, B1.

> question of what this occasion symbolizes… When I started thinking about that over the past year, it seemed to me that setting aside a national holiday, honoring the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King and what he stands for—and I mean what he still stands for—may be one small, but nonetheless important step toward recognizing the consensus of conscience that has developed in this country with respect to civil rights… It seems to me we at least ought to set aside one day where we can come together, Black and White, Red and Brown, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal, people of every political stripe and acknowledge that we do have a continuing commitment for civil rights.[152]

Lungren's change of heart arose from his belief that the nation had come to a "consensus of conscience" on civil rights. Yet he also illuminated the shallowness of the "consensus" when he acknowledged the contestation on how to best achieve these elusive civil rights for all. Civil rights may be broadly agreed upon as important, but the definition of equality and how to achieve it remained a point of contention. Rather than bogging down King's legacy with the details on the true nature of civil rights (Martin Luther King Jr. certainly had specific ideas that are little acknowledged in the hearing), Lungren allowed room for ambiguity regarding what would signify a national commitment to civil rights. This provides an answer to Clifford J. White III's concerns, expressed in the 1979 joint hearings discussed earlier in this chapter, that the national holiday would signify broad support for all of Martin Luther King's agenda. Representative Lungren made clear that the holiday merely honors Dr. King as the symbol of the civil rights movement and indicates that the nation now supports racial equality of opportunity.

[152] "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service House of Representatives," Serial No. 98-5, June 7, 1983, 32-3.

House of Representatives Pass the King Holiday Bill – August 2, 1983

After the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service of the House of Representatives approved the holiday bill, the full House of Representatives took up the measure on August 2, 1983 when freshman Representative Katie Hall (D-IN) introduced H.R. 3706 to the floor. Its text read:

> Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that section 6103(a) of title 5, United States Code, is amended by inserting immediately below the item relating to New Year's Day the following: "Birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., the third Monday in January." Sec 2. The amendment made by the first section of this Act shall take effect the two-year period following the date of the enactment of this Act.

Written this way, the bill conceded two points of contention related to the potentially deleterious economic impact of the holiday. First, it positioned the holiday on a stable date each year, the third Monday of January. Congressional Budget Office studies indicated that making the holiday part of an extended weekend, rather than potentially placing it in the middle of the week, would reduce the cost to the federal government. Second, the law would not go into effect until two years after passage, allowing time for the struggling economy to improve. This symbolic acknowledgement of the concern for costs proved enough to convert many borderline supporters of the holiday.

The House of Representatives again debated the bill under the suspension of the rules procedure. Representative Hall began the debate by framing King as having taught the nation an important lesson about democracy:

> [Martin Luther King] taught us that our democratic principles could be seriously impaired if they were not applied equally, and that tailoring these principles

> through nonviolence would have a lasting effect… The time is before us to show what we believe: that justice and equality must continue to prevail.[153]

Representative William Dannemeyer (R-CA) responded on the opposing side by conceding that King made positive contributions to American society, but questioned whether those contributions equaled the impact of George Washington, Christopher Columbus, and Jesus Christ, all of whom had holidays in their honor. Further, he determined that the estimated cost to the federal government ($225 million) was too high and proposed an amendment to establish the holiday on a Sunday.[154] These two frameworks would reflect the majority of the commentary on either side of debate. The "pros" tended to reflect on King as a vicar of American democracy and justice who dreamed of racial brotherhood, and the "cons" tended to concede King's impact but question the economic cost of another holiday as well as the lasting endurance of King's work.

In contrast, Representative Howard Wolpe (D-MI) made the following argument on behalf of a national King holiday:

> In establishing a Martin Luther King national holiday, we will not only be giving recognition to the life and accomplishments of a truly great American, but we will be providing a living memorial that can serve to inspire both present and future generations of Americans to a renewed dedication to the principle upon which this Nation was founded. … Dr. King symbolized the best in the nation: the continuing struggle to achieve a truly open society, in which all Americans will have an equal opportunity to achieve their full human potential; the commitment to an ultimately integrated society in which racial and ethnic and religious prejudice and discrimination will not limit the ability of Americans to learn from and to enjoy one another; the advocacy of nonviolent social change; [and] the historical affirmation by Americans of the value and importance of the individual citizen.[155]

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[153] "Congressional Record of the House of Representatives – Tuesday, August 2, 1983," August 2, 1983, 22208.

[154] "Congressional Record…August 2, 1983," 22209.

[155] Ibid., 22213.

Supporters often referred to King as a symbol of something, usually the best of American values or the civil rights movement as a whole, and many expressed a hope that the holiday would be a day of national reflection and rededication to the American values that King embodied, best expressed in his "dream."

With the notable exception of Representative McDonald's diatribe against the idea of Martin Luther King as a legitimate hero, most comments by dissenters of the holiday resembled the words of Representative Daniel B. Crane (R-IL):

> The civil rights movement was a period in our history that many have referred to as a second American revolution, a time when people of all races and creeds began to envision a dream of equal opportunity and social economic progress for all. I feel that it is entirely proper and I support fully the concept of a commemorating birth date for this American. In recognizing this man and this period in history we would preserve for future generations the memory of a man who changed the lives of millions of Americans. The question we are facing today is not whether we should recognize this man but rather in what manner. … The cost of a national holiday on a regular workday is estimated at $237 million… The spirit and intent of commemoration can be realized by the designation of another day, a non-work day as a national day of recognition. … I come from the great state of Illinois, the home of Abraham Lincoln. I am sure you will agree with me that history has shown he was a great man, one who also had an impact on the lives of millions of his fellow Americans. We do not commemorate his birthday with a separate national holiday.

Representative Crane acknowledged King's impact but questioned whether he deserved honor above even Abraham Lincoln.

The comparison between King and Lincoln is interesting because a national holiday for Lincoln would have been unfathomable in 1880, fifteen years after his assassination. Too many southerners still resented the Civil War and too many northerners still believed Lincoln did not prosecute the war well and let the southern "traitors" off the hook. A strong consensus for Lincoln's status as an American hero did not develop until well into the twentieth century after the Civil War generation had

passed away.[156] King's 1983 legacy astounds because the generation most affected by his work was still alive and in power. However, the shifts in arguments detailed above show the ways in which the sharp edges and specific details about King's work, policies, and goals have been smoothly transformed into universal principles which a broad majority can accept.

This shift is best exemplified by the words of congressional representatives who changed their vote on the King holiday bill from "nay" in 1979 to "yay" in 1983. Consider the testimony of Representative Jack Kemp (R-NY):

> The Martin Luther King holiday is not just a holiday for a civil rights leader. It is more importantly, as the gentleman from California pointed out, a holiday to commemorate that idea, that dream that all people have over this country and indeed the world, to live in freedom, justice, dignity, to be able to know that those rights are [not just] guaranteed by Government through our Constitution but are given to us by God, that inalienable source. 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 were meant to be. … We must truly say that America is one nation, one people, one family, one country dedicated to rights not only for all Americans, but for all people everywhere.

Representative Kemp framed Martin Luther King Jr. as a universal representation of freedom, justice, and dignity. Kemp insisted that a King holiday would signal to everyone America's full commitment to these principles and, in imperialistic undertones that perhaps King himself would not appreciate, its willingness to export those values globally.

Some speakers offered challenges to this bland universal view of Martin Luther King Jr. Representative Parren Mitchell responded on multiple occasions to critics who

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[156] For a compelling analysis of the slow rise of Abraham Lincoln's national esteem, see Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

questioned the cost of the holiday by interjecting, "What do you mean, 'cost?' What was the cost of keeping us Blacks where we were?" His challenge framed the holiday as something the nation owed to its Black citizens. Representative Jerry Patterson (D-CA) saw the holiday as an opportunity to halt the attempts by the Reagan administration to "turn back the clock on gains we have made for civil rights" and show "our neighbors that we are a nation truly committed to the ideals of peace and equality—at home and abroad."[157]

Others speculated on what a commitment to King's notion of peace and nonviolence would mean in a nuclear age. In this vein, Representative Robert Odell Owens (D-NY) declared:

> Martin Luther King was an apostle of nonviolence. In a world which is now threatened with extinction by violent nuclear war, the way of nonviolence must be promoted with new vigor. At this moment riots and wars are raging in several parts of the world. Those who worship the false gods of war and violence continue to create new bitterness and new cycles of revenge-seeking. This special recognition of Martin Luther King would send a message around the world that America stands for freedom and justice achieved through nonviolent peaceful means.

Representative Ronald Dellums (D-CA) went even deeper in recalling the specifics of King's commitment to nonviolence:

> As a citizen of the world, Martin Luther King Jr. carried his message into the global arena: The message of human rights, true brotherhood and sisterhood through the justice of shared equality, and the reconciliation of nations through the justice of shared equality, and the reconciliation of nations through diplomatic negotiation, rather than the violence of war and destruction. … It was Martin Luther King Jr., using his eminence as a Nobel Peace Laureate, who chose to speak out on the insanity and immorality of the war in Indochina, despite the warnings and threats of other so-called leaders in the civil rights movement. … Were [he] still alive today, he would be in the forefront of the movement to

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[157] "Congressional Record of the House of Representatives – Tuesday, August 2, 1983," 22212.

> reverse the course of the nuclear arms race, and to prevent this Nation from continuing its overt and covert military intervention in Central America.[158]

However, the view of a heroic King opposing American military interventions across the globe was rarely found amongst the speakers who expressed their support for the national King holiday. Only one other person directly mentioned King's activism against the Vietnam War—Representative Burton (D-CA), a supporter of the holiday who saw the act as courageous,[159] though Representative McDonald, a staunch opponent of the King holiday, introduced several statements that criticized King for giving aid to the Viet Cong.[160] The absence of a robust discussion of King's legacy as an anti-war activist, not just a proponent of nonviolence, belies the notion that the nation rejects pacifism. Too much emphasis on this aspect of King's legacy might have prevented the elevation of his status to national American hero.

The House of Representatives passed the King holiday bill by a margin of 338 to 90 with five abstentions. While the debate on the floor of the House, as well as the subsequent voting, had the feel of a coronation, the Senate's debate took on an entirely different feel.

U.S. Senate Debates the King Holiday Bill – October 1983

A few days after the House of Representatives finally passed the King holiday bill, White House officials began to suggest that President Reagan, stirred by Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker Jr. (R-TN) and Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), was

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[158] Ibid., 22231.

[159] Ibid., 22212. Representative Burton declared of King, "He was the first civil rights leader to speak out against the war in Vietnam—an action which was condemned by many, both black and white. But he had the courage to do what was right and the vision to see that war is always begun by those in power but is fought by the powerless."

[160] Ibid., 22218. Representative McDonald accused King of being influenced by communists and introduced ten statements and/or previous Congressional testimony impugning King's character and merit for a national holiday.

leaning towards changing his position and supporting the King holiday bill.[161] This would pave the way for the Senate to take up the matter and presumably pass the legislation easily.

Indeed, on October 3, 1983, the Senate began discussing the bill, but a striking filibuster by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) halted the proceedings. Helms first decried the speed at which the Senate was being asked to approve the legislation, bypassing debate in the Committee on the Judiciary and fast-tracking it to the Senate for a vote. If the Senate would allow the bill to go through the standard process, Helms pledged to not delay its consideration thereafter.[162] Next, Senator Helms questioned whether King held universal appeal for the citizens of the nation, suggesting that perhaps King was a source of tension and a symbol of a divided society.

> Martin Luther King's repeated and well-publicized appeals to love and brotherhood found, during his lifetime—and still find—a broad appeal to men of goodwill, because they are basic things upon which we can all agree. But there are many who point out—and they are sincere and they are not without foundation when they say it—that the image of Dr. King as a religious leader blends quickly into the image of Dr. King as a political leader, as a man who was seeking to use the power of government to reshape and redistribute the power within the Government. Indeed, the veneer of religious imagery with which he cloaked his political concepts created the very tension which his name still invokes.[163]

Senator Helms declared that while King offered memorable platitudes supportable by a broad coalition, his true political motivations, concealed by a "veneer" of religious imagery, indicated that his thicker understanding of those broad values did not necessarily have broad appeal in American society. He attacked King for engaging in nonviolent social action with the express purpose of disturbing the peace of the State,

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[161] Juan Williams and Lou Cannon, "President to Support King Holiday," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1983, A1.

[162] "Congressional Record of the Senate – Monday, October 3, 1983," October 3, 1983, 26867.

[163] Ibid., 26868.

adhering to a liberation theology that denied traditional ideas of God and salvation for one seeking to bring about an idealized view of a just society, and developing a political and economic program that was conceived and aided by communists.[164]

After a brief interlude from Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) who defended King for inspiring us with a dream that would "go on as long as there is an America,"[165] Senator Helms attacked what he saw as King's communist and extremist associations.

> There is no evidence that King himself was a member of the CPUSA [Communist Party of the United States] or that he was a rigorous adherent of academic Marxist ideology or of the Communist Party line. Nevertheless, King was repeatedly warned about his associations with known Communists by friendly elements in the Kennedy administration. … King took perfunctory and deceptive measures to separate himself from the Communists against whom he was warned [and] continued to have close and secret contacts with at least some of them. … King, unlike many other civil rights leaders of his time, associated with the most extreme political elements in the United States. He addressed their organizations, signed their petitions, and invited them into his own organizational activities. Extremist elements played a significant role in promoting and influencing King's opposition to the Vietnam War–an opposition that was not predicated on what King believed to be the best interests of the United States but on his sympathy for the North Vietnamese Communist regime and on an essentially Marxist and anti-American ideological view of U.S. foreign policy. … The conclusion must be that Martin Luther King Jr. was either an irresponsible individual [who was] careless of his own reputation and that of the civil rights movement for integrity and loyalty, or that he knowingly cooperated and sympathized with subversive and totalitarian elements under the control of a hostile foreign power.[166]

Senator Helms judged Martin Luther King guilty of being a communist by association. Beyond King's nice words, Helms found a man deeply influenced or manipulated by nefarious forces, forces with values that ran counter to American democracy. King's willingness to engage "extremist" elements, refusal to ostracize advisors with alleged communist ties, and sympathy towards people with whom America was at war, disqualified him from consideration as a national hero. For Helms,

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[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 26870.
[166] Ibid.

brotherhood and unity did not and should not truly extend to all, especially communists, no matter how much King wanted those values to apply to all.

Helms continued his filibuster by detailing King's questionable associations with alleged communists, impugning King's engagement with unions and political organizations alleged to be Communist front organizations, and criticizing King's anti-Vietnam War activism. Helms considered the last particularly egregious, chastising King for his "Beyond Vietnam" speech in which King called America "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[167] Helms accused King of opposing the Vietnam War from the false ideological view that "American foreign policy [was] motivated by capitalist and imperialist forces that sought only [America's] own material satisfaction and [was] responsible for the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism."[168] For Senator Helms, this view of American foreign policy was "fundamentally Marxist" and aligned well with King's belief that "the capitalistic system was predicated on exploitation, prejudice, and poverty."[169]To conclude, Senator Helms insisted:

> King's view of American society was thus not fundamentally different from that of the CPUSA or of other Marxists. While he is generally remembered today as the pioneer of civil rights for Blacks and as the architect of nonviolent techniques of dissent and political agitation, his hostility to and hatred for America should be made clear.[170]

A cloture motion brought the filibuster of Senator Helms to a close, but not before he carefully articulated a contested narrative of Martin Luther King Jr., reflecting attitudes about King that, over time, had actually declined in the general public. Although King did not have a specifically or generally Marxist view of American society, Helms's

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[167] "Congressional Record…October 3, 1983," 26876.
[168] Ibid., 26877.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

charges against King as a critic of American capitalism and imperialism had some basis in fact. King associated with liberals, progressives, socialists, and other political activists with backgrounds or ties to Communism in America. He vocally opposed the Vietnam War, chastising the nation for its commitment to state sanctioned violence. His nonviolent social action sometimes provoked violent opposition, perhaps intentionally so in some cases, for example, in Birmingham.

The question at stake was whether these affiliations and beliefs made King fundamentally un-American and unworthy of national recognition, an exemplar of American democracy worthy of secular canonization, or something in between. The debate over this question is a debate about collective memory where the facts of history get interpreted for their meaning and importance in the present and where the present circumstances influence the importance and meaning of past events. As we have seen in this protracted debate on the legacy of Dr. King, consensus on collective memory is never completely settled, but the airing of contested narratives in public can actually work to develop a broader consensus.

Senator Arlen Spector (R-PA) countered Helms's account by citing King's nonviolent, peaceful interventions regarding the 1966 and 1967 riots in Pittsburgh, Detroit, Newark, and Philadelphia. King's efforts to keep the peace in these situations belies any notion that he was "an exponent in any way, shape, or form of a theory of destruction which may or may not be a part of the liberation theology."[171] Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) based his surprising support of the bill on a different narrative about Martin Luther King Jr. Thurmond sought to "recognize and appreciate the many

[171] "Congressional Record…October 3, 1983," 26880.

substantial contributions of Black Americans and other minorities to the creation, preservation, and development of our great Nation" and followed the advice of Black leaders whose preference that "the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. should be the focus of such a holiday."[172] He makes the national holiday for and about minorities, specifically Blacks.

Senator Robert Dole (R-KS), after defending the honor of those who opposed the bill from accusations of bigotry, offered another narrative about King in support of the holiday:

> [King's] work—which in reality must be our work—is unfinished. Since he first commanded national attention, legal obstacles to voting, fair housing, and employment have fallen. … But much remains to be done. A dream has yet to be fully realized. … Let us acknowledge more subtle forms of discrimination wherever they exist, and pledge anew to root them out, inspired by the example of a man of God and an authentic hero to tens of millions of Americans, Black and White or whatever.[173]

For Dole, King's dream represents the shared values of conservatives and liberal Americans. King deserves national recognition for being the leader of a movement that fought to end discrimination and continues to inspire Americans of every hue.

The next day the Senate worked out a compromise under the "unanimous consent" procedure, allowing the debate to move forward. Senator Daniel Moynihan (D-NY) called the illegal FBI surveillance of King "filth" and said a much better measure of King's relationship with communism can be found in King's sermon, "How Should a Christian View Communism," published in his 1963 book *Strength to Love*. Moynihan then quoted King at length:

> Communism exploits the dreadful philosophy that the end justifies the means. It enunciates movingly the theory of a classless society, but alas! its methods for

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[172] Ibid.
[173] "Congressional Record…October 3, 1983," 26884.

> achieving this noble end are all too often ignoble. Lying, violence, murder, and torture are considered to be justifiable means to achieve the millennial end. … The ultimate weakness of Communism is that it robs man of that quality which makes him man. Man, says Paul Tillich, is man because he is free. This freedom is expressed through man's capacity to deliberate, decide, and respond. Under Communism, the individual soul is shackled by the chains of conformity; his spirit is bound by the manacles of party allegiance. He is stripped of both conscience and reason. … In spite of its glowing talk about the welfare of the masses, Communism's methods and philosophy strip man of his dignity and worth, leaving him as little more than a depersonalized cog in the ever-turning wheel of the state. … Never can we, as Christians, tolerate the philosophy of Communism.[174]

Senator Warren Rudman (D-NH) offered an amendment suggesting that Congress enact a National Equality Day on February 12 (Abraham Lincoln's birthday), rather than a National Martin Luther King Day. After listing all of the historically disadvantaged groups that have managed to gain political agency in American society, Senator Rudman worried that honoring only King would omit and dishonor other figures and movements whose accomplishments were on par with King's.

> To commemorate one person is to embrace the arrogance of assuming the goal [of liberty and justice for all] has been attained. Once we are complacent enough to assume that, we will be in danger of losing the dynamic nature of our democracy, which itself insures the possibility of realizing the idealized equality we aspire to. Instead we must focus on the past to gain knowledge, the present to measure progress, and the future to set goals now unattainable.[175]

Senator John Porter East (R-NC), protégé of Senator Jesse Helms, introduced an amendment seeking to create a National Civil Rights Day on the birthday of James Madison in lieu of honoring Martin Luther King Jr. His amendment sought to strike the name of Martin Luther King Jr. from official national recognition, ignored the success of the civil right movement as reason for commemorating Dr. King in the first place, and

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., 28083.

celebrated the Constitution in the cause of honoring civil rights.[176] Senator East opposed any national honor for King because of King's 1967 speech at Riverside Church where King desecrated "the memory of the brave young Americans who fought and died in [the Vietnam War]" by comparing the nation's actions in Vietnam to those of Nazi Germany.[177] These words made King, from the perspective of Senator East, unworthy of recognition equal to that of George Washington.

Senator Kennedy answered Senator East's concerns by declaring that King did more to "eliminate the elements and the residue of prejudice and discrimination in our society" than anyone in American history, and employed a Judeo-Christian ethic to do it. Kennedy complained that reducing the day to a "civil rights day" missed the point. The holiday would recognize King's achievements and commemorate the struggle for equal rights. Martin Luther King Jr. best embodied the values and ideals in need of commemoration. Further, Kennedy reasoned that King's opposition to the Vietnam War only criticized American policy; it did not impugn the character of brave Americans who fought and died for this country.

Senator Daniel Moynihan addressed concerns that the holiday would simply become a day to criticize Republicans by insisting that Martin Luther King was beholden to no political party. King was neither a Democrat nor a Republican, rather he was committed to the "American Constitution and to the fulfillment of its promise and its provisions."[178] The holiday celebration would span political parties and commemorate

[176] Ibid., 28091.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., 28097.

the guarantee of freedom for all which began with a Republican president (Abraham Lincoln).

The Senate rejected both Senator Rudman's amendment (22 yeas to 68 nays) and Senator East's amendment (18 yeas to 76 nays). They also rejected amendments to make King's birthday the holiday date (23 yeas to 71 nays), to replace the holiday with a day of commemoration (24 yeas to 69 nays), and to wait for the Senate Legal Counsel to obtain and review the FBI files on King (3 yeas to 90 nays).

On the final day of debate, senators offered and rejected a few more amendments. The most outlandish was Jesse Helms's amendment also to demand that President Reagan pardon the deceased "Father of Black Nationalism," Marcus Garvey. Helms declared, "Marcus Garvey had a dream, and it was the dream of thousands of Black Americans. It was the dream of Black achievement, of Black participation in the free enterprise system, and of Black leadership throughout the world."[179] Helms admitted on the Senate floor that none of his amendments had a chance of passing. He simply wanted to obstruct the process and dramatize his belief of the unworthiness of King for national recognition. He saw the holiday as a public holiday for Blacks. Helms's actions suggest he understood that the holiday would legitimize Martin Luther King Jr. as an American hero. Since he could not stop the process, he could at least disrupt it and create a historical record of his dissent that would give him the final say when the truth about King was finally revealed.

All of the amendments and the negative tone of the debates prompted Senator Bill Bradley (D-NJ) to give an impassioned statement.

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[179] "Congressional Record…October 3, 1983," 28351. It is unclear whether Senator Helms truly endorsed the exoneration of Marcus Garvey or was making a rhetorical argument linking King to another Black radical who had a "dream" to illustrate King's unworthiness of a national holiday.

> [King] spoke with a prophetic voice about redemption—of our individual souls and from our national disgrace. The dream he shared that hot August afternoon in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—the dream he gave his life for—was a dream shared by millions of Americans Black and White alike. It was a dream that challenged America to live up to its ideals, to rise above the assumed rights of prejudice and to assert the inherent rights of humanity once again, just as 100 years earlier Abraham Lincoln had urged Americans to rise above the assumed rights of property and to assert the inherent rights of humanity… His message told us what we knew, that America was incomplete without addressing the injustice, festering in our national soul, of a dual society of Black and White. But he believed that even in the face of blatant discrimination, America—its institutions and its people—had the capacity for righting the wrong course. His message offered redemption from our original sin… He made us all see the monstrous evil we had allowed to seep into our national conscience and he provided us the way out through a commitment to love our brothers as ourselves, and to seek justice through the application of moral power to the institutions of our democracy. This is the American we seek to honor with a national holiday.[180]

Senator Bradley also directly addressed the accusations of the Senators from North Carolina:

> When I listen to the senior Senator from North Carolina talk about Dr. King and communism and when I listen to the junior Senator from North Carolina construe Dr. King's words so that he implies Dr. King called American soldiers Nazis—two images swirl up in my imagination, one trivial, one ominous. … I hear their rationalization; they are not against Black Americans, you understand, just Dr. King. Yet nowhere in this debate have I heard the two Senators say they supported the 1964 civil rights law, even today, or the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Indeed they voted against the recent voting rights extension. They fought to protect the tax-exempt status of schools that practiced racial discrimination, and they have voted against reauthorization of the Civil Rights Commission. They speak for a past that the vast majority of Americans have overcome… The Senators from North Carolina have implied on more than one occasion that they are courageous, fighting for their views. "Political suicide," the Senator from North Carolina has called his opposition to the holiday. I do not think they are courageous; I think their actions are very carefully calculated.[181]

Senator Bradley's strong rebuke of Senators Helms and East neatly encapsulates the primary reasons given by proponents for supporting the King holiday. Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophetic words and actions provoked a dramatic change that forced the nation

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[180] "Congressional Record…October 3, 1983," 28359-60.
[181] Ibid., 28360.

to reckon with its failure to live up to its founding principles. Using the tools of democracy and nonviolent social action, King led a movement to redeem the nation's soul. The national holiday in his honor would serve to celebrate this change and legitimize King as a national hero for all. Many of the bill's opponents resist this legitimization. Senator Bradley suggested that these opponents longed for a gilded past. Honoring King and the change to America he represented meant delegitimizing the past, perhaps a step too far for those who did not think the past was all that bad, racial inequality notwithstanding.

After the Senate rejected each amendment one by one, with Senator Boren's amendment coming the closest to passing, several senators offered their final remarks and the Senate finally voted. The National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Bill passed the U.S. Senate by a vote of 78 yeas to 22 nays. The bill was finally on its way to the desk of President Ronald Reagan.

Summary

Today, we commonly accept Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a national hero whose leadership more fully established America as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. This outcome was not predestined, especially considering King's contested popularity at the time of his assassination, with two of three Americans disapproving of him. Though Representative John Conyers introduced a national holiday bill four days after King's death, the nation did not begin to consider seriously the idea of such a national honor for King until 1975, and the movement in support of a national holiday did not gain real influence until 1979.

The adoption of the National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday reveals key insights into collective memory. First *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) stand between

yesterday and today to help society filter the past to make sense of the present. The national holiday signifies the heightened importance of Martin Luther King Jr. in American history and the cultural shift towards social equality that his leadership brought to the nation. It sets up a specified time each year for Americans to disrupt their daily patterns and collectively reflect on the legacy of Dr. King, the meaning of the social change he inspired, and the nation's current commitment to King's "dream."

Second, the interpretation of the meaning of sites of memory often varies depending on the individual or group doing the interpretation. The contestation of interpretations operate continuously from the moment society begins to consider whether a site of memory is warranted, through the creation of the site of memory, and afterwards as the site of memory ritually participates in society. In the case of the national King holiday, Americans first contested the appropriateness of establishing a site of memory in his honor; then we argued over the most appropriate way to honor him.

Third, sites of memory inspire commemoration that allows the collective to connect itself to the subject of the site and exercise the collective's sense of group identity. The King holiday debates eventually settled on the general consensus that Dr. King contributed something so profound to the American experience that he deserved to be celebrated as a national hero. The details of that contribution and the specific values celebrated are left relatively open and ambiguous. Thus, Americans can celebrate King for any combination of the following: his use of nonviolent social action as a social corrective in a democracy, his leadership in tearing down the walls of legalized racial discrimination, his courageous declarations against the Vietnam War, his noble commitment to anti-poverty economic justice, and the like.

Finally, we can think of sites of memory as a subtext for what a society wants to declare about itself. This is the root of the contestation of these sites. Does honoring Martin Luther King Jr. in such a high profile way signify that America embraces *all* of King's ideas? Certainly not! No more than does honoring Thomas Jefferson with a national memorial signify that the nation remains hypocritically ambivalent toward slavery. We ought to understand the establishment of the national holiday as a general overlapping consensus that King embodies American values worth celebrating *and* that King is such an important historical figure that honoring him will allow the collective to celebrate those values.

President Ronald Reagan first took part in the public contestation of King's legacy by repeatedly questioning whether King's nonviolent social action was appropriate for a democracy, and whether King's association with accused communists disqualified him from public recognition. As the tide turned and a congressional vote enacting the holiday became inevitable, Reagan began to indicate that he would not get in the way if Congress decided to pass the holiday bill. Reagan eventually did more than just stay out of the way. His speech at the signing ceremony transformed Martin Luther King Jr. into a *conservative* cultural icon. The next chapter explores Reagan's complicated relationship with Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy and the civil rights movement, and shows its ramifications for how conservatives would address King's legacy.

Chapter 3

The Colorblind Priest:

Martin Luther King Jr. as a Conservative Cultural Icon

> 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.
>
> "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963

As chapter two demonstrated, it was far from certain that the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday would become a reality. Enough time had to pass for American society to end its most egregiously visible institutionalized racist practices. King's image and legacy had to be reconstructed so that he fit more neatly within the American story, not as someone who destroyed the myth of an exceptional America, but as one who pushed the nation towards living up to its lofty ideals. The expansion of African-American civil rights is rightly presumed as the chief accomplishment of Dr. King, and it ultimately became the primary reason that people gave for supporting the national holiday. However that does not explain the near universal appeal King has in contemporary American society, nor does it explain how so many political conservatives have come to embrace Dr. King as a hero and an icon. To better grasp this turn in American collective memory, we must look to the role a legendary conservative icon played: Ronald Wilson Reagan.

In his long political career, Ronald Reagan never truly advocated for the civil rights of African Americans. He campaigned for Republican Presidential Candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964, issuing the famous stump speech that launched him into the public limelight, "A Time for Choosing." In that speech, Reagan cast the political opponents of Goldwater as do-gooders who would "sacrifice freedom for security" and

lead the nation towards the "ant heap of totalitarianism."[182] Both Goldwater and Reagan considered the 1964 Civil Rights Act a step towards that ant heap. In defense of his U.S. Senate vote against the bill, Goldwater argued that the law would take away the freedom of business owners to decide whom to serve or refuse service, essentially telling them how to run their own businesses. Carrying on in Goldwater's legacy, Reagan refused to support the use of federal power to guarantee civil rights, opposed the 1965 Voting Rights Act (deeming it a humiliation to the South) and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and courted the support of segregationist White southerners during the 1960s.[183] Reagan even blamed Martin Luther King Jr. for his own death, calling King's assassination "a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they'd break."[184]

Reagan frequently used racially coded phrases such as "states' rights" to explain his opposition to encroaching federal power. He casually dismissed complaints that these phrases were often used to reinforce White supremacy in the South. One incident in particular continues to negatively define Reagan's civil rights legacy. At an early

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[182] Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," delivered as a stump speech for Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964, republished at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-goldwater/, last accessed January 16, 2014.

[183] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 520.

[184] Jeremy D. Mayer, "Reagan and Race: Prophet of Color Blindness, Baiter of the Backlash," in Kyle Longley et al., *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 84. Mayer's essay is a devastating critique of Ronald Reagan's troubling racial (racist) political legacy. Reagan's ambivalence to a National King holiday is just the tip of the iceberg in his ambivalence to the concerns of Blacks across the globe. Reagan opposed all civil rights legislation, endorsed tax breaks for all-white segregated private schools in the 1980s, and advocated for "constructive engagement" with the apartheid government of South Africa when Congress was ready to pass economic sanctions.

campaign stop in August 1980 at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi (frequently misidentified as the opening of his successful presidential campaign) Reagan pledged to "restore to state and local governments the powers that belonged properly to them" and reaffirmed for the audience that he "believed in states' rights."[185] Reagan's speech was particularly egregious given the proximity of the fair to the location of the 1964 kidnaping and murder of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. The national outrage was intense but fleeting. Reagan diffused the tension by falling back on his historical record of using "states' rights" in his political rhetoric even for issues that did not specifically correspond with race.[186] What could have ended his 1980 presidential campaign before it got started ended up being a blip on the radar as the nation focused on economic and national security issues. Nevertheless, this incident well represents a Ronald Reagan who did not give much thought or credence to structural racism, believing racism to be a matter of an individual's heart. This view is neatly encapsulated by an anecdote Reagan loved to tell about how, as a sportscaster, he opposed "the long and shameful practice of barring blacks from major league baseball," what his staff called Reagan's "Jackie Robinson" story.[187]

Ronald Reagan's inattention to civil rights and lack of regard to how some could perceive his rhetorical language as supporting structural racism underscored his ambivalence to a national Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Yet, it does not tell the whole story. Another potential factor that informed Reagan's resistance to elevating King to

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[185] Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 21-22. Bates interrogates Reagan's rhetoric during the 1980s, explaining how he navigated controversies and changed the public discourse on a variety of different topics.

[186] Ibid., 23.

[187] Cannon, 520.

national hero was his distaste for King's opposition to the American war in Vietnam. Reagan received a standing ovation for his 1980 speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, reframing the narrative of that War with the following:

> For too long, we have lived with the "Vietnam Syndrome." … It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern.
>
> There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.
>
> Shouldn't it be obvious to even the staunchest believer in unilateral disarmament as the sure road to peace that peace never more certain than in the years following World War II when we had a margin of safety in our military power which was so unmistakable that others would not dare to challenge us?[188]

Those who thought the Vietnam War a tragic mistake, Reagan accused of being duped by North Vietnamese propaganda. He would call this group of people naïve and wrong throughout his presidency, even when calling for national unity to move past the historical divide on Vietnam.[189] He viewed the Vietnam War through the prism of his steadfast belief that communism was the greatest threat to liberty in the world. For Reagan, the threat of communism in Vietnam made the War a noble cause. He described Vietnam War veterans as innocent warriors betrayed by their government who asked

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[188] Ronald Reagan, "Restoring the Margin of Safety," delivered on August 18, 1980 before the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago, IL, reprinted at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html, last accessed January 17, 2014.

[189] Bates, 54.

them to fight a war, but refused to allow them to win it. Because of the stakes, Vietnam deserved to be favorably compared to other less divisive and more fondly remembered wars.[190]

Martin Luther King Jr.'s anti-war activism and call for negotiations and unilateral disarmament would have disqualified him for any public honor in Reagan's eyes. In fact, Reagan often blamed protestors for driving the government's refusal to commit fully to winning the war. Despite this obvious point of disagreement in the views of the two men, Reagan did not directly challenge King's national status by accusing him of being responsible for losing the Vietnam War, nor did he claim that King's opposition to Vietnam disqualified him from receiving such a lofty national honor. Instead, in many of his public presidential declarations about King, Reagan adhered to the carefully crafted collective memory of King as the one who led the United States out of the morass of segregation and racism. So, for example, he said of King on his birthday in 1983,

> Martin Luther King Jr., burned with the gospel of freedom, and that flame in his heart lit the way for millions. What he accomplished—not just for black Americans, but for all Americans—he lifted a heavy burden from this country. As surely as black Americans were scarred by the yoke of slavery, America was scarred by injustice. Many Americans didn't fully realize how heavy America's burden was until it was lifted. Dr. King did that for us, all of us.[191]

Still, this lifting of America's burden did not mean that President Reagan believed Martin Luther King Jr. merited a national holiday. He initially opposed the holiday, citing some of the same superficial concerns (such as cost and doubting King's stature

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[190] Bates, 46.

[191] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King Jr.," delivered January 15, 1983 at the White House, reprinted at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/11583d.htm, last accessed on January 20, 2014.

measured up to the founding fathers) given in the congressional debates.[192] Yet President Reagan allowed a more authentic objection to surface at an October 19, 1983 press conference. When asked by a reporter about Jesse Helms's accusation that King was a communist sympathizer, Reagan employed his trademark dry wit to confirm that he shared Helms's suspicions.

> We'll know in about 35 years, won't we? No, I don't fault Senator Helms's sincerity with regard to wanting the [FBI] records opened up. I think that he's motivated by a feeling that if we're going to have a national holiday named for any American, when it's only been named for one American in all our history to this time, that he feels we should know everything there is to know about an individual.[193]

It is striking that earlier that day President Reagan had tried out his "35 years" quip on his staff, all of who mistakenly had believed he was joking and would never express these sentiments in public.[194]

For Reagan, King's associations with suspected communist supporters and his dubious record of protesting the Vietnam War sullied his role in transforming American society. Indeed it was this dubious record to which Reagan referred when he responded in a personal letter to the governor of New Hampshire's concerns about elevating the radical King to the status of national hero: "I have the reservations you have, but here the perception of too many people is based on an image, not reality. Indeed, to them the perception is reality."[195]

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[192] Juan Williams and Lou Cannon, "President to Support King Holiday: Reagan to Back Holiday Marking King's Birth," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 1983, A1.

[193] "President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Issues," *New York Times*, October 20, 1983, B10.

[194] Cannon, 524.

[195] Kiron K. Skinner et al., *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 634.

Nevertheless, in the same press conference in which he quipped about King's alleged communist associations (held one day after the Senate passed the King Holiday bill), President Reagan reiterated his preference for a day of recognition rather than a holiday. He also agreed to sign the legislation despite that preference, declaring "since they seem bent on 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."[196] The symbolism of the holiday, its demarcation of the United States overcoming its racist past, made it worthwhile despite the costs. Reagan would use the occasion of the signing ceremony to define his understanding of the symbolism of the holiday. The narrative that he developed has come to shape a significant variant of the collective memory of Martin Luther King Jr.

President Reagan and the King Holiday Signing Ceremony

Given President Reagan's ambivalence towards the King holiday, one would have expected him to sign the bill with little fanfare or ceremony, allowing the historical moment to pass with little interruption to his day. Yet on November 2, 1983, President Reagan did just the opposite, hosting a signing ceremony with one thousand (1,000) guests in the Rose Garden of the White House. Attendees included Rev. Jesse Jackson (a candidate for the Democratic Presidential Nomination at the time), Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, and King's widow, Coretta Scott King. Though Coretta King was afforded the opportunity to give a few brief remarks, calling the bill the "highest recognition which this nation gives," the highlight of the event was President Reagan's speech.

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[196] The full text of the news conference can be found at "President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Issues," *New York Times*, October 20, 1983, B10.

Despite the glaring differences in his views about the right course for the nation and those King promoted in his lifetime, President Reagan managed to find a thin thread of agreement between himself and King. In the process, he crafted a narrative about King and his impact on the nation that has become the dominant narrative in the nation's collective memory of Martin Luther Jing Jr. That thin thread of agreement was the belief that American society ought to be colorblind.

> In America, in the fifties and sixties, one of the important crises we faced was racial discrimination. The man whose words and deeds in that crisis stirred our nation to the very depths of its soul was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
>
> Martin Luther King was born in 1929 in an America where, because of the color of their skin, nearly 1 in 10 lived lives that were separate and unequal. Most black Americans were taught in segregated schools. Across the country, too many could find only poor jobs, toiling for low wages. They were refused entry into hotels and restaurants, made to use separate facilities. In a nation that proclaimed liberty and justice for all, too many black Americans were living with neither.
>
> In one city, a rule required all blacks to sit in the rear of public buses. But in 1955, when a brave woman named Rosa Parks was told to move to the back of the bus, she said, "No." A young minister in a local Baptist church, Martin Luther King, then organized a boycott of the bus company—a boycott that stunned the country. Within 6 months the courts had ruled the segregation of public transportation unconstitutional.
>
> Dr. King had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind, and that among white and black Americans, as he put it, "Their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom; we cannot walk alone."[197]

President Reagan named King's struggle as one against racial discrimination and celebrated him for stirring the soul of the nation. He highlighted that segregated schools, the lack of access to good paying jobs for Blacks, and the refusal of entry for Blacks into

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[197] Ronald Reagan: "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., a National Holiday," November 2, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40708. All subsequent quotations from President Reagan's speech at the King holiday signing ceremony are from this source.

privately-owned businesses signified that a nation that promised liberty and justice for all, denied the same to Blacks during King's lifetime. Reagan retold the story of the Montgomery bus boycott to illustrate that King's work had tangible and intangible effects on the nation. Not only did his work lead to the end of segregation in public transportation it forced the nation to realize that "true justice must be *colorblind*." To punctuate this, Reagan quotes King directly from his "I Have a Dream" speech, suggesting that Blacks and Whites in America have come to see that their freedoms and destinies are mutually bound together.

Reagan also celebrated King's commitment to nonviolence as a means for creating social change:

> In the years after the bus boycott, Dr. King made equality of rights his life's work. Across the country, he organized boycotts, rallies, and marches. Often he was beaten, imprisoned, but he never stopped teaching nonviolence. "Work with the faith," he told his followers, "that unearned suffering is redemptive." In 1964 Dr. King became the youngest man in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Here, Reagan quotes another line from the "I Have a Dream" speech to suggest that the beatings and imprisonment King and his followers received while seeking the "equality of rights" were "unearned suffering" that redeemed the American soul.

President Reagan also made a more concrete reference to the March on Washington:

> Dr. King's work brought him to this city often. And in one sweltering August day in 1963, he addressed a quarter of a million people at the Lincoln Memorial. If American history grows from two centuries to twenty, his words that day will never be forgotten. "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

Reagan lifted up King's "I Have a Dream" speech as one of the most iconic and important in U.S. history. The "table of brotherhood" encapsulated what he considered

the most important lesson of King's life: that Blacks and Whites learn to live together in harmony.

President Reagan also celebrated the change that King brought to the nation.

> In 1968 Martin Luther King was gunned down by a brutal assassin, his life cut short at the age of 39. But those 39 short years had changed America forever. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had guaranteed all Americans equal use of public accommodations, equal access to programs financed by Federal funds, and the right to compete for employment on the sole basis of individual merit. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had made certain that from then on black Americans would get to vote. 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.

The two civil rights laws made the rule of law more equitable. However, more important than a change to any law was the change of American hearts that King brought about. This change of conscience moved Blacks and Whites to treat each other as "fellow Americans," one of Reagan's signature phrases.

Finally, Reagan recalled the religious nature of King's movement:

> But traces of bigotry still mar America. So, each year on Martin Luther King Day, let us not only recall Dr. King, but rededicate ourselves to the Commandments he believed in and sought to live every day: Thou shall love thy God with all thy heart, and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself. And I just have to believe that all of us—if all of us, young and old, Republicans and Democrats, do all we can to live up to those Commandments, then we will see the day when Dr. King's dream comes true, and in his words, "All of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, '... land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.'"

Reagan summarized King's work as seeking an agape love that treats all equally. If all in society can begin to do that, then and only then will freedom truly ring.

These remarks at the signing of the King holiday bill frame King's worth to U.S. society as having taught us to treat each other more fairly through a colorblind understanding as equal citizens, not as Black or White. This is entirely consistent with

Reagan's belief that racism is a matter of the individual conscience, rather than evident in unequal, unjust societal structures. The subtle shift away from celebrating civil rights laws towards celebrating "changed hearts" reinforces that belief and obscures Reagan's own history of opposing the enactment all civil rights legislation and his attempts to overturn several civil rights laws as President. The remarks also reveal that Reagan is primarily interested in Martin Luther King Jr. as encapsulated by the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He quotes King four times in this eight-minute speech. Every quotation comes from the "I Have a Dream" speech, as if it were the only thing of worth from King's copious body of speeches and writings. This has the cumulative effect of elevating the "dream" speech to iconic status and reducing King's legacy to the "dream."

Reagan also employed King's "dream" rhetoric in a way that was not entirely consistent with King's intent in that very speech. Reagan's insistence that King's words indicated that Whites and Blacks were to treat each other fairly, either intentionally misread King or reinterpreted him to correspond with Reagan's understanding of what society ought to do in the present. Yet King's speech was not about Blacks and Whites treating each other fairly; it was about Whites correcting their unjust treatment of Blacks in American society.

For example, consider the broader context of the "their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom" line that Reagan quoted as an affirmation of King's colorblind justice mentality. Here is the original King:

> The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is

> tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.[198]

King celebrated the White participants in the March on Washington for realizing that the destinies of Blacks and Whites were tied together, implicitly hoping that all Whites would come to this understanding. King challenged Blacks, and their non-Black civil rights allies, to continue advocating for social change nonviolently. In contrast, Reagan interpreted King to suggest that the most important value in society was fair treatment in the present, eliding the present day ramifications of the past, and dismissing the belief that past injustice deserves some kind of recompense. This subtle shift in focus allowed Reagan to use King to justify his continued assault on government programs and laws that attempted to rectify the past by creating opportunities for the advancement of minorities.

In these signing ceremony remarks, President Reagan made complete his transformation from King holiday apostate to King holiday supporter. In doing so, he crafted King into a figure more to his own liking. Reagan did not mention his own historic opposition to King's racial agenda, nor did he reflect on King's anti-poverty and anti-war activism. He placed King in an ill-fitting colorblind suit, making King's primary goal and most important achievement changing the hearts of racist individuals in American society. Though the fourteen-year push to get a national holiday honoring King embraced a tendency to celebrate King primarily for his nonviolent leadership in racial justice, Reagan's rhetoric reduced King's life even further by casting that struggle for

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[198] Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech delivered on August 28, 1963. Reprinted by *American Rhetoric*. http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm. Last Accessed on February 14, 2014.

racial justice as a movement towards a society that does not see color and does not need the government to intervene to correct inequalities resulting from its racist history.

Of course this is not the full story of Martin Luther King Jr., but collective memory does not objectively measure history; rather, it subjectively takes facts and ideas from the past to help make sense of the present. If Martin Luther King Jr. was going to become an American icon, then the president under whose watch this would occur felt compelled to give a stirring account as to why he and his conservative associates could embrace him. It is not a coincidence that the Martin King of Reagan's memory has transformed the nation into one that does not need government interference to correct racial injustice (or poverty for that matter). That was Reagan's position in the 1960s! Given his status as the high priest of American civil religion and the timing of King's elevation to national hero, is it any wonder that President Reagan's narrative became a dominant variant of the American collective memory of King?

The Reagan Misappropriation of King's Legacy

For Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig, President Reagan's speech at the signing ceremony of the King holiday bill exemplifies a broader trend in which Reagan used Dr. King's words and legacy to advance his own agenda for civil rights in direct violation of Dr. King's intentions. Bostdorff and Goldzwig argue that Reagan attempted to change America's perspectives on civil rights by employing King's words to demonstrate that equality of opportunity had already been attained and that the onus was now on individuals rather than the government to make any additional progress.[199]

[199] Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig, "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 662.

For example, President Reagan often played off the public memories of King's "I Have a Dream" speech and successful efforts to end Jim Crow segregation to locate the civil rights struggle in a mythic past that was forever changed by King's appeal to our national conscience. Consider the following from Reagan's remarks at the signing ceremony for the King holiday bill:

> Now our nation has decided to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by setting aside a day each year to remember him and the just cause he stood for. We've made historic strides since Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. As a democratic people, **we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it.** And we should remember that in far too many countries, people like Dr. King never have the opportunity to speak out at all.[200]

Reagan essentially declared that America had fixed its race problem and celebrated the nation as being uniquely suited to adapting its culture towards justice. America continues to move towards a colorblind society, making past abuses a matter of "unenlightened conscience," rather than "systematic institutional discrimination."[201] Reagan often linked his own lessons about King to anecdotal stories of individual Blacks overcoming discrimination and changing individual hearts and minds. This view completely neglected the role that changed regulations, government intervention, and collective action had in creating renewed opportunities. Instead, in Reagan's view, overcoming the last remnants of racism was a matter of individuals working hard and changing hearts one at a time.[202]

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[200] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks." Emphasis mine.

[201] Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 670.

[202] Ibid., 673-4. An anecdote frequently used by President Reagan was that of a Black teammate on Reagan's college football team. A racist opponent tried intentionally to injure the teammate and instead of complaining, the Black teammate took personal responsibility and battered the racist opponent (within the rules of the game), earning that player's respect and admiration despite his racism. This (to Reagan) exemplifies that individuals can convert racists by living out their personal principles.

Bostdorff and Goldzwig also argue that the president made rhetorical moves to position King closer to his own political positions. First, Reagan asserted that he supported civil rights and associated his support with King. In particular, after initially opposing the 1981 extension to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Reagan signed the extension and gave a statement in a radio address on King's birthday, positioning himself on the correct side of history:

> [Dr. King] advocated nonviolence because he believed that with hard work and good will, people's hearts can be touched and progress can be made. Yet, progress is not easy. In his book, *The Strength To Love*, Dr. King wrote, "Nothing pains some people more than having to think."
>
> Well, during the years following the bus boycott, Dr. King, with tremendous courage and resourcefulness, got a lot of Americans thinking. He was instrumental in getting passage of legislation that provided Federal protection for the crown jewel of American liberty—every American's right to vote. That legacy still lives. Last year, I signed into law the longest extension of the Voting Rights Act since its passage—a measure that will protect the right to vote for many years to come.[203]

Here, Reagan named hard work and good will as the necessary components for social change, celebrated King's efforts to make the original Voting Rights Act a reality, and bragged that his was the longest extension of the Act since its passage. In other words, Martin Luther King Jr. used the same principles embodied by Reagan to pass a law that guaranteed a fundamental right of democracy to all people (even though Reagan opposed the act) and Reagan was responsible for continuing that legacy.

Later the same day, President Reagan spoke about Martin Luther King Jr. at a dinner featuring the Harlem Boys Choir:

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[203] Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King, Jr.," delivered January 15, 1983, online at http://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speeches/31-archives/speeches/1983/2021-11583a, last accessed February 14, 2014.

> Though Dr. King and I may not have exactly had identical political philosophies, we did share a deep belief in freedom and justice under God. Freedom is not something to be secured in any one moment of time. We must struggle to preserve it every day. And freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.
>
> . . .
>
> Martin Luther King, Jr., burned with the gospel of freedom, and that flame in his heart lit the way for millions. What he accomplished not just for black Americans, but for all Americans—he lifted a heavy burden from this country. As surely as black Americans were scarred by the yoke of slavery, America was scarred by injustice. Many Americans didn't fully realize how heavy America's burden was until it was lifted. Dr. King did that for us, all of us. Abraham Lincoln freed the black man. In many ways, Dr. King freed the white man.
>
> . . .
>
> Throughout my life, and especially my political life, I've spoken a great deal about the nature and spirit of America. I believe the vast majority of Americans share that spirit with Dr. King. He said, "The goal of America is freedom." He said, "The American people are infected with democratic ideals." And there he found hope. He said he believed there were great vaults of opportunity in this nation. He genuinely believed in the potential of America.[204]

Reagan acknowledged that he had political differences with King but did not disclose the details of those differences, opting instead to highlight that he and King shared a commitment to "freedom." King burned with the gospel of freedom, as did Ronald Reagan and the American people. Freedom, the foundation of American democracy, made the onset of racial justice somewhat inevitable. This inevitability, perhaps, inspired King's hope in the "potential of America."

While Reagan and King shared a commitment to a thin consensus to define freedom, they most certainly had different thick conceptions of the meaning of freedom.

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[204] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King Jr.," delivered on January 15, 1983, online at http://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speeches/31-archives/speeches/1983/2024-11583d.

By eliding this difference, Reagan could claim a kinship with King that did not really exist.

Early in his presidency, Reagan publicly argued that some civil rights laws were not as useful as they once were and that society should not attempt to "remedy past discrimination by mandating new discrimination."[205] He told the NAACP in June 1981:

> Harriet Tubman, who was known as the "conductor" of that earlier underground railroad, said on her first escape from slavery, "When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything." Even after a century the beauty of her words is powerful. We can only imagine the soaring of her soul, what a feeling that must have been when she crossed into freedom and the physical and mental shackles fell from her person.
>
> Harriet Tubman's glory was the glory of the American experience. It was a glory which had no color or religious preference or nationality. It was simply, eloquently, the universal thirst that all people have for freedom.
>
> Well, there are poor people in this country who should experience just such an elation if they found the economic freedom of a solid job, a productive job -- not one concocted by government and dependent on Washington winds; a real job where they could put in a good day's work, complain about the boss, and then go home with confidence and self-respect. Why has this Nation been unable to fill such a basic, admirable need?
>
> The government can provide subsistence, yes, but it seldom moves people up the economic ladder. And as I've said before, you have to get on the ladder before you can move up on it. I believe many in Washington, over the years, have been more dedicated to making needy people government-dependent rather than independent. They've created a new kind of bondage, because regardless of how honest their intention in the beginning, those they set out to help soon became clients essential to the well-being of those who administered the programs.
>
> An honest program would be dedicated to making people independent, no longer in need of government assistance. But then what would happen to those who made a career of helping? Well, Americans have been very generous, with good intentions and billions of dollars, toward those they believed were living in hardship. And yet, in spite of the hopes, the government has never lived up to the

[205] Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 675-6.

> dreams of poor people. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation freed black people 118 years ago, today we need to declare an economic emancipation.[206]

Though Reagan did not reference King directly in this speech, he clearly imagined economic freedom as the freedom that all Americans desire. Government programs have created a "new kind of bondage" from which Blacks must now "declare an economic emancipation" proclamation. By framing government social programs as symbolically akin to slavery, Reagan justified his desire to eliminate or drastically reduce them.

In March 1982, he invoked Martin Luther King Jr. to further justify this position:

> Last week, I addressed the Alabama State Legislature in Montgomery. Only two blocks from where I spoke, a courageous American named Martin Luther King organized a struggle for racial equality that led to historic changes in our society. He walked in the footsteps of other martyred Americans of other races and other ages. He, too, was an American pilgrim. The sacrifice that Martin Luther King made brings tears of sorrow, but the good he did brings tears of gratitude and a message of hope.
>
> Martin Luther King warned, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and his message helped to guide us to a freer and more just society.
>
> The struggle goes on. To be alive and to be human is to struggle for what is right and against what is not. Our nation today is engaged in a serious and, at times, even acrimonious debate over what policies will best serve the interests of America and a troubled world.
>
> Here at home, there are wide differences over how best to tackle the twin problems of recession and inflation. The debate continues over how best to divide the responsibilities between the Federal Government and State governments, and between the public and private sectors, in our constitutional duty to promote the general welfare.
>
> You know, back in the New Deal days, many critics of Franklin Roosevelt accused him of trying to destroy the free enterprise system. Well, FDR's answer was simple: He wasn't out to destroy our political and economic freedom; he was out to save it at a time of severe stress that had already caused democracy to crumble and fascism and totalitarianism to rear their ugly heads in so many other

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[206] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," delivered June 29, 1981, online at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/62981a.htm, last accessed on February 18, 2014.

> countries. In America, freedom was saved, and it gave us the strength to rescue a strife-torn Western world in the 1940's and 1950's.
>
> Well, today I'm accused by some of trying to destroy government's commitment to compassion and to the needy. Does this bother me? Yes. Like FDR, may I say I'm not trying to destroy what is best in our system of humane, free government; I'm doing everything I can to save it, to slow down the destructive rate of growth in taxes and spending, to prune nonessential programs so that enough resources will be left to meet the requirements of the truly needy.[207]

Reagan linked his struggle to reduce the imprint of the federal government with King's struggle for the dignity of Blacks in American society and Franklin Roosevelt's effort to implement the New Deal. There is no evidence that Reagan understood the irony that the very "nonessential programs" he wanted to prune were outgrowths of the New Deal which he just applauded as necessary to save the American economic and political systems. By assuming that a conception of justice rooted primarily in purely economic freedom would fit within King's framework of economic justice, let alone his framework of justice broadly conceived, Reagan comfortably invoked King on behalf of reducing federal social programs.

President Reagan used the occasion of the first National King Holiday in 1986 to advance this same agenda:

> Martin Luther King believed, as I and so many Americans do, that our country will never be completely free until all Americans enjoy the full benefits of freedom. It is now over 17 years since his death, and enough time has gone by to get a sense of the progress made by minorities in America and by America in the area of equal justice since 1968. I think it's fair to say that we've come a long way in the pursuit of racial fairness in our country. We have a lot to be proud of, but nothing to be complacent about; we still have a way to go. We're committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, and so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a colorblind society, a society that, in the

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[207] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks in New York City on Receiving the Charles Evans Hughes gold Medal of the National Conference of Christians and Jews," delivered March 23, 1982, online at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/32382d.htm, last accessed February 18, 2014.

> words of Dr. King, judges people "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."
>
> . . .
>
> The economy is expanding because from the beginning we made it clear that one of the prime motivating intentions of this administration was to get the economy going again. And it was clear the way to do that was cut tax rates, stop penalizing initiative, and sit back and watch the fireworks. All of us have benefited. The poverty statistics show John Kennedy was right when he said, following his own tax cuts, a rising tide lifts all boats.
>
> So, we've done some boat lifting the past few years, but it's still not enough. We can do better. We can reform our tax system, make it fairer, and lower most people's tax rates. We can also get spending under control and keep government from demanding more and more of your money. For years now we've been asking for enterprise zones in depressed areas, areas that would get tax breaks to attract the businesses that create jobs. And in education, we propose the educational voucher system in which families that live in poor areas can use vouchers to send their children to any of a number of schools, whichever they think is doing better. No reason parents shouldn't be given more freedom of choice, and no reason schools shouldn't compete for students.
>
> The answer to the question "How are blacks doing in America?" is "Better than ever before, and still not good enough." There's work to be done. But if we continue to allow the economy to expand and continue to work for a more perfect society, the people of all colors will prosper. And isn't that what Dr. King's dream and the American dream are all about?[208]

Here, President Reagan invoked King's legacy to expound upon his own vision of economic freedom via tax relief and a colorblind society. In his view, the political course on which he set the nation would allow all people, regardless of color, to prosper. This, he reasons, was King's dream and the American dream.

This contestation over the thick meanings of thin conceptions of freedom, justice, and equal rights is a central function of civil religion seen as a moral dialogue and argument shaping and shaped by a nation-state's collective memory. A nation's civil

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[208] Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Martin Luther King Jr., and Black Americans," delivered January 18, 1986, online at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11886b.htm, last accessed February 18, 2014.

religion embraces and argues over its shared sacred texts, icons, sites, and artifacts, thereby forging and recasting its national identity by reworking and revising its underlying story and vision of itself through the hands of its prophetic and priestly leaders.

These addresses illustrate that Ronald Reagan evoked a specific variant of the public memory of Martin Luther King Jr. to serve his own conservative political agenda. He separated King's words from their historical context and relied on a truncated version of King's legacy, circumscribed primarily to King's "dream," to offer a conservative narrative about what that dream was (a colorblind society) and how it ought to be achieved (through individual acts and a decrease in government intervention). He consistently relied on the notion of freedom, a cornerstone of King's philosophy, to connect his own ideals to King's. The final two sentences in the January 1986 radio address perhaps best encapsulate this story: "But if we continue to allow the economy to expand and continue to work for a more perfect society, the people of all colors will prosper. And isn't that what Dr. King's dream and the American dream are all about?" This throwaway line implies that King's legacy was primarily about the economic prosperity of all races.

Reagan's reframing of King also sought to make the struggle for civil rights an issue of past significance. This was a necessary move to support his agenda of decreasing federal social programs and eliminating restrictions on business for the purpose of free enterprise. His message was effective because he rooted it primarily in the speech that had already overwhelmingly come to define King's legacy. Ronald Reagan did not single-handedly transform Martin Luther King Jr. into an embraceable figure for conservatives.

Indeed conservative politicians in the House of Representatives and Senate were already doing this work in the last few years of the King holiday debate. Nevertheless, Reagan's public framing, given a significant airing because of his role as the high priest of American civil religion, cemented the "dreamer" as the most significant image of King. The legacy of Reagan's reframing of King would have long lasting ramifications for how political conservatives employed King as a resource for their political causes. The lasting influence of this reframing warrants a more thorough exploration of the colorblind thesis.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Colorblind Thesis

Ronald Turner declares that proponents of the colorblind thesis posit that, "classifying persons according to their race is more likely to reflect racial prejudice than legitimate public concerns." For these proponents the lesson of a history of race-based discriminatory laws is that race should "seldom be used as a criterion for decision making, even when its use purports to make restitution for the present effects of a racist past."[209] Colorblind proponents insist that if discrimination against Black people is wrong, then it is equally wrong to give race-based favoritism to Black people. Merit-based decision-making is preferable because the justice and morality vested within colorblindness does not "suffer the drawbacks of traditional race-based action such as injustice to dis-preferred groups, stigmatization of preferred ones, and flagrant race consciousness."[210]

Neil Gotanda describes the colorblind social vision as extending from the strict scrutiny standard of judicial review under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth

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[209] Ronald Turner, "The Dangers of Misappropriation: Misusing Martin Luther King Jr.'s Legacy to Prove the Colorblind Thesis," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, Fall 1996, 111.

[210] Ibid., 113.

Amendment[211] and broadening out to private as well as government decisions. In effect, proponents of the colorblind vision believe it to be a representation of the society we ought to seek to build, one that does not see color or allow race to factor into decision making.[212]

Colorblindness has long been an aspect of conservative ideology and following Ronald Reagan's lead, conservatives have used Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy to endorse it as the preferred means towards social and racial equality. In particular, King's phrase, that people should "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," has been used to challenge the existence of affirmative action. Though the colorblind motif existed before Reagan gave it voice, he raised it to prominence. President Reagan rhetorically aligned King with his own political ideology by employing King's stated desire for a colorblind society to argue *for* dismantling instead of advancing affirmative action and related programs as a matter of social justice.

For example, in February 1986, one month after the first national celebration of the King holiday, President Reagan argued for a change in how affirmative action was administered, declaring:

> We have seen in administering these programs, we've seen that the affirmative action program was becoming a quota system. Now, I've lived long enough to have seen quotas when they were employed long before there was a civil rights movement, when they were employed in my youth to definitely discriminate and

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[211] The Supreme Court classifies laws that discriminate on the basis of race as suspect classifications requiring a strict scrutiny review to determine their constitutionality. Under the strict scrutiny standard, the most rigorous judicial review, the government must prove that its policy is necessary for achieving a compelling state interest and that the policy is narrowly tailored to achieve the intended result. See "Strict Scrutiny," *The Free Dictionary* at http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Strict+Scrutiny, last accessed January 20, 2014.

[212] Neil Gotanda, "Failure of the Color-Blind Vision: Race, Ethnicity, and the California Civil Rights Initiative," *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 23:1135, 1138.

> use the quota as a means of discrimination. And, therefore, we feel that, yes, we want affirmative action to continue. We want what I think Martin Luther King asked for: We want a colorblind society. The ideal will be when we have achieved the moment when no one—or when nothing is done to or for anyone because of race, differences, or religion, or ethnic origin; and it's done not because of those things but in spite of them.[213]

Reagan took the notion of a colorblind society to its logical conclusion. "Nothing is done to or for anyone because of race." The systematic and structural disadvantages for people of color resulting from centuries of legalized discrimination do not matter as much as superficially treating everyone the same.

King's legacy came up in the 1991 Senate Judiciary Hearings on President George H.W. Bush's nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Senator Hank Brown (R-CO) extolled Thomas's commitment to equal justice and cited King's words about judging by the content of one's character to express his belief that Thomas was of excellent character. He wanted his fellow senators to refrain from pre-judging Judge Thomas. Judge Thomas, speaking on his own behalf at the same hearing, explained his decision to become President Reagan's chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as being inspired because of the "last great person who was able to inspire our country toward an ideal … Martin Luther King."[214] That ideal was the colorblind society. Thomas had used his chairmanship of the EEOC to chip away at affirmative action on behalf of the colorblind ideal, preferring individual cases over

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[213] Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference," February 11, 1986, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36870, last accessed January 30, 2014.

[214] "Nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to Be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States," Hearings before the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate, held on 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16 September 1991.

systemic lawsuits based on statistical data, ending hiring quotas,[215] and overseeing a dramatic reduction in the number of cases resolved by the EEOC as well as the overall administrative effectiveness of the EEOC.[216]

Shelby Steele also provided cover for conservatives to embrace Martin Luther King Jr. by suggesting in his 1990 book, *The Content of Our Character*, that the best way for Blacks to cover the gap with Whites in achievement, progress, and financial security was through personal responsibility, not affirmative action. Steele found affirmative action problematic because it tried to create parity in society rather than ensure equal opportunity,[217] falsely telling Blacks that racial preferences can do the work that Blacks must do themselves. He cited a quotation from a 1964 speech King gave to Black students in Chicago to reinforce his belief that the presumed inferiority of Blacks can only be overcome by hard work. King's words, "When you are behind in a footrace, the only way to get ahead is to run faster than the man in front of you. So when your White roommate says he's tired and goes to sleep, you stay up and burn the midnight oil," indicate that Blacks ought to take their social disadvantages as a challenge rather than a mark of shame.[218] To Steele's credit, he did not claim that Dr. King would agree with his

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[215] B. Dan Wood, "Does Politics Make a Difference at the EEOC?," *American Journal of Political Science* 34.2 (1990), 509.

[216] Ibid., 526. Thomas claimed that he simply ended the practice of "forced settlement between the charging party and the employer" in favor of fully investigating all claims individually. He also believed that sociological and demographic realities ought not to affect legal interpretation and theories. Thus what some see as a lack of effective administration, Thomas saw as a necessary correction to an organization that was not performing correctly. See Clarence Thomas, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: Reflections on a New Philosophy," *Stetson Law Review* 15 (29), 29-36.

[217] Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 121.

[218] Ibid., 138.

vision and oppose affirmative action or racial preferences. He simply highlighted that King was also a fierce advocate of hard work and personal responsibility. These are values that political conservatives have traditionally championed as keys to an individual's success. The colorblind thesis attracts because it confines racism to individual practices of raced-based vitriol, rather than systemic outcomes that harm and hold back the citizenry of a particular race. If society can effectively eliminate or reduce individual practices of racism, then racism will no longer have the power to affect the individual's ability to thrive in American society. Thus any social, economic, or political success can be attributed solely to the individual's work ethic. This connection with King's work makes him more accessible as a hero to political conservatives in America who espouse this "bootstraps" mentality.

Conservatives Reclaim King's Conservative Legacy

In recent years the conservative conversation about Martin Luther King Jr. has moved beyond the colorblind thesis to other ways in which King may have embraced conservative principles. In 1993, the Heritage Foundation sponsored a lecture in King's honor by Robert Woodson, Vice President of the NAACP in West Chester, PA when King was assassinated in 1968, and conservative columnist William Bennett. Both men participated in the civil rights movement in King's time and subsequently became prominent conservative voices. Unintentionally disrupting the dominant conservative discourse about King, Woodson lamented that King's legacy had been restricted to the "I Have a Dream" speech:

> I was questioned by a producer of the "Today Show," who is considering a story on Martin Luther King's life. He asked me why young blacks are not embracing Dr. King or do not understand him. I said because it has been convenient for many advocates of civil rights to emphasize the Dr. King of the "I Have a Dream" speech. So he is presented to many as this wimpish figure who has a dream out

> here somewhere without really connecting to the realities confronting these young people today. I told him that when I think of Dr. King, I think of the Dr. King who, in the spirit of Jesus, went into the temple and threw out the money changers, I think of the aggressive Dr. King. Dr. King was a man who never was content to conform to the consensus of the majority or to reflect popular opinion. He was a man who was willing to challenge assumptions, and even his own peers.[219]

Woodson argued that the dreamer conception of Martin Luther King Jr. was not sufficiently grounded in reality to be useful. He preferred the image of a tough, aggressive, nonconforming King who was not afraid to challenge public assumptions. As evidence of King's nonconformity Woodson declared:

> [King] sought to remove the barriers confronting black America, [but] he did not seek to then describe [Blacks] as victims. There are two ways that you can prevent someone from competing. One is to deny them the opportunity to compete by law, which laws of segregation and discrimination did. The second way to deny them the opportunity to compete is to tell them they do not have to compete, that they can just sit back and government will do it for them.[220]

Woodson enlisted King to challenge the idea that Blacks continue to be victims because of past discriminatory practices. He charged contemporary Black leaders with being more interested in victimization than the moral rectitude and personal responsibility ethic that had historically undergirded Black churches.

> Many of the civil rights leaders who have followed him no longer refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basis of their message. Instead, they have embraced poverty programs. Instead, they have secularized the movement. They have told young people that they should be exempt from responsibility: It is OK to become fathers and mothers before you become women and men, because you have been a victim of discrimination. It is OK for you to kill and maim one another—after all, you are a victim of society. As a consequence of this drumbeat of despair—this drumbeat of victimization—we have the kind of decline and despair that exists today. If Dr. King were alive today, he would stand here and in pulpits throughout this country and give a message of redemption to young people. He

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[219] Robert Woodson and William J. Bennett, "The Conservative Virtues of Dr. Martin Luther King," lecture given November 5, 1993, online at *The Heritage Foundation,* http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-conservative-virtues-of-dr-martin-luther-king, last accessed February 2, 2014.

[220] Ibid.

> would say to them that the victimizer might have knocked you down, but it is the victim that has to get up.

Woodson maligned the character of contemporary civil rights leaders who highlight structural racism as the main deterrent facing Black Americans. He insisted that by focusing more on outside forces rather than personal responsibility, contemporary civil rights leaders tacitly affirmed negative pathologies within the Black community. His account, however, absolved American society of the responsibility to address the structural discrepancies made possible by its racist past.

Woodson insisted that King led the movement using the principles of Christianity and accused King's successors of abandoning that commitment and replacing it with a faith in government programs. These programs send the message that American society owes Blacks restitution and that Blacks only have to wait around, wallowing in their sorrow, for society to give it to them. He claimed that King would not tolerate such wallowing. Woodson's framework about the challenges facing Black America and the ineptitude of Black leadership continues to be a consistent refrain among Black conservatives. His insistence that personal responsibility and self-help were the only ways for Blacks to make progress, and that government programs hurt Blacks more than they help, are traditional conservative virtues. By connecting King to these virtues, Woodson provided conservatives with ample justification to celebrate King as one of their heroes.

Bill Bennett followed Robert Woodson with the following declaration, “If you said in 1968 that you should judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, that you should be color-blind, you were a liberal. If you say it now, you are

a conservative. It is in that sense that Martin Luther King today is a conservative."[221] For Bennett, King remained more than a source of inspiration; he was a fountain of wisdom.

> I think people should continue to read what he has to say on three issues—race, education and the Western tradition, and the spiritual in life. On race, Dr. King said, "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." A color-blind society.
>
> Well, Dr. King, we're not going to make it with your children, maybe your grandchildren, maybe your great-grandchildren. We are further away from being color-blind today than we were when Dr. King said these words, because race-norming, counting by race, reverse discrimination, racial identification, talking about oneself and one's identity in terms of race is much more popular and much more a part of the intellectual and political mainstream than it ever was. But to remind people of what King said I think is still a moral obligation.

Bennett insisted that the barrier to racial justice in society was no longer White racism; it was reverse discrimination, affirmative action, and individuals identifying themselves by their races. He suggested that these policies do not take King's stated desire for a colorblind society seriously.

> Bennett also disavowed the rise of Afrocentric and ethnic studies:
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> Here is a quote you will not see very often. Who said this? "The Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa." That was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King, as a student, immersed himself in the intellectual tradition of the West. No pusher of Afrocentric studies was Martin Luther King.
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> According to Arthur Schlesinger, a distinguished historian, "Martin Luther King did pretty well with Thoreau, Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr as models. And remember, after all, whom King and his father were named for. The record hardly shows that Eurocentric education had such a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of black Americans. Why deny it to black children today?" Martin Luther King embraced the West, the philosophical tradition of the West, the universalism of Western philosophy, and believed that that tradition was the tradition that led to the liberation of black men and white men and black women and white women.
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> From Morehouse to Crozier Theological Seminary, where King studied, King immersed himself in the writings of the great philosophers, "from Plato and Aristotle," I see he wrote later, "down to Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill and

[221] Woodson and Bennett.

> Locke." Here, with these teachers, was planted the seed not of a contemplative life, but of a life of action, a life of thoughtful devotion to political reform, to the pursuit of justice -- in the broader sense, equality, liberty and dignity of all people.

Bill Bennett used King's educational biography to challenge a trend in education that sought to broaden the academic canon beyond Western philosophical traditions. He rooted King's commitment to the pursuit of equality, liberty, and human dignity solely in the Western tradition (Gandhi notwithstanding, whom Bennett inaccurately placed in the Western philosophical canon). Bennett also quoted King's March 1964 interview with Robert Penn Warren to imply that King did not believe Blacks should put much energy in Afrocentric education.

Bennett's presumption of the superiority of Western philosophical traditions caused him to severely misread King's intention. King, in his statement: "The Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa," attempted to explain the psychology of some *middle-class* Blacks who were ashamed of their African heritage and just wanted to identify with the White majority. He lamented that these folks end up lacking cultural roots and pursuing "conspicuous consumption." King's statement was one of speculation, not value. He wanted Blacks to value both their Afrocentric heritage and their heritage as Americans.[222] Indeed, King also stated in the same interview that he understood the psychology of Blacks who wanted nothing to do with a culture and a religion shaped by White supremacy.

> There's always a danger that an oppressed group will seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thereby subverting justice so that you end up substituting one tyranny for another. Now, I think our danger is that we can get so

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[222] See Robert Penn Warren, interviewer, "Interview with Martin Luther King Jr. March 18, 1964, *Robert Penn Warren Civil Rights Oral History Project*, online at http://nyx.uky.edu/oh/render.php?cachefile=02OH108RPWCR03_King.xml, last accessed February 24, 2014. The archive of the interview is indexed by segment. See the segment "Splitting the psyche of the 'negro' / African or American" beginning at 27:50.

> bitter that we revolt against everything White. And this becomes a very dangerous thing because it can lead to the kind of philosophy that you get in the Black Nationalist movements and the kind of philosophy that ends up preaching Black supremacy as a way of counteracting White supremacy. And I just think this would be bad for our total society, but I can well understand the kind of impatience and the psychological conditions that lead to this kind of reaction.[223]

King did not presume the superiority of the Western philosophical tradition as Bennett intimated. On the contrary, King was much more pragmatic about the tradition because it was the most familiar tradition to Blacks in America and the only one to which the American power structure would respond. However, by such acceptance Martin Luther King Jr. did not endorse American cultural hegemony. Bill Bennett did King a disservice by framing him as one who did.

Finally, like Robert Woodson, Bennett wanted to reclaim King as a minister of the Christian Gospel whose faith informed and directed his political beliefs.

> When reviewing the textbooks in history and how they treated Dr. King, I find, more often than not, King is described in the history books as a social activist. He is not described as a minister of the Christian faith. But if you asked Martin Luther King what was the most important thing in his life, he would never hesitate to tell you. And if you read the collected works of Martin Luther King, you will see him primarily and overwhelmingly a minister of the Christian faith. He said, "I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may." He said this over and over and over again. He was not primarily a social activist, he was primarily a minister of the Christian faith, whose faith informed and directed his political beliefs.
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> I had the opportunity to go to the King Center two years in a row when I was in government. Coretta Scott King invited me down and I made this point both times, and both times she said, "Thank you for making this point. This is somehow an embarrassment for a lot of people -- that Martin was a minister." This, ladies and gentlemen, is what Stephen Carter was talking about in his book *The Culture of Disbelief*—the hesitation or even discomfort of many liberals with religion and with people who take religion seriously. This is a very, very serious matter. Martin Luther King, there again, is not just a source of inspiration, but a

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[223] Ibid.

> source of wisdom. There is that other bigotry in American life, bigotry against religious people.[224]

By situating King's identity as a minister above his work as a social activist, Bennett sought to give cultural conservatives, particularly those motivated by religious ideals, another reason to view King favorably. Unfortunately, he also presented a false dichotomy by separating King the minister from King the activist. Martin Luther King Jr. was both minister and activist and did not see a distinction between these two roles. King's social activism grew out of his religious commitments. Bennett's dichotomy relegated the need for activism, particularly race-based and poverty-based activism, to the past and assigned that activism a lesser value compared to ministry. It also served to redeem King from liberals who insisted that social activism was the most important part of King's legacy. However, it is hard to imagine King's legacy being important enough to warrant national hero status without his social activism.

Though their reflections on Dr. King were more thorough than most conservative recollections, Woodson and Bennett seem inaccurate at best and disingenuous at worst. Their co-lecture opened the door for conservatives to consider Martin Luther King Jr. beyond a single phrase in a famous speech. They took seriously his collective writings and his public activism and admirably connected King's life with conservative principles.

In 2002, Joel Schwartz published an essay entitled, "Where Dr. King Went Wrong" that continued this trend in conservative thinking. Schwartz began his essay with the following declaration:

> A few years before his tragic death in 1968, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. famously had a change of heart about the proper cure for persistent black poverty. He began to look increasingly to big government to help poor blacks, even though throughout his life he'd been an advocate—indeed a preacher—of the virtues of

[224] Woodson and Bennett.

> self-help. It was a change of worldview that was dead wrong, however understandable it might have been as a response to the grim reality then unfolding among America's inner-city blacks. It was a mistake that had terrible consequences for black America and for the nation as a whole.[225]

Schwartz fondly recalled a King who initially preached a self-help philosophy to Blacks before allowing despair to lead him to the false doctrine of faith in big government. Schwartz traced King's self-help philosophy to his upbringing in the Southern Black church, where King heard messages that "tended to stress the economic, educational, and moral self-improvement of the black community . . . [as] the best way for poor blacks to escape poverty and integrate themselves fully into American social and political life," and the example of King's father who "relied on a muscular work ethic, Spartan self-discipline, and a devotion to education to propel himself into the Black middle class."[226]

Schwartz extolled the conservative virtues that he claimed King originally embraced as the best means for the black community to prosper. Eschewing the more familiar refrain of King's "dream" of a colorblind society and his leadership in ending Jim Crow segregation, Schwartz used the framework of self-help, characterized by hard work, thrift, moral uplift, and a commitment to the traditional family to suggest that King embraced conservative principles as the keys to individual success. In each case, Schwartz focused primarily on what King instructed Black audiences to do rather than for what King admonished American (re: White) society. He created a King who preached conservative values.

For example, regarding King's advice on hard work, he wrote:

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[225] Joel Schwartz, "Where Dr. King Went Wrong," *City Journal* (Winter 2002), online at http://www.city-journal.org/html/12_1_urbanities-where.html, last accessed February 1, 2014.

[226] Schwartz.

Black workers should hold themselves to universal standards of excellence, King strongly believed. In a 1957 address to the Montgomery Improvement Association (a forerunner to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference), he told his black audience to "set out to do a good job," not "a good Negro job." Three years later, he was even more adamant: "We must seek to do our life's work so well that nobody could do it better. The Negro who seeks to be merely a good Negro, whatever he is, has already flunked his matriculation examination for entrance into the university of integration." Even the later King touted this line. "[W]e must work assiduously to aspire to excellence," he proclaimed in 1967.[227]

Regarding King's advice on thrift, he wrote:

Thrift was a second key virtue that King thought could help blacks propel themselves into the American mainstream. In his 1957 talk, he urged his listeners: "Let's live within our means. Save our money and invest it in meaningful ends." Blacks shouldn't spend more than they could afford on houses and cars, he counseled, and they should especially "stop wasting money on frivolities," such as "all these alcoholic beverages." "It would be one of the tragedies of this century," he maintained, "if it is revealed that the Negroes spent more money for frivolities than we spent for the cause of freedom and justice and for meaningful ends." Here, too, King persisted in his views even after his big-government turn. In his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, he called for "the development of habits of thrift and techniques of wise investment," so that "the Negro will be doing his share to grapple with his problem of economic deprivation."[228]

Regarding King's advice on moral uplift, he wrote:

If blacks were to integrate themselves into America, King felt, black crime rates had to fall. "Let's be honest with ourselves and say that . . . our standards have lagged behind at many points," he declared in 1957. "Negroes constitute ten percent of the population of New York City, and yet they commit thirty-five percent of the crime," he observed.

A decade later, with America's black ghettos becoming so dangerous that a child born and raised in one had worse chances of survival than a U.S. soldier in World War II, King called for a moral renewal in the black community that might bring the chaos under control. "We can begin a constructive program which will vigorously seek to improve our personal standards," he said. "It is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of high maturity, to rise to the level of self-criticism," King declared. "Through group unity we must convey to one another that our women must be respected, and that life is too precious to be destroyed in a Saturday night brawl, or a gang execution."

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[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.

Regarding King's advice on the importance of the traditional family, he wrote:

> King felt, the breakdown of the black family, the institution that most nurtured the strength of character that is the key to self-help, threatened to undermine any gains blacks made. "[N]othing is so much needed," King wrote in 1967, "as a secure family life for a people seeking to rise out of poverty and backwardness." King himself wasn't that much of a success as a family man; we know both from FBI wiretaps and from the testimony of friends and associates about his compulsive philandering. But if he didn't walk the correct walk, he talked the right talk, from early on. "[W]e have eight times more illegitimacy than white persons," a troubled King reminded black listeners as far back as the late 1950s. And blacks "must work to improve these standards," he insisted.
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> . . .
>
> King's fears over black family breakdown even led him to become one of the few civil rights leaders not to reject outright Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial 1965 report, *The Negro Family*, which warned about the rising illegitimacy rate among blacks (at the time 25 percent, well below today's rate). In fact, without mentioning the report directly, King sympathetically discussed its contents in a talk shortly after its publication, saying that family collapse threatened the "very survival" of American blacks. He dismissed the views of "a good many writers who have tartly denigrated the role of the family."

In each of these cases, Schwartz cited speeches King delivered to Black audiences about personal actions they could take to improve their own lives, demonstrating King's alleged commitment to conservative virtues. Schwartz asserted that self-help was the original emphasis of King's philosophy and the product of King's upbringing as the son of a Southern Black minister. He contended with aspects of King's work that do not correspond with conservative mores. In particular, Schwartz claimed that King took a wrong turn after 1965 when he began to propose huge government programs as the solution to Black poverty. King was so dispirited about the plight of Blacks in northern industrialized cities that he could only imagine government intervention making things better. Schwartz found this abandonment of the self-help philosophy for a stronger commitment to the ill-fated liberal "War on Poverty" and advocacy of a guaranteed

income a mistake because it would not have been as effective as stimulating the American economy by supporting free enterprise principles.

Unfortunately, Schwartz's characterization of Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy does King a disservice. Schwartz's own narrative damaged his claim that King turned away from conservative virtues towards a belief in big government later in life. Schwartz himself provided several examples in which King espoused conservative virtues during the time period in which King had supposedly turned away from them towards supporting big-government programs. The evidence Schwartz presented actually suggests that Martin Luther King Jr. merged a philosophy of Black self-help with a call for institutional change to combat poverty, racism, and violence holistically.

Schwartz not only reduced King to a priest of self-help gone astray, he reduced conservatism to a personal responsibility ethic, in the process making King a vicar of contemporary conservatism. He selectively quoted King out of context, only highlighting speeches King addressed to Black audiences rather than speeches King gave that admonished American society as a whole. He also dismissed King's philosophical growth hewn in "response to the grim reality then unfolding among America's inner-city Blacks." Schwartz's approach did move conservative discussion of King's importance beyond "I Have a Dream." Nevertheless, a more faithful understanding of King would acknowledge that while he did believe in self-help and personal responsibility, King never believed that those twin conservative virtues alone were enough to overcome racism, poverty, and violence.

In a 2006 essay for the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation, Carolyn Garris declared,

> It is time for conservatives to lay claim to the legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. King was no stalwart Conservative, yet his core beliefs, such as the power and necessity of faith-based association and self-government based on absolute truth and moral law, are profoundly conservative. Modern liberalism rejects these ideas, while conservatives place them at the center of their philosophy. Despite decades of its appropriation by liberals, King's message was fundamentally conservative.[229]

Garris sought to rescue King's legacy from liberalism by heralding the conservative principles undergirding King's work.

In her effort to "lay claim" to King's legacy, Garris identified three ways which King's message was "fundamentally conservative." First, King believed in the principles of America's Founding:

> He maintained, "We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom." Throughout American history, racism has posed a peculiar obstacle to the achievement of that goal. However, Dr. King believed that the Founders had set the nation on the right course. He did not reject the principles of our nation because contradictions existed; instead he hoped that racial groups would put aside their differences and acknowledge the principles that unite all Americans. Today, it is conservatives who seek to unite. In a nation divided by cultural diversity, conservatives defend and celebrate the characteristics that we share as Americans. As America drifts from the ideas and ideals of the Founders, conservatives stand with King as believers that the principles of the American Founding are as relevant today as in 1776.[230]

Garris rightly recalled a King who held a mirror to American society to demonstrate the gap between its principles and its praxis. However her declaration that King "hoped that racial groups would put aside their differences," absurdly minimizes White supremacy and Black oppression and did not even begin to accurately describe King's leadership in the struggle for Black civil rights. Her view did, however, conform

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[229] Carolyn Garris, "Martin Luther King's Conservative Legacy," *The Heritage Foundation*, published January 12, 2006, online at http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/01/martin-luther-kings-conservative-legacy, last accessed February 2, 2014.

[230] Garris.

to the conservative thesis that labeled the acknowledgment of racial difference and the attempt to rectify racial inequality via race-based social policy as social sin.

Second, Garris found King's message "fundamentally conservative" because King rooted his activism in a belief in a "fixed moral law," in contrast to morally relativistic liberals in contemporary society.

> For King, a just law was "a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God." Dr. King required that his followers lead moral lives, and he emphasized the importance of faith in the face of adversity. Modern liberalism has rebuffed this teaching, dedicating great effort to silence religion and morality. Again, conservatives are the standard-bearers here.

By highlighting the religious dimension of King's philosophy, Garris sought to align him more closely to contemporary political conservatism on the basis of the claim that conservatives carry the mantle of religious-based morality today.

Finally, Garris insisted that King's message was fundamentally conservative because he based it on the moral authority of the colorblind thesis:

> For Dr. King, individual freedom depended upon civic responsibility. He proclaimed, "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." Racial judgment is inherently unjust, but judgment based on moral character is essential. King wanted his children to live in a colorblind society but not a value-neutral society that rejects all standards of judgment. Today, this is the Conservative message. Moral character as expressed in our social interactions is at the center of self-government, which in turn is the sustaining force of American democracy. Conservatives know that without a morally-informed sense of social obligation, we would be rudderless.

Garris provided a unique take on the "content of their character" quotation by asserting that while racial judgment was unjust, judgment based on moral character was essential. This reading ignored King's intention. For Garris, King said that public policy cannot be determined by race (or attempts to account for the nation's racist past), but it can be determined based on the perceived morality of those affected by the policy. In

fact, a democracy that does not instill the morals of social obligation (i.e. determine policy based on moral value judgments) is rudderless. To that end, Garris identified King's movement as a faith-based, Christian, grassroots movement that sought change from the bottom up and empowered faith-based communities, associations, and congregations to "carry out moral ends." This strategy, which Garris imagined as a hallmark of contemporary conservatism unlike liberalism, did not mandate "government action in the name of 'social justice.'"

Garris concluded her essay by asserting that King sought to "unite a divided America behind the goals of the Founders, not to shift fundamentally unjust policies to favor different groups." Her assertion was only partially correct. King did invoke the Founding Fathers to undergird the struggle for Black civil rights, most notably in the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," but he also fundamentally sought to shift an abundance of policies to balance the scales of justice. It is difficult to imagine that seeking to end codified segregation, advocating for a national guaranteed income, and calling for a unilateral ceasefire in Vietnam were not "fundamental shifts to unjust policies."

Garris cemented her case that King had the heart of a conservative with a final invocation of King's dream:

> It is not a coincidence that conservatives share Dr. King's core principles, as they are the principles of the American Founding [Fathers] and continue to guide us today. Dr. King's dream echoes that of the Founders: "all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." King's dream is rooted in the ideas of human equality, individual freedom, and the consent of the governed. These ideas depend on absolute truth and moral law, and they are supported and affirmed by religion and religious association. This dream, Dr. King's Conservative message, is nearly lost amidst the worship of cultural diversity and moral relativism. It is still a dream worth pursuing.

Garris correlated King's dream of racial equality with the founding principles of the nation, something King himself did in that very speech. She also made assertions about what undergirds those principles: absolute truth and moral law affirmed by religion. By limiting the basis of King's ideals to "human equality, individual freedom, and the consent of the governed," Garris again cast King as a champion of conservative virtues, at the expense of a deeper exploration of what King actually intended. At the very least, Garris did not address King's ruminations on mutuality and shared destiny in the "dream" speech, nor did she acknowledge King's desire for justice. His attention to just and equal social outcomes challenges Garris's conception of his legacy.

The three essays discussed above push the conservative conversation about Martin Luther King Jr. beyond the colorblind thesis to evaluate how much King espoused conservative virtues. They rely not only on the "content of their character" line from the "I Have a Dream" speech, but the religious character of King's activism, the self-help rhetoric in his speeches to Black audiences, and King's grassroots organization, to suggest that King has a much deeper association to contemporary conservatives than is commonly discussed in public. Such attempts to contextualize King and stress his convergence with conservative thought represent a process of collective memory re-evaluate the facts of history to make moral claims about the present. Conservatives do not have to rely solely on these accounts to connect more deeply with the American icon. Indeed, two African American figures with close personal ties to King also offer additional counter-narratives that allow conservatives to embrace Martin Luther King Jr. as a conservative icon.

Black Conservatives with Special Ties to Martin Luther King Jr.

"Martin Luther King Jr. was a republican," or so Alveda King, pro-life activist and niece of Martin Luther King Jr., has claimed on multiple occasions. Alveda King, who has become the heir of the conservative Martin Luther King Jr., often publicly feuded with Coretta Scott King. Each has made opposing claims on what Dr. King would say about certain contemporary issues. For example, in 1994, Alveda King publicly chastised Coretta King for the latter's support of gay rights and abortion, saying it would bring "curses on [Coretta's] house and [her] people."[231] Alveda King would later argue that her own perspective on Martin was more valid than Coretta King's because "I've got his DNA, she doesn't … I'm made out of the same stuff."[232]

Though she served a stint in the late 1970s as a Democratic state legislator in Georgia, Alveda King became a staunch Republican whose passionate pro-life advocacy stemmed from personal regret and repentance from her own two abortions. In a 2008 article for *The Black Republican*, a magazine published by the National Black Republican Association (NBRA), King recalled the religious foundation undergirding her uncle's leadership of the civil rights movement. She declared that we ought to consider her own work a continuation of that legacy.

> As a Christian civil rights activist, I can remember a time in America when Black people looked to God for answers. This recollection brings to mind a startling revelation: God is not a Democrat, nor a Republican! In light of the emergence of a black man as a presidential contender this election season, we might do well to take note that it is not the political party or the man, but the message that is imperative.

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[231] Daniel Denvir, "Meet MLK's Glenn Beck-loving Niece," *Salon* published on 27 August 2010 at http://www.salon.com/2010/08/27/alveda_king_glenn_beck/, last accessed on February 4, 2014.

[232] Ibid.

> In his "I Have a Dream" speech, my uncle, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "I have a dream that my four 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."
>
> Today, as enlightened, informed African-Americans living in America, we must demand that candidates represent our views — and always vote your values!
>
> As a Republican, my goal is always to seek the will of God for good government, and then to demand accountability from all elected leaders. We are off track, seeking solutions from government, when we should be seeking the grace of God![233]

Alveda King nostalgically reminisced about a time when Blacks "looked to God for answers," juxtaposing that with what she considered to be a false turn towards reliance and belief in government. She interpreted King's dream of a society that judged on the basis of character as a call to vote one's values and to hold leaders accountable to that moral judgment.

King also credited her grandfather, Martin Luther King Sr., for the Black defection in the 1950s and '60s from the Republican party to the Democratic party.

> Daddy King influenced a reported 100,000 black voters to cast previously Republican votes for Senator Kennedy even though Kennedy had voted against the 1957 Civil Rights Law. Mrs. King had appealed to Kennedy and Nixon to help her husband, and Nixon who had voted for the 1957 Civil Rights Law did not respond. At the urging of his advisors, Kennedy made a politically calculated phone call to Mrs. King, who was pregnant at the time, bringing the attention of the nation to Dr. King's plight.
>
> Moved by Mrs. King's gratitude for Senator Kennedy's intervention, Daddy King was very grateful to Senator Kennedy for his assistance in rescuing Dr. King, Jr. from a life threatening jail encounter. This experience led to a black exodus from the Republican Party.

Alveda King points to a blurred collective memory that had, in her view, conveniently forgotten pertinent information about the historical relationship between Republicans and African-Americans:

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[233] Alveda King, "A Covenant with Life: Reclaiming MLK's Legacy," *The Black Republican*, Fall/Winter 2008-2009, 17.

> It was the Republicans who started the HBCU's and the NAACP to stop the Democrats from lynching blacks, … [and] pushed to pass the civil rights laws in 1957, 1960, 1964, 1965 and 1968. … It was Republican President Dwight Eisenhower who sent troops to Arkansas to desegregate schools, established the Civil rights commission in 1958, and appointed Chief Justice Early Warren to the U.S. Supreme Court which resulted in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision ending school segregation.

Not only had the role of the Republican Party in Black liberation been erased from the public memory, Alveda King contended that the racist past of the Democratic Party had been obscured as well:

> It was a Democrat, Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Conner, who in 1963 turned dogs and fire hoses on Dr. King and other civil rights protestors. No one noted that it was a Democrat, Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, who waved ax handles to stop blacks from patronizing his restaurant. Nor was heed paid to the fact that it was a Democrat, Alabama Governor George Wallace, who stood in front of the Alabama schoolhouse in 1963 and thundered: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." None of those racist Democrats became Republicans.
>
> . . .
>
> To their eternal shame, the chief opponents of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act were Democrats Senators Sam Ervin, Albert Gore, Sr. and Robert Byrd, a former Klansman. All of the racist Democrats that Dr. King was fighting remained Democrats until the day they died. How can anyone today think that Dr. King, my uncle, would have joined the party of the KKK?

In revisiting the backgrounds of the two major political parties, Alveda King attempted to upset the conventional wisdom about their present-day nature. In her retelling, Democratic President Lyndon Johnson did not play a pivotal role in passing civil rights legislation, Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater did not implement the infamous "Southern Strategy," and the segregation-supporting American south did not switch its allegiances to the Republican Party. Clearly, Alveda King aimed to convince Blacks that they ought to be loyal to the Republican Party. Not only did the party have a history of supporting the full equality of Blacks, she said, its commitment to

religious (Christian) principles corresponded with the historic values of blacks in general, and Martin Luther King Jr. specifically. This, and her insistence that Dr. King was a Republican, informed a counter-narrative about the Republican Party and its relationship to Blacks in America. She recovers the Republican Party's history as the political party primarily responsible for emancipating slaves, founding historically Black colleges, and dismantling Jim Crow. Therefore, she reasoned, Black people should transfer their loyalties from the Democratic to the Republican Party.[234]

In addition to advancing the "Martin Luther King Jr. was a Republican" meme, Alveda King may have helped initiate an attempted "Tea Party" takeover of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. During an appearance on Glenn Beck's show on Fox News, she drew positive correlations between the Tea Party and the civil rights movement and offered a ten point nonviolent pledge for protestors that mirrored the pledges required of nonviolent protesters during the Movement.[235] Glenn Beck, reflecting on her appearance as a guest on his Fox News program in April 2010, credited her with his re-evaluation of King's conservative credentials in a blog post on his eponymous website the day after. When they met on the set, Alveda King inspired Beck, allegedly in the midst of trying to figure out the purpose of his planned rally in August of the same year. He described their interaction like this:

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[234] For a recent example of this line of inquiry see Rand Paul's April 2013 address at Howard University, a Historically Black College in Washington, D.C. Rand Paul, "Rand Paul Addresses Howard University," delivered on April 10, 2013, republished at *Real Clear Politics* online at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2013/04/10/rand_paul_addresses_howard_university.html, last accessed February 4, 2014.

[235] See the transcript of the show "'Glenn Beck': History of Nonviolence," broadcast April 21, 2010, online at http://www.foxnews.com/story/2010/04/21/glenn-beck-history-nonviolence/, last accessed February 4, 2014.

> But Dr. [Alveda] King told me yesterday when she first walked on the set, she grabbed my hand. She said, bless your heart. She said, you know you're on it, don't you? And I said, no, I know I'm close. She said, no. And she pointed to faith, hope and charity. She said, no, you're on it. She said, I never forget what my uncle used to say to me all the time. She said, he grabbed my hand. He said, Alveda, the secret is faith, hope, and helping one another. Faith, hope, and charity. She said, that was his answer; that is the answer. [236]

Beck's conversation with Alveda King led him to formulate the theme of his national rally that would be held on August 28, 2010, coincidentally the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, one of the seminal moments of the Civil Rights era. In a later discussion on the show, this time on July 19, 2010, Glenn Beck, Alveda King, and Reverend Stephen Broden determined that Glenn Beck was more representative of Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of justice than Reverend Al Sharpton. They asserted that the "dream" was not about a fair distribution of wealth, it was about "treating each other with dignity … It [was] not about race or skin color. Those are irrelevant."[237] Those discussions, coupled with Alveda King's subsequent participation in the "Restoring Honor" rally as the symbolic representative of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, gave Glenn Beck the rhetorical and symbolic cover of being aligned with the principles of the civil rights movement. It also helped to deflect criticism that Beck's rally circumvented and misappropriated King's legacy.

Clarence B. Jones, a principal advisor and personal friend of Martin Luther King Jr. from 1960 until King's death in 1968, defended Beck's rally and Alveda King's

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[236] Glenn Beck, "Glenn Beck: MLK's Pledge," online at http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/39442/, last accessed February 4, 2014.

[237] Quotation is from Alveda King from the transcript of "'Glen Beck': What Would Martin Luther King Think of America Today?," broadcast on July 16, 2010, online at http://www.foxnews.com/story/2010/07/19/glenn-beck-what-would-martin-luther-king-think-america-today/, last accessed on February 4, 2014.

participation in it. Writing for the *Huffington Post* the day before the rally, Jones declared that Alveda King's participation spoke volumes about the legitimacy of the event:

> Beck, Sarah Palin, and others who are summoning people today to join them to restore the honor of America, whether intended or not, are following in the footsteps of Dr. King. He spoke prophetically about their generation. Indeed, he had a "Dream" that young Becks and Palins, when they became adults, would join hands not only with members of their "Tea Party," but, all Americans of goodwill, regardless of their race, color or ethnicity, to restore the honor and values enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution.[238]

Jones argued that the two marches shared similar goals, requiring participants in the first march, like himself, to "extend the hand of fellowship" to Beck and his rally's participants in an effort to recommit ourselves to Dr. King's "Dream."

By defending Beck's rally in this manner, Jones narrowed King's vision to restoring nebulous honor and values enshrined in the nation's founding documents. His history as one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s advisors added authority to his advice and combined with Alveda King's participation to link the rally to the civil rights protests of the past. It is yet another example of how certain narratives of the past can be used to explain and provide legitimacy for events in the present. While it is highly unlikely that Martin Luther King Jr. would have participated in Glenn Beck's rally, the general cause of colorblind unity proves such an inspiring theme that it makes unlikely civil religious and collective memory allies.

Clarence Jones's 2008 book *What Martin Would Say* prefigured his willingness to give Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" rally the benefit of the doubt. In the introduction of that book, Jones touted his close relationship with Dr. King to insist, "I think I understand

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[238] Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Glenn Beck's 'Restoration of Honor' Rally," *The Huffington Post*, posted August 26, 2010 online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clarence-b-jones/mlk-and-glenn-beck-rally_b_696467.html, last accessed February 4, 2014.

what [Dr. King] would have to say, and what he would advise, on issues of the day." He wrote the book to "translate Martin for a modern audience concerned with a variety of subjects and looking for the moral leadership that [King] gave the country during perilous times."[239]

Jones sought to answer what Martin would say about five contemporary issues: the state of Black leadership, affirmative action, illegal immigration, anti-Semitism, and terrorism and the war in Iraq. Conveniently, his answers tended to veer towards conservative ideology, making Martin Luther King Jr. an ambassador of some of the same causes that animate the political right. While a full accounting of Jones' book is beyond the scope of this work, a few examples shall suffice to demonstrate how Jones participates in the conservative reconstruction of King's legacy.[240]

On the state of Black leadership, Jones lamented that Blacks were too loyal to the Democratic Party. Jones blamed contemporary Black leadership whom he accused of enhancing their own checkbooks rather than being party neutral and negotiating with all politicos as Martin Luther King Jr. did when he was alive.[241] On affirmative action, Jones acknowledged King's history of support for Black reparations, as well as his subsequent turn towards support for robust economic aid for people of all races and genders. He,

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[239] Clarence B. Jones and Joel Engel, *What Would Martin Say?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), xvi.

[240] For a more thorough accounting of Clarence Jones's book, see Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Barrow Jr. (eds.), *The Domestication of Martin Luther King Jr.: Clarence B. Jones, Right Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of King's Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

[241] Ibid., 30-33. A prime example of poor Black leadership was the response to the Jena Six situation where six Black students were overcharged for beating a White student in the midst of racial tension after an incident in the schoolyard. See pages 46-54 for more details. Jones also (falsely) accuses Black leadership of being more concerned about White on Black racism then Black violence, a false equivalency.

nevertheless, characterized King's turn as a mistake, believing that King had a stronger moral argument when he argued only for Black reparations.[242] Jones also speculated that King would celebrate the extraordinary economic and social progress many Blacks have made, lament the underside of Black life (over-representation in the justice system, gang violence, the high percentage Black homes headed by single-parents, and the like), and criticize affirmative action for its alleged contribution to the diverging paths of Black America.[243] This achievement gap would lead King to trade all affirmative action programs for a "Manhattan Project type of commitment for rebuilding and re-staffing urban schools."[244]

On illegal immigration, Jones believed King would be sympathetic to "illegals" who came to America to work because they had no other alternative to care for their families, but outraged by the "greater immorality of importing a slave class . . . that has robbed so many African-Americans of their hard-won livelihoods."[245] This interpretation suggests that Martin Luther King Jr. would have pitted Blacks working low-wage, blue collar workers against undocumented immigrants whose insecure status allows employers to exploit them and further lower the economic floor.

Finally, on terrorism and the war in Iraq, Jones declared that though King opposed war and violence, he was not so much of a pacifist that he would allow the likes of German Nazis to flourish without supporting armed conflict to prevent it. Jones persisted in this claim despite revealing that King told him personally that he would have

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[242] Baldwin and Barrow, 77. This is not a conservative position.
[243] Ibid., 83.
[244] Baldwin and Barrow, 96.
[245] Ibid., 109.

been a pacifist during World War II.[246] Jones posed a multitude of hypotheticals in which King, faced with the choice of standing idle while an innocent is killed or killing a perpetrator to stop a murder, would kill. This set up his belief that Islamic jihadists were the moral equivalent to Nazis who dreamt of "making the world a garden for their kind only."[247] Therefore, just as King supported the use of state troopers to enforce desegregation (even at gun point), he would "agree that military action is an unavoidable option that even those who are otherwise committed to nonviolence must be prepared to consider now in order to save many more lives later."[248]

Clarence Jones's book provided a great amount of detail regarding how King addressed in his own time, each of the topics that Jones raised. Yet too often, Jones imagined that King would have evolved in ways that contradicted the historical record of King's words and actions. The twenty-first century King that Jones imagined, one who would publicly chastise fellow Black leaders and remain politically neutral in today's climate, does not resemble the King who continually avoided public conflict with rival civil rights organizations and had tough words for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. The King of Jones's imagination who opposes affirmative action does not resemble the King who criticized President Johnson for declaring a war on poverty and

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[246] Ibid., 152.

[247] Ibid., 169.

[248] Ibid., 170-1. I have presented on King's proposal for President Kennedy to issue a Second Emancipation Proclamation. In this document, ghost written by a team that included Clarence Jones, King details his reasoning for supporting military intervention to enforce desegregation. I criticized this move as betraying King's growing commitment to absolute nonviolence and suggested that it is a position that he would not have supported later in his life when his faith in the U.S. government was at its lowest. See Jermaine M. McDonald, (2013, November) *Precursor to the Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Appeal for a Second Emancipation Proclamation.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, MD.

failing to adequately fund it. The King of Jones's imagination who supports the war on terrorism and celebrates the violent liberation of Afghanistan does not resemble the King who wanted to protest the Vietnam War as early as 1963. Clarence Jones used his credibility as an advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. to reimagine King as a pioneer of conservative principles. Though Black conservatives generally lack the support of a large Black constituency and have limited Black institutionalized support, support from politically conservative institutions allows them to shield the colorblind thesis from charges of racism by giving it the veneer of Black legitimacy. Clarence Jones does just this in what is probably the most thoroughly conservative reconstruction of King. His books about the conservatism of Dr. King garnered a book length response by scholars who focus on King's life and legacy.[249]

Summary

The lukewarm conservative support for the National King holiday did not presage the elevation of Martin Luther King Jr. into a conservative cultural icon. That elevation, flowing from Ronald Reagan's creative interpretation of King's credentials as an American hero, challenges the vision of King that the original supporters of the national holiday had put forward. These competing notions of King's legacy inform our understanding of the way collective memory and civil religion operates within American society.

Modern society creates and maintains *lieux de mémoire* such as museums, monuments, memorials, communal celebrations, holidays, and the like to sustain its collective memory of the past. Barry Schwartz writes that these cultural artifacts help to

[249] See Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Barrow Jr. (eds.), *The Domestication of Martin Luther King Jr.: Clarence B. Jones, Right Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of King's Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

filter the past to make meaning of the present by inviting citizens to reflect, shape, and frame the contemporary social setting.[250] This process of reflecting, shaping, and framing is continuous and publicly contested, rendering collective memory always subject to change depending on the present needs of society.

Ronald Reagan opposed the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. up until it became inevitable that a national holiday in his honor would happen. Rather than continuing to fight the tide, Reagan found a way to commemorate King in a manner consistent with Reagan's own political convictions and ideological stance. He reflected on King's words and activism to reimagine King's social impact, casting King as a champion of colorblind social policy. This allowed Reagan to employ King's legacy to shape a public policy that sought to eliminate or reduce the consideration of race in American social policy. In particular, President Reagan frequently framed King's message as a "gospel of freedom," then shaped King's understanding of freedom to conform to Reagan's own vision that sought to unburden the populace of the responsibility of funding federal social programs, reduce the presumably heavy regulatory burden on businesses, and eliminate race-based policies.[251]

Given his well-documented opposition to Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy, dating back to at least 1960, President Reagan could have simply signed the King holiday bill with little fanfare. Perhaps because Reagan realized that the narrative of Dr. King as a national hero had the potential to shape the values and collective identity of the nation in

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[250] Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

[251] See Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on the Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King, Jr.," delivered on 15 January 1983, online at http://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speeches/31-archives/speeches/1983/2024-11583d.

ways that would challenge his own policy prescriptions, he took the initiative to shape King's legacy in a manner that was more conducive to his political and moral beliefs.

Such a process of revision exemplifies how civil religion means and functions in American society. Civil religion develops via a democratic, discursive process in which citizens and their leaders debate, discuss, challenge, and defend the reasons, means, and ends of state action in light of contrasting, often competing moral visions and values. Martin Marty characterizes the nature of this discourse as expressing "priestly" and "prophetic" approaches to "under God" and "self-transcendent" variations of civil religion.

Ronald Reagan's reframing of the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. fits within Marty's "priestly" approach to the "under God" variant of American civil religion. This approach fuses an historic faith with "autochthonous national sentiments."[252] As president of the United States, Reagan stood as the nation's high priest and used that platform to shape the moral framework of the nation. He often invoked Martin Luther King Jr. as a symbol of American power and offered policy prescriptions that elided social division for the sake of unity and in the name of freedom.

For example, on the eve of the first ever National Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday, Reagan declared in a radio address:

> The answer to the question "How are blacks doing in America?" is "Better than ever before, and still not good enough." There's work to be done. But if we continue to allow the economy to expand and continue to work for a more perfect

[252] Martin E. Marty, "Civil Religion: Two Kinds of Two Kinds" in a collection of his essays, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 84. Republished from a 1976 essay.

> society, the people of all colors will prosper. And isn't that what Dr. King's dream and the American dream are all about?[253]

Here, Reagan elides the differences between the challenges facing Black Americans and those of other Americans under the allusion of "a more perfect society" where "people of all colors will prosper." He conflates King's dream with the American dream and uses both symbols to promote the course on which he has set the nation.

Reagan employed King to convey a "priestly, under God" approach to civil religion whereas King himself typically adopted a "prophetic, under God" approach in his own discourse about the proper course for America. Reagan remakes King into an exemplar for making America the just nation it always declared itself to be and celebrates America as being open to changing its ways. America has completed the hard work; no more corrective policies and activism are necessary.

Gradually, political conservatives would come to regard King as more than the symbolic representative of a seismic social change in America. As conservative intellectuals began to reconsider the details of his life's work under the influence of Reagan's vision, they conceded that King was not a "stalwart conservative," yet they found common ground with him by affirming King's messages of personal responsibility, by lifting up his religious and moral foundations of faith and freedom, and by highlighting his dream of a colorblind America. The 1993 Heritage Foundation lectures given by Robert Woodson and William Bennett bear this out. Both men highlighted the religious and moral dimension of King's legacy, a perspective that they believed had been lost in American collective memory. Both sought to reframe King to make him

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[253] Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black Americans," delivered January 18, 1986, online at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11886b.htm, last accessed February 18, 2014.

more relevant and acceptable to political conservatives. In the process of forming collective memory, not only does the past shape and influence the present, the present can reshape our collective understandings of the past. Both Bennett and Woodson have a clearly conservative political vision for society and employ King to justify that vision and criticize those political liberals who disagree. Their remaking of King also demonstrates that contestation in collective memory and civil religion results from differences over reasons, means, and ends regarding the moral visions, values, and modes of discourse.

Finally, certain Black conservatives with close personal ties to King have given legitimacy to the conservative reimagining of his legacy by arguing that their versions of King are the true and genuine versions. Their supposed familiarity with and proximity to King give their narratives added credibility, forcing those with counter-narratives to consider their perspectives very carefully. All of this combines to lift Martin Luther King Jr. to iconic status in conservative ideology, so much so that noted conservative Glenn Beck could somewhat credibly make King the focus of a national rally, based on this reimagining of the American collective memory of King. In the next chapter, we will explore the creation of the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC to see how the memorial uses collective memory to frame King's legacy. It contrasts the Reagan reconstruction by offering a fuller account of King's impact on American society and features universal themes and values, embodied by King, which correspond to a shared American identity.

Chapter 4

Set in Stone:

The Making of the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

> If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.
>
> "The Drum Major Instinct," 4 February 1968

The fourteen-year struggle to secure a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. created equilibrium for King's legacy to allow a centrist consensus among enough American politicians to support the elevation of King as an official national hero. The making of the National King Memorial on the National Mall broadened the scope of King's legacy and positioned him more concretely as one who embodied recognizably American values. This broadening adds a bit of context to the narratives on King's life and moves the collective memory of him beyond the "dream."

As this chapter will demonstrate, the architects of the memorial engage the crucial task of creating a *lieu de mémoire*[254] to crystalize the national memory of Martin Luther King Jr. in a manner that elucidates the collective identity and values of the nation while remaining authentic to the historical record on King. The narrative of the creation and construction of the National King Memorial demonstrates that the collective memories of subgroups within a nation often conflict in the public square and compete for decisive supremacy on the state level of governmental action. For a national monument to have lasting resonance its symbolism must represent its subject matter accurately, yet be broad

[254] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* (26), 7. Nora suggests that the acceleration of history has rendered meaningless memory and the way it customarily shapes group identity. To make sense of the overwhelming amount of history at its disposal, societies create "lieux de mémoire" to help articulate (cement) group values and identity.

enough to embrace a multitude of sometimes competing interpretations. As we will see, the National King Memorial does exactly this by claiming that Martin Luther King Jr. embodied values universal enough to be embraced by a vast majority of U.S. citizens, transcending particularized descriptions that could complicate the overall narrative of King as a national hero.

Bringing the King Memorial to Fruition

James E. Young writes that because monuments seem to remember everything but their own pasts, we ought to reinvest the monument with the memory of its creation to better understand the intended original story as well as the story the monument currently tells.[255] Exploring the development of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial allows us to see how it borrows from and adds to American civil religion and dramatizes the contestation in collective memory by allowing us to see how much the meaning of a monument can shift just in the process of bringing it from conception to fruition.

The idea for a National Martin Luther King Jr. memorial arose out of informal discussions amongst George H. Sealey Jr., Alfred Bailey, Oscar Little, Eddie L. Madison Jr., John Harvey, Robert Hatchel, and Harold Navy, all members of Alpha Phi Alpha, King's fraternity, in 1984, one year after President Ronald Reagan signed the King National Holiday into federal law.[256] The fraternity brothers believed that a person of color ought to be memorialized on the National Mall and quickly determined that Martin Luther King Jr. was the ideal candidate. Announcing their idea to the national Alpha Phi Alpha convention in Cleveland that same year, they argued that a Black person had never

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[255] James E. Young. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 14.

[256] Michael E. Ruane. "King Memorial Idea Born in Silver Spring". *Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/king-memorial-idea-was-born-in-silver-spring/2011/08/25/gIQAWyRieJ_story.html. Last accessed March 19, 2012.

been honored on the Mall and that their fraternity brother, Martin Luther King Jr. deserved the honor because he "was a quality individual that had given his life to try to have betterment of the races."[257] Though the national organization initially believed that the idea was too grand to come to fruition, they soon got behind the project and began to investigate how to make the memorial a reality.

Twelve years after these initial conversations, President Bill Clinton signed congressional legislation proposing the establishment of a King memorial on the National Mall to honor the slain civil rights leader. This legislation, introduced by Senators Paul Sarbanes (D-MD) and John Warner (R-VA), designated the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity as the organization responsible for the memorial's design and funding.[258] Upon introducing the bill, Sen. Warner warned the fraternity, in consideration of the controversies surrounding the World War II memorial that "simplicity [regarding the design of the memorial] would go a long way and send the strongest of messages—simplicity and elegance."[259] To that end, early proposals for the memorial projected a cost of $300,000.[260] That is a long way from the $120 million price tag of the completed memorial. How did the memorial increase in scope so drastically?

Alpha Phi Alpha formed the Washington, DC Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, Inc. (henceforth the King Memorial Foundation) in 1998.

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[257] Ruane.

[258] Forgey Benjamen, "King Memorial Takes a Step; Senate Bill Would Secure Prominent Site to Honor Slain Leader" *The Washington Post.* Published Feb 27, 1998. D01.

[259] Ibid.

[260] "A Memorial Here to Dr. King" *Washington Post.* Published Sept 11, 1989. A10.

They appointed their national president, Harry E. Johnson Sr., to lead the King Memorial Foundation in 2002.[261]

In January 1998, the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission,[262] voted to recommend the King Memorial be built in Area 1 of the DC commemorative areas map (see Appendix C), which includes the area surrounding the White House, the Capitol Building lawn, Theodore Roosevelt Island, Lady Bird Johnson Park, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Tidal Basin. In June of the same year, both houses of Congress passed resolutions giving the King Memorial Area 1 status. In October, the same committee recommended that the Memorial be built on the East end of Constitution Gardens, the land in front of the Lincoln Memorial that includes the reflecting pool. Sometime between October 1998 and March 1999, the King Memorial Foundation expanded its plans for the proposed location of the King Memorial. The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC),[263] acting on previous plans but against the expressed wishes of the

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[261] Michael E. Ruane, "Man in Charge of Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Readies for the Spotlight". *Washington Post.* http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/man-in-charge-of-martin-luther-king-jr-memorial-readies-for-the-spotlight/2011/08/12/gIQAqZBjSJ_story.html. Last accessed March 20, 2012.

[262] US Code Title 40, Subtitle II, Part D, Chapter 89, § 8904, declares that the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission shall be composed of the Director of the National Park Service, the Architect of the Capitol, the Chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, the Chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission, the Mayor of the District of Columbia, the Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service of the General Services Administration, and the Secretary of Defense. See "40 USC § 8904 - National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission" at http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/40/8904. Last accessed April 2, 2012.

[263] The National Capital Planning Commission is comprised of 12 members (11 at the time of this vote) representing Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. Three members are appointed by the President of the United States, two by the Mayor of D.C. Additionally, seven ex officio members serve on the commission including the Secretaries of Defense and the Interior, and the Mayor of D.C. See "Commission." *National Capital Planning Commission website.*

King Memorial Foundation, approved the east end of the Constitution Gardens location as the site of the Memorial by a vote of 6-5. The Foundation appealed the ruling and presented a different site for consideration by the US Commission of Fine Arts (CFA)[264] one month later. The CFA rejected this site, but recommended that the King Memorial Foundation analyze two additional sites: one on the west end of Constitution Gardens and another on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The recommendation of these two locations suggests a difference in opinion between the King Memorial Foundation and the authorizing Commissions over the scope and size of the King Memorial project, as constructing a monument to King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial would severely limit its physical size in a way that building on open land would not. In October 1999, the CFA finally saw the vision of the King Memorial Foundation and approved the tidal basin site. The NCPC followed suit in December of the same year, finalizing the location of the memorial and permitting the King Memorial Foundation to proceed with securing a design for the Memorial.

In the midst of wrestling with the various commissions in 1999, the King Memorial Foundation announced a design competition for the memorial, soliciting architecture schools and firms from across the world to submit design proposals. Though participants could register for the competition early, they could not begin creating their designs until after the King Memorial Foundation gained approval for the site. Upon gaining final site approval, the King Memorial Foundation sent out the siting specs to the

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http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/About_Us(tr2)/About_Us(tr3)/Commission.html. Last accessed April 2, 2012.

[264] The Commission of Fine Arts is composed of seven members with expertise in the arts. Appointed by the President, Commission members serve four-year terms without compensation. See "Members of the Commission of Fine Art". *U.S. Commission of Fine Arts website.* http://www.cfa.gov/about/bios/index.html. Last accessed April 2, 2012.

design competition teams. In September 2000, the design competition assessors, consisting of eleven architectural design experts, chose the design by ROMA Design Group from San Francisco out of the nine hundred (900) submissions from fifty-two (52) countries around the world.[265]

In 2007, the King Memorial Foundation appointed a twelve-member "council of historians" expert in African-American history, culture and social activism, to select the quotations that would go on the Inscription Wall of the King Memorial.[266] The council was tasked to select texts that reflected King's broad message of "hope, democracy, justice, and love." It included two prominent people, Maya Angelou and Cornel West, who would ultimately criticize the memorial itself after its completion. As I will discuss later, Angelou criticized the ill-crafted paraphrase of a quotation from King's last sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct" for making King appear to be an "arrogant twit."[267] West

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[265] "Fact Sheet" *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Website*. http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/c.hkIUL9MVJxE/b.1777009/k.1B32/Fact_Sheet.htm. Last accessed February 24, 2012.

[266] "Council of Historians Selects Martin Luther King, Jr. Quotations to Be Engraved Into Memorial". *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Website*. http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=hkIUL9MVJxE&b=1601407&ct=3560637. Last Accessed February 24, 2012. The members of the council of historians were Maya Angelou, Lerone Bennett, Jr., Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Lonnie G. Bunch, James Chaffers, Johnetta B. Cole, John Hope Franklin, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., F. Michael Higginbotham, Jon Lockard, Cornel West, and Marianne Williamson. It is unclear how this council actually worked. I contacted several of the participants and received only a few responses. One historian never participated in discussions. Another was only asked to submit his/her favorite King quotation. It seems as if the council did not have as much to do with the selected quotations as has been advertised. Harry Johnson accused Maya Angelou of not participating in the council after she publicly voiced her concerns about the "drum major" paraphrase.

[267] Gene Weingarten and Michael E. Ruane. "Maya Angelou says King Memorial Makes Him Look 'Arrogant.'" *The Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/maya-angelou-says-king-memorial-inscription-

cautiously celebrated the creation of the memorial, suggesting it signified "the undeniable success of the civil rights movement," but warned that in King's own view the "dream of a more democratic America had become ... 'a nightmare,' owing to the persistence of 'racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism.'"[268] King would have wanted a revolution, not a national monument.

The King Memorial Foundation officials also informally asked Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, to suggest King quotations for the memorial's inscription wall. While he welcomed the assignment, Carson was soon dismayed that the Foundation restricted the quotations to the themes of hope, justice, democracy, and love. "Why not other themes, such as nonviolence, religion, peace, and poverty?" Carson asked, quite accurately believing that this restriction "eliminated King's forceful statements against poverty and the war in Vietnam."[269] The additional themes identified by Carson would have combined with the present themes to more fully represent King's convictions and legacy. Carson's themes serve criticize, challenge, and correct the nation, not only to celebrate it, as do the themes immortalized in the King memorial.

Controversies notwithstanding, construction began on the Memorial in 2009. The King Memorial website featured images of the construction, allowing interested parties to track its progress. In that same year, the King Memorial Foundation launched a faith-

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makes-him-look-arrogant/2011/08/30/gIQAlYChqJ_story.html. Last Accessed March 21, 2012.

[268] Cornel West. "Dr. King Weeps from His Grave." *The New York Times*, 26 August 2011, A27.

[269] Clayborne Carson, "Designing the King Memorial," *Encyclopedia Britannica Blog*, http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2011/08/designing-king-memorial/, last accessed December 7, 2012.

based fundraising drive separate from its corporate donor campaign. They sought to give churches and communities the opportunity to be a part of the building efforts, wanting the memorial to be the gift of a wide swath of Americana, not just corporate interests.

Elements of the King Memorial

The placement of the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall signifies the importance of Martin Luther King Jr. to American collective memory for a variety of reasons. First, memorialization in the nation's "sacred space" along with America's other heroes suggests that King has himself become a national hero. The esteemed Reverend Joseph Lowery articulated this best when he said at the dedication ceremony that King had become "a father of the country [whose] leadership gave birth to a new America."[270] Second, the King Memorial is the first on the National Mall dedicated to a person of color, the first to a figure of peace/pacifism, and the first to a non-president. Its location on the Tidal Basin, forming a civil religious "line of leadership"[271] with the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, announces the completion of America's journey towards guaranteeing the social equality of all: Jefferson, the announcer that all people are created equal; Lincoln, the emancipator of African slaves in America; and King, the American prophet of social equality.

The King Memorial has three design components: the "Mountain of Despair" and "Stone of Hope," the inscription wall and water feature, and the landscaping and siting. The "Mountain of Despair" is a 30-foot tall boulder, carved from pink-hued granite, split

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[270] From Rev. Joseph Lowery's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National King Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[271] "About the Memorial". *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Website.* http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/c.hkIUL9MVJxE/b.7548975/k.9356/Site_Location.htm . Last accessed March 21, 2012.

in the middle to form the entrance to the King Memorial. The "Stone of Hope" hewn metaphorically out of the mountain of despair (presumably by Martin Luther King Jr. himself) is pushed forward and slightly askew from the mountain. These two elements evoke a passage from King's "I Have a Dream" speech:

> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; 'and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.' This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.[272]

The last words of that phrase are etched on the left side of the "Stone of Hope," when facing the stone towards the "Mountain of Despair," away from the Tidal Basin. Sculpted into the front of the "Stone of Hope" is the image of Martin Luther King Jr., standing resolute with his arms folded across his chest and staring austerely out towards the Jefferson Memorial. Andrew Young suggested at the memorial dedication ceremony that the diminutive 5'7" King would have been pleased to be standing thirty feet tall in the Nation's capital.[273] The words, "I was a drum major for peace, justice, and righteousness" were initially etched on the right side of the "Stone of Hope." This paraphrase comes from King's last sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct," in which King imagined what ought to be said about him at his funeral. The paraphrase sparked controversy because it seemed to make King appear arrogant and boastful, rather than humble and unselfish.

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[272] Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream." Delivered on August 28, 1963. Reprinted by *American Rhetoric*. http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm. Last Accessed on September 15, 2011.

[273] From Ambassador Andrew Young's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National King Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

Responding to the controversy, the Department of the Interior had the paraphrase removed in 2013.

The second component of the King Memorial is the inscription wall and water features. The inscription wall, constructed from black granite, spans both sides of the Mountain of Despair, arching downwards away from the mountain on either side until it slopes into the ground. The 450-foot crescent shaped wall contains "fourteen of Dr. King's most notable quotes,"[274] six on the left side and eight on the right. The quotations, intentionally placed at random, allow visitors to begin reading them from any location within the memorial and not follow a specific path. The quotations reflect the universal themes discussed above and intentionally avoided phrases from the "I Have a Dream" speech, because the overall design of the memorial itself evokes its imagery. Visitors can hear the water features before seeing them. Located on the inscription walls next to both boulders in the Mountain of Despair, the water features evoke the theme of justice running "down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."[275] The sound of the water also elicits a sense of peace and serenity, signaling that the Memorial is a safe space for personal reflection.

The final component of the King Memorial is the landscaping and siting. The Memorial sits on a four-acre plot of land on the Tidal Basin directly across from the Jefferson Memorial. Visitors standing on the bank of the basin in front of the King Memorial can see the Washington Monument on the left, the Jefferson memorial in front,

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[274] "About the Memorial". *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Website.* http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/c.hkIUL9MVJxE/b.7548977/k.8C6B/Design_Elements.htm. Last accessed March 21, 2012.

[275] From the inscription wall, quoting Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

and unkempt trees shielding the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial on the right. Directly behind the King Memorial, visitors can see the top of the Lincoln Memorial peeking out above the trees. Over 180 cherry blossom trees have been planted in the memorial, aesthetically linking it to the National Mall's cherry blossom motif and allowing the memorial to be a key part of the annual two-week cherry blossom blooming season. To give the memorial a sense of life and color throughout the summer and fall months, the landscapers added crepe myrtles, jasmine, English yew, and liriope.[276]

The Quotations on the Inscription Wall

The 450-foot crescent-shaped inscription wall contains fourteen quotations from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches, letters, and writings, chosen by the council of historians to reflect the themes of hope, democracy, justice, and love. These universal themes show the broad appeal of King's legacy as shaped in the struggle for the holiday and reinforced by the colorblind ideals of Ronald Reagan, yet mitigate any full turn toward redefining King as a conservative icon. The quotations simultaneously add narrative detail to the collective memory of King that give a fuller account of King's life and solidifies his status as a national hero. However while the quotations give the appearance of a thick representation of Martin Luther King Jr., they actually avoid much of King's more controversial and prophetic rhetoric that could put his status as a national hero in jeopardy.

Such choices allow the Memorial to impose unity on the varying political and philosophical views by connecting them with King's legacy. This process of

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[276] "About the Memorial". *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Website.* http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/c.hkIUL9MVJxE/b.7548977/k.8C6B/Design_Elements.htm. Last accessed March 21, 2012.

universalization de-contextualizes King's work in a way that obscures how King's message could continue to serve as a challenge and source of criticism for American society today.

The inscription wall only feebly contextualizes King's contributions to American society, nor does it tell the story of Martin Luther King Jr. and how his public activism made America better. Instead, it shows short snippets of King's words with a bare-minimum of documentation. Quotations from King's speeches only name the year and city in which King gave the address. Quotations from King's books only include the year of publication. The decision to place the quotations randomly instead of chronologically, potentially improves the flow of traffic during high traffic days, yet feels a bit disorienting. A chronological display would have provided the Memorial with more contextualization, implying that King directed his words to address specific situations.

Though the memorial seems intentionally to obscure context, it would help us to better understand the memorial, the intent of the designers, and the intent of the "council of historians" if we contextualized the selected quotations.

Arc of the Moral Universe

We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. – District of Columbia, 1968

Martin Luther King Jr. frequently employed this phrase, most notably at the rally to conclude the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.[277] Though King did not specifically attribute the paraphrase to anyone in particular, it actually originates from

[277] See Martin Luther King Jr. "Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March" republished at *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_address_at_the_conclusion_of_selma_march. Last accessed April 23, 2012.

an 1853 sermon by the Universalist minister and abolitionist, Rev. Theodore Parker. Parker's extended quotation, from his sermon "Of Justice and the Conscience," reads:

> Look at the facts of the world. You can see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.[278]

In this sermon, Parker imagines a world in which conscience has brought about the end of slavery in America, much like conscience drove the progress towards justice that society had already made. Thus, it makes sense for Martin Luther King Jr. to connect his civil rights activism with the abolitionist activity of the nineteenth century. The civil rights movement was a continuation of that freedom struggle and, indeed, that of the American Revolution.

The council of historians chose this quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sunday morning, March 31, 1968, address at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, entitled, "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution." An alternative source for the quotation, not specified in the memorial, was King's speech at the conclusion of the final march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

In today's cultural milieu, the very title of this message would be deemed provocative. King cautioned the audience not to remain asleep during the great revolution that was occurring in their midst. King understood the revolution in a threefold way: as a technical revolution, as a revolution in weaponry, and as a human rights revolution. He declared that this trifold revolution presented challenges that America must embrace, including the challenge to develop a "world perspective," the challenge to eradicate "the

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[278] Theodore Parker, "Of Justice and the Conscience" in *Ten Sermons of Religion*. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1853), 84-5.

last vestiges of racial injustice," the challenge to "rid our nation and the world of poverty," and the challenge to "find an alternative to war and bloodshed."[279]

It is in this context that King used the "arc of the moral universe" quotation. Justice is not just some universal principle towards which the moral universe moves; it takes shape in the concrete commitments and actions of individuals, groups, and societies seeking to form a world kinship. That kinship becomes established when we defeat racism, collectively overcome poverty, and end the existence of war. The quotation without the context does not give us an accurate picture of what King believed justice requires from us.

This is only one example of many where the Memorial committee assumes too much about the visitor's foreknowledge of Dr. King, or presumes that the visitor will have the ability or desire to take the initiative and follow the trail of the somewhat limited reference on the inscription wall and read the source material in its entirety. I suggest that the Memorial asks visitors to do too much of the work themselves to gain a better grasp of King's understanding of justice in this quotation, as in most of the quotations on the inscription wall.

Darkness Cannot Drive Out Darkness

Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. – 1963

This refrain from Martin Luther King Jr.'s opus of speeches and sermons appears in written form on at least two occasions. The first, and the one sourced on the inscription wall, is from the fifth chapter of King's first book of sermons, *Strength to Love* (1963).

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[279] Martin Luther King Jr. "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution". *Martin Luther King Jr. And the Global Freedom Struggle.* http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_remaining_awake_through_a_great_revolution/. Last accessed April 3, 2012.

The second source of the quotation is the second chapter in King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967). These two books have drastically different historical contexts, which perhaps accounts for why the council selected the earlier text over the latter.

King wrote *Where Do We Go from Here* in the wake of the 1965 Watts riots and James Meredith's interrupted Mississippi Freedom March of June 1966. He aimed to draw attention to *Northern* racial discrimination as embodied in the slums of 1960s Chicago, to prove that Black subjugation was not merely a Southern issue. The Civil Rights Movement had hit a critical juncture. Some Blacks, fed up with the slow progress resulting from nonviolent social action, began to embrace the motto "Black Power," a frightening new phrase to the American majority, and one that had potentially violent connotations. King, sensing both Black frustration with slow social progress and White fear of too much social change, wrote his response to the burgeoning Black Power movement in the appropriately titled chapter, "Black Power." King recounted the birth of the use of the phrase "Black Power" as a motto in the civil rights movement (in the wake of the reclamation of James Meredith's march by several national civil rights organizations after Meredith was shot while attempting his march), then simultaneously defended and refuted the Black call for power in this provocative essay. He defended Black Power on the basis that it was a cry of disappointment in the social gains of Blacks in the American South,[280] a challenge to Blacks to accumulate their political and economic strength to achieve their goals,[281] and a call for improved Black self-esteem.[282]

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[280] Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community.* (New York: Beacon Press, 2010 [Harper & Row, 1967]), 32-33.

[281] Ibid., 36.

He argued that the power Blacks ought to be infused with love so that it would "make the world and our nation better places to live."[283] King also asserted that in a multiracial society, "The American Negro will be living tomorrow with the very people against whom he is struggling today," hence violent retribution for the social plight of Blacks in America cannot be the answer.[284] King refuted the potential violence associated with calls for "Black Power" on the basis that all people in society need one another.

An alternative quotation from this text perhaps better cements King's central argument regarding Black Power:

> Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.[285]

Drawing attention to King's reflections on Black Power could have been a powerful way to allow Martin Luther King Jr. to speak to an America captivated by the false illusion of a post-racial society. Nevertheless, the council of elders did not source the "darkness" quotation on the inscription wall from King's chapter on Black power. Instead, they took it from King's sermon "Loving Your Enemies," originally preached to his church in Montgomery, AL in 1957. The overall message of this sermon was more universal and broadly accessible than King's more direct and explicit ruminations on "Black Power" ten years later. It challenged popular dissent regarding the human ability to love an enemy and the viability of said love to solve the problems of the world. King laid out a practical way for us to love our enemies, emphasizing that we ought to maintain the capacity to forgive.

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[282] Ibid., 38. King uses the phrase "a psychological call to manhood." He has a tendency to use masculine language in his arguments for social equality, a practice common for his day.

[283] Ibid., 64.

[284] Ibid, 64.

[285] King, *Where Do We Go*, 37.

Though the council selected a safer source for the quotation, its broader context still has great significance. According to King:

> Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. **Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.** Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction... The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.[286]

The sermon serves as a theological justification for nonviolent social action, emphasizing such action as a function of *agape* love. Though in the sermon King clearly addressed Blacks on how they ought to respond to White oppression and segregation, the inclusion of "wars producing more wars" in the extended version of the quotation suggests that as early as 1957 King was developing a pacifist attitude towards war as an extension of his theology of nonviolent civil disobedience and Negro social equality.

Unarmed Truth and Unconditional Love

> I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant. – Norway, 1964

This quotation is one of two on the inscription wall from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, given on December 10, 1964 in Oslo, Norway. Despite the worldwide recognition of the merit of the civil rights struggle, King was in the midst of one of the most morose and despondent periods of his life. The belief statements in this speech belie King's deepening sense of hopelessness about the actual world situation. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, as well as the recently passed

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[286] Martin Luther King Jr. *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1981 (1963 orig.)), 52-53. The bold print represents the words used for the King Memorial inscription. King originally delivered the sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL on November 17, 1957.

Civil Rights Act of 1964 were great symbolic victories, but they did little to relieve the immediate suffering of Blacks in America. The FBI was threatening to expose King's extramarital proclivities, and the situation in Selma was beginning to explode.

While the vision of unarmed truth and unconditional love triumphant is inspiring, we ought to remember how King imagined the state of justice at the time, even as he expressed a hopefulness that defied reality.

> I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of [humanity]."[287]

Indeed, if a "tortuous road which has led from Montgomery, AL to Oslo" still left justice, "lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets," then how could King (and by extension we) be so certain that "unarmed truth and unconditional love" would have the final word? King reasoned that if love did not have the final word, then humanity was doomed to self-destruction. He refused to believe that self-destruction was our final destiny. The quotation as it stands on the inscription wall obscures the amount of work and sacrifice that King intimated would be required by those committed to unarmed truth and unconditional love. The fuller text acknowledges how much of a struggle progress had been up to that point and how hard it would be going forward. Yet, King proclaimed, "This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future [and] give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom."[288]

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[287] Martin Luther King Jr. "Nobel Peace Prize 1964 Acceptance Speech," *The Official Web Site of the Nobel Prize.* http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html. Last accessed April 5, 2012.

[288] King, "Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech."

Make a Career of Humanity

> Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in. – District of Columbia, 1959.

This quotation comes from a relatively short speech King gave on April 18, 1959 before 26,000 high school and college students who had sojourned to the nation's capital for the Youth March for Integrated Schools, a march designed to support the 1954 Supreme Court decision, "Brown v. Board of Education." This was the second march held in DC for the same purpose; the first had occurred on October 25, 1958. Labor leader A. Philip Randolph, the force behind both marches, and leaders from several different civil rights groups converged to make both events successful.[289] Though King served as co-honorary chairman of both marches, he missed the first because he was recovering from a knife attack he sustained from a mentally ill woman while on a publicity tour for his book in New York City.

King's speech celebrated the march's demand for the full integration of schools as a step towards greater social progress. His thought, nonetheless, lingered on "the greatest privilege as an American—the right to vote."[290] He reiterated the commitment of SCLC to increasing the number of registered Black voters in the South by three million and linked the march to the broader struggle of guaranteeing the full dignity of Blacks as human beings in America. The text on the inscription wall captured King's vocational advice to the students. Rather than focus primarily on "careers, security, and prosperity,"

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[289] "Youth March for Integrated Schools (October 25, 1958 and April 18, 1959," *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_youth_march_for_integrated_schools_25_october_1958_and_18_april_1959/. Last accessed April 17, 2012.

[290] From Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Speech Before the Youth March for Integrated Schools (1959)" as recorded in James M. Washington (editor). *Martin Luther King Jr. – I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, 1992), 35.

King encouraged the gathered assembly to consider also civil rights advocacy as a vocational choice. He suggested that this avocation would make them better doctors, lawyers, and educators by "enrich[ing their] spirt[s] as nothing else possibly can."[291]

Moral Example of the World

I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as a moral example of the world. – California, 1967.

On February 25, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr., after taking a two month public hiatus to finish his book, *Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos of Community*, joined four anti-Vietnam War senators—Ernest Gruening, Mark Hatfield, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern—in Los Angeles at a program that called for the United States to end the Vietnam War.[292] During this hiatus, King had come across an illustrated story in the January 1967 edition of *Ramparts* magazine about young Vietnamese burn victims of American napalm. This photo essay cemented King's distaste for the Vietnam War and drove his committed activism against it from that time forward.

In the speech, "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," King detailed six casualties of American principles resulting from the war. He declared that American conduct in the War violated the Charter of the United Nations and undermined its purpose, abrogated Vietnam's right of self-determination, endangered the promise of the "Great Society" by diverting funds away from anti-poverty programs and towards an ill-considered war, sacrificed the humility of the nation, repressed the principle of dissent by

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[291] Ibid., 36.

[292] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1986), 545.

vilifying those who speak out against the war, and threatened the prospect of humanity's survival by claiming to desire peace while rapidly expanding the military budget.[293]

The text quoted on the Inscription wall casts King as a defender of American virtue and fits well within the "American Exceptionalism" paradigm, which imagines America as the moral exemplar of the world. It suggests that King's opposition to the war was in part due to his belief that it caused the nation to lose its moral authority and exceptionalism.

Though this sentiment about King's thought is certainly true, I find that a quotation from the same paragraph in the same speech is a more accurate expression of King's thoughts on war in general and the devolving moral character of the nation due to its engagement in the Vietnam War. King declared: "There can be no great disappointment where there is no great love. I am disappointed with our failure to deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism."[294] This quotation is more in tune with the tone of King's speech and the evolution of his thought towards the end of his life. Further, it has a more direct bearing on King's prophetic critique of America that still has relevance in today's landscape. While one can make the argument that America's incomplete racial progress has, nonetheless, been quite astounding, King's comments on the excessive materialism and militarism speak directly to our society today. The inclusion of the "triple evils" quotation

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[293] Martin Luther King Jr. "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," delivered February 25, 1967 in Los Angeles, CA. Reprinted at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/unpub/670225-001_The_Casualties_of_the_War_in_Vietnam.htm. Last accessed on April 18, 2012.

[294] King, "Casualties of the War."

rather than the "moral example of the world" quotation could have captured the prophetic sense of King that is desperately missing in the narrative of the King Memorial.

Since King's legacy has come to represent what America wants to believe about itself, it is telling that the King Memorial Foundation did not select the "triple evils" quote. America desperately wants to believe that it is post-racial, that materialism is America's birthright, and that its militarism protects against foreign enemies and signifies the nation's superiority.

A World Perspective

> If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. – Georgia, 1967.

This quotation comes from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Christmas 1967 sermon to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. At the beginning of 1967, King began to challenge vehemently the American presence in Vietnam, exposing himself to severe criticism from many of his allies in the civil rights struggle. Roy Wilkins and A. Philip Randolph both publicly questioned King's stance and resisted his attempt to link the civil rights and peace movements. Even ministers within SCLC, King's own organization, had trouble seeing the merit of such a turn. King's sharp criticism of Vietnam derived, in part, from his belief that the funds used to wage war would have been better spent waging a different kind of war, one against poverty. The 1967 Christmas sermon contained an abundance of familiar refrains from King.

The selection of this particular quotation makes sense if we understand the memorial as one of many *lieux de mémoire* based on the cultural significance of Martin

Luther King Jr. that articulates American ideals.[295] Developing a world perspective and transcending divisions has come to be the defining aspect of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. King expounded on this need for transcendence by reflecting on the interconnectivity of the world. He suggested that the morning routine of the average American adult was affected by the work of persons from all over the world. This is aptly encapsulated in the best-known phrase from this sermon, "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."[296] This interconnectivity means that we are also responsible for one another.

> **Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere**
> Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. – Alabama, 1963.

Applying the lessons from the experiences of Montgomery, Albany, and the Freedom Rides, King led the SCLC in an intentional, targeted movement against the business community of Birmingham in order to press change on the entrenched racist institutions in that city. While sitting in a jail cell after his April 12, 1963 arrest, King read in the *Birmingham News* the response by moderate White clergymen in Birmingham to the civil rights activism in their city. Their statement compelled him to write a response of his own. The "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" did not immediately capture the imagination or attention of the media, many of whom simply saw the twenty-page

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[295] See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* (26), 7.

[296] Martin Luther King Jr. "A Christmas Sermon on Peace." Delivered on Christmas Eve, 1967 at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Transcribed at http://www.ecoflourish.com/Primers/education/Christmas_Sermon.html. Last accessed on April 17, 2012.

letter as a long-winded King sermon.[297] It did not gain broad recognition until the situation in Birmingham turned violent. Nor did the letter become one of King's most famous and well-known pronouncements until several years later. Though it was written directly to White, moderate clergymen ambivalent about the civil rights movement, the letter had masterful language that employed a rich tapestry of sources, including biblical imagery, American cultural artifacts (such as the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution),* philosophical reasoning and the like, to articulate the cause of civil disobedience on behalf of Black social equality in America.

The quotation on the wall comes from the third paragraph of the letter. King countered the argument that he was an illegitimate outsider coming in to cause havoc in Birmingham by suggesting not only that the Black community of Birmingham had invited him, but that the interrelatedness of all communities and states provoked him to action in Birmingham. The "outside agitator" idea had no place in a world where distant actions have local consequences.

The sentiment that society is interconnected resonates in a multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic society. Thus, the use of this quotation aligns well with an inclusive understanding of American civil religion as "E Pluribus Unum." Nevertheless, the details of the letter's context, particularly its effort to address White resistance to racial justice, get lost in the universalism of the quotation. Those details teach lessons about America and the relevance of social activism that the King Memorial neglects to explore.

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[297] Branch, *Parting*, 744.

The Audacity to Believe

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. – Norway, 1964.

This is a second quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. The quotation in isolation reads as an inspiration for those who aspire to have full stomachs, quality educations, and spiritual dignity in the face of circumstances that would deny them these very things. Seen in its broader context, with this text King was indicting the status quo in which whole groups of people are denied these basic necessities for a good life. The quotation comes from the same paragraph as the "unarmed truth" inscription addressed above.

King determined that a re-prioritization of values was necessary to ensure that, "nation after nation [ceased] spiral[ing] down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction."[298] The belief that society could feed, educate, and treat all people with dignity would only become a reality if those who already possessed those qualities committed themselves to making it so. King sought to inspire the well fed to work with those in need of human dignity and the like to dismantle systems and ideologies that prevented this vision from coming to fruition. One of the primary threats to such a vision was the existence of war.

It is Necessary to Love Peace and Sacrifice For It

It is not enough to say, "We must not wage war." It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but on the positive affirmation of peace. – California, 1967

This is the second quotation from King's speech, "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," delivered February 25th, 1967 in Los Angeles, CA. The quotation also

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[298] King, "Nobel Peace Prize 1964 Acceptance Speech."

appeared in another notable King lecture that occurred three years before that: his Nobel Peace Prize Lecture (not to be confused with his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech) delivered December 11, 1964. Perhaps the main difference between the contexts of the two documents is that in the "Casualties" speech, King focused primarily on the Vietnam War and in the Nobel lecture, King more broadly connected the three evils that confront the world: racism, poverty, and war. Additionally, the audience for the "Casualties" speech is Americans while the Nobel lecture had a world perspective. However the contexts of the "Casualties" speech and the Nobel lecture differ, the sentiment of the quotation in both documents was virtually the same. The quotation reveals King to be a pacifist who was not naïve about the dangers in the world. After observing that history was full of conquerors that pursued war in the name of peace, King insisted that peaceful ends must be pursued by peaceful means. He used Homer's story of Ulysses overcoming the song of the Sirens to suggest that humanity must sing the song of peace, "a cosmic melody that is far superior to the discords of war."[299] In other words, King was certain that peace did not equal the absence of war (reminiscent of another King quotation on the inscription wall) and he wanted the nation to create the conditions for lasting peace.

The inclusion of a quotation calling for people to sacrifice for peace can also be seen as an inversion of the more typical understanding of American troops sacrificing for their country by serving in the armed forces and waging war against America's enemies. There is no doubt that King intended this inversion in his speech about the damage American military conflict in Vietnam was doing to America’s international prestige.

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[299] Martin Luther King Jr. "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," delivered February 25, 1967 in Los Angeles, CA. Reprinted at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/unpub/670225-001_The_Casualties_of_the_War_in_Vietnam.htm. Last accessed on April 26, 2012.

King was certainly sensitive to charges that he was dishonoring American troops and giving aid to the enemy, namely Communists, by vocally opposing the Vietnam War.[300] King inverts our common understanding of what is worthy of sacrifice, peace rather than war. This inversion directly refutes the idea that the most important public sacrifice was made by the military and their families who wage war to guarantee the security of the nation.[301]

The Ultimate Measure of a Man

> The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. – 1963.

The source of this quotation is a sermon entitled, "On Being a Good Neighbor," republished in King's 1963 book of sermons, *Strength to Love*. In the sermon, King reflects on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to suggest that the Samaritan displayed three types of *altruism* by choosing to help the "certain man" lying at the side of the road: *universal*, *dangerous*, and *excessive* altruism. The danger in the scenario stemmed from the unknown circumstances facing the Samaritan. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was mountainous, meandering, and treacherous. Robbers would hide behind the twists and turns, cracks and crevices, waiting to ambush travelers. The

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[300] According to biographer David J. Garrow, in September 1965, after meeting with U.N. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, King told reporters that he had recommended to Goldberg that the United States halt its bombing campaign in Vietnam and end its opposition to China joining the United Nations. Connecticut Senator Thomas Dodd (D) accused King of giving aid to "Red China" and violating federal laws barring private citizens from foreign policy ventures. See Garrow, *Bearing*, 445.

[301] Stanley Hauerwas argues that the United States *needs* war to unite its diverse populace because it does not have a single unifying story. See Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle argue that the nation requires the blood sacrifice of its warrior class for social cohesion and that the U.S. flag serves as a totem object to which the sacrifices of the warrior class are offered. See Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Samaritan could not be certain that he would not be attacked while attempting to help the beaten stranger. Further, the existing social norms forbade contact between certain groups. King hypothesized about the reasons why the priest and the Levite, the presumed moral vicars of society, would pass by the man lying on the side of the road, but ultimately he suggested that their reasons came down to one simple explanation: fear. King suggested that the fear of negative social repercussions for going against social norms for the greater good stopped good people from taking the risk to do the right thing.

It is in this context, a discussion of dangerous altruism, that King suggested, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."[302] The message was more than just one about the virtues of personal perseverance or standing one's ground in the face of public criticism. The next sentence in the same paragraph further illuminated King's specific meaning: "The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others." Thus, the ultimate measure of a person for King was standing up for someone else, even at the expense of one's own self.

Develop an Overriding Loyalty to Mankind

Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. – New York, 1967.

This quotation comes from King's address before the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. King had been uneasy about the American war in Vietnam for a few years, but generally remained a marginal opponent, choosing to focus his energies primarily on the Black

[302] King, *Strength*, 35.

civil rights struggle. He did not begin articulating comprehensive arguments against the Vietnam War until January 1967.

This quotation comes from his best-known address regarding the Vietnam War. On that night in April of 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. publicly, if not formally, broke ranks with President Lyndon Johnson, by demanding that the President "halt all bombing, North and South; declare a unilateral cease-fire; curtail military activities in Thailand and Laos; accept a Viet Cong presence in peace negotiations; and set a date by which all foreign troops would be out of Vietnam."[303] Though King was pleased with the speech and ecstatic that he had finally made a comprehensive public declaration consistent with his moral convictions about Vietnam, friends and foes alike roundly criticized him. A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young all disassociated themselves from him. The *Washington Post* editorial page claimed he was no longer useful to the civil rights cause. Even his closest advisor, Stanley Levison, told him that the statement was "unbalanced and poorly thought out."[304] In this one speech, King was ever so true to the sentiments of his "the ultimate measure of a man" quotation discussed above.

The text on the wall comes from a section in the speech where King spoke of what was really needed to defeat communism. He lamented that the Western nations founded with a revolutionary spirit had become "anti-revolutionary" at the very moment when the world needed a revolution to "[declare] eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and

[303] Garrow, *Bearing*, 553.
[304] Ibid., 554.

militarism."[305] King declared, "A genuine revolution of values means . . . our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies."[306] This ecumenical loyalty to humanity was the revolution for which King called. He acknowledged that many in society would consider the idea that a "love revolution" could solve the world's problems to be weak and cowardly, but King insisted that love powerful enough to spur a peace revolution was a "force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life."

Until Justice Runs Down Like Water

We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs "down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." – Alabama, 1955.

On December 5, 1955, a little over a year after assuming the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL, Martin Luther King Jr. was thrust into public ministry when he was drafted into becoming the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and de facto leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King, accustomed to spending fifteen hours to prepare his sermons, was only able to spend thirty minutes preparing notes for this, his first public address as a protest leader. One primary concern of his was the need to distinguish the MIA's use of the boycott as a strategy from the boycotts sponsored by the White Citizens Councils against Negroes who advocated against segregation.[307] To that end, King, quite masterfully, linked the

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[305] Martin Luther King Jr., " 'Beyond Vietnam': Address Delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church." Delivered on April 4, 1967. Online at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.pdf, last accessed 26 April 2012.

[306] Ibid.

[307] Branch, *Parting*, 138.

cause in Montgomery to the broader American story. "We are American citizens and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning,"[308] King opined in the opening paragraph of his address. Later in the address, King suggested that the right of Blacks to protest bus laws in Montgomery was guaranteed by the Supreme Court, the Constitution, and God Almighty and that public protest was a pillar of American democracy. This last point, as I will discuss shortly, is, for me, King's greatest legacy for an enduring American identity and is incomprehensibly missing from the narrative of the National King Memorial.

This quotation on the inscription wall obliquely acknowledges the influence of religion on King's work. The reference within the quotation is from the biblical book of Amos, chapter 5. In this chapter, the biblical writer laments the ritual worship of God by a community that will not rightfully honor God. The best way to worship God is to guarantee justice for God's people. The parallels are fitting. King encouraged those long denied justice to strive, in the name of love, to form a society that would guarantee justice to them. This is the only quotation on the inscription wall that has an explicitly religious reference. It is surprising that the memorial would eschew references to God, especially given the central role God plays in civil religious discourse, as we saw in chapter one. Perhaps the council of historians did not want to offend non-religious Americans, especially in a twenty-first century context of increased cultural and religious pluralism.

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[308] Martin Luther King Jr. "Address to the first Montgomery Improvement Association MIA Mass Meeting." Delivered December 5, 1955. Transcribed at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/the_addres_to_the_first_montgomery_improvement_association_mia_mass_meeting/. Last accessed May 3, 2012.

Nevertheless, this quotation gives only a subtle acknowledgement of one of the major influences on King's thought and work.

A Society at Peace with Itself

> We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. – Alabama, 1965.

The first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery on behalf of Black voting rights ended in the infamous "Bloody Sunday" attacks by Alabama state and local police on 600 civil rights marchers on March 7, 1965. The second march ended when King turned the 2,500 protesters around at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, 1965. The third march, beginning on March 16, completed the trek from Selma to Montgomery on March 25, 1965 where King delivered a stirring address, colloquially known as the "How Long, Not Long" speech, on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery.

The address amounted to a rally speech lifting up those who had participated in the march, celebrating the accomplishments of the movement to that point, and pleading for a sustained commitment to the struggle for Black equality and nonviolence. King warned of the difficult moments ahead and counseled against the temptation to seek justice by means of revenge.

> Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the White man, not of the Black man. That will be the day of man as man.[309]

King envisioned a unified, multicultural society that peacefully worked out its social issues and guaranteed justice for all. If Blacks were to obtain justice and equality

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[309] Martin Luther King Jr. "Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March." Delivered on March 25, 1965. Transcribed at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_address_at_the_conclusion_of_selma_march/. Last accessed on May 3, 2012.

by employing violent means, King feared that society could not be at ease with its conscience. In the "How long? Not long!" refrain at the end of the address, King declared his confidence that the truth that undergirds the desire for full equality would win the day, no matter how long it took.

The Presence of Justice

True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. – 1958

This quotation from the inscription wall comes from the second chapter of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1958 text, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, about his experience of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the chapter entitled "Montgomery Before the Protest," King wrote of the social conditions in Montgomery, Alabama that ultimately made the bus boycott necessary. He suggested that although Blacks did not put the system of segregation in place, their actions nonetheless contributed to its continued existence. For King, Montgomery failed to make social progress due to "factionalism among the [Black] leaders" which prevented the unity necessary for social action, "indifference in the educated group," who were satisfied with their positions and status in the internal community, and "passivity in the uneducated," who were too afraid to challenge the system.[310]

Nevertheless, people like Reverend Vernon Johns and E.D. Nixon, according to King, lit a slow fire of discontent that disrupted the "peace" in Montgomery achieved at the "cost of human servitude."[311] It was to this "negative" peace that King responded. He related a story of a White citizen of Montgomery asking him why he had come to destroy

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[310] Martin Luther King Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 37.

[311] Ibid., 39.

the tradition of peaceful, harmonious race relations. King had responded to the gentleman like this:

> You have never had real peace in Montgomery. You have a sort of negative peace in which the Negro too often accepted his state of subordination. But this is not true peace. **True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.** The tension we see in Montgomery today is the necessary tension that comes when the oppressed rise up and start to move forward toward a permanent, positive peace.[312]

The truncated quotation on the inscription wall only partially reveals King's intended meaning. Certainly it tells us that true peace only comes when justice is present. However, the other meaning of King's words, evident in the longer quotation above, is that the justice necessary for peace comes about due to the creative tension caused by the disenfranchised seeking justice for themselves (nonviolently). Thus, the tension for King, was not only justifiable and understandable, it was necessary.

The extended quotation speaks to the role social action plays in a fully functioning democracy. King's enduring legacy is his invocation of nonviolent social action as the most legitimate method for populist movements prophetically to confront and correct a social order gone wrong. This was most certainly a hard fought fight; friends, foes, and everyone in between attacked King's methods. People questioned whether direct action was inherently violent because it incited violent responses, whether the best way to earn social equality was through the courts, whether state-sanctioned physical threats to health and freedom posed too great a risk to get involved in direct social action, and whether the slow rate of social progress revealed the futility of nonviolent social action. Nonetheless, the collective memory of King's legacy today

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[312] Ibid., 40. I have italicized the portion of the extended quotation that is inscribed on the King Memorial inscription wall.

expresses the belief that nonviolent social action has won the day, despite the fact that the inscription wall does not explicitly say so.

The Drum Major Paraphrase Controversy

A controversy about the King Memorial erupted around the time of the originally scheduled dedication date in August 2011. The right side of the Stone of Hope was supposed to have etched on it the following words from King's "The Drum Major Instinct" sermon, the last message he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church before his assassination: "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter." Late in the process, the designers decided to place this long inscription on the right side of the Stone of Hope rather than the left side because they wanted the other inscription, "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope" to be the first inscription visitors saw when walking through the Memorial, as it embodied the grand metaphor at the heart of the design of the Memorial.

Unfortunately, Lei Yixin, the master sculptor tasked with creating the statue of King for the memorial,[313] had already prepared the right side of the stone for the shorter quotation. Instead of sticking with the original plan, the King Memorial Foundation decided to paraphrase the drum major quotation, believing that words from King's self-

[313] The King Memorial Foundation selected Chinese master sculptor Lei Yixin to build the King Memorial, sparking multiple mini-controversies. First, some complained that the Foundation should have hired an American sculptor. Second, labor unions were upset that Lei brought unpaid laborers from China to work on shaping the granite rather than using unionized labor in the United States. See Ben Evans, "Choice of Sculptor for Martin Luther King, Jr. Monument Draws Flak" *USAToday*. Published August 8, 2007 at http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-08-25-mlkmemorial_N.htm. Last accessed May 30, 2012.

declared eulogy belonged on his national memorial.[314] Thus, Lei etched the following into the right side of the Stone of Hope: "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness."

The esteemed poet and civil rights icon Maya Angelou rather plainly articulated what many had come to believe about the paraphrase: that it made Martin Luther King Jr. look like an "arrogant twit." Angelou, who knew King personally and worked in a leadership capacity with a northern branch of the SCLC when King was alive, complained that the paraphrase excluded a crucial, conditional "if" clause. She argued that the paraphrase minimized King and made him seem less humanitarian and more egotistic than he truly was. Further, in her opinion, King never would have called himself a drum major.

A closer look at King's actual words validates Angelou's comments. King did not view the label of drum major positively. King argued in the sermon from which the paraphrase was sourced that people with the drum major instinct wanted to be first, wanted to lead the parade, and wanted to be recognized and praised. This drum major instinct was dangerous because if left unharnessed it could distort one's personality, creating an ego problem.[315] In fact, King believed that America itself had succumbed to the drum major instinct given its actions in Vietnam. King did not want the drum major label. The accolades and awards were meaningless to him. However, he said, *if* society insisted on labeling him a drum major, then it should allow him to be a drum major for the positive, life-affirming values of peace, justice, and righteousness. King refused to

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[314] Weingarten and Ruane.

[315] Martin Luther King Jr., "The Drum Major Instinct," delivered February 4, 1968, online at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/, last accessed February 20, 2014.

claim the label for himself, in contrast to the implication of the poorly worded paraphrase.

Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Department of the Interior, agreed with Maya Angelou's assessment. In January 2012, four months after the King Memorial opened, he gave the National Parks Service, charged with maintaining the monuments in the National Mall, thirty days to come up with a plan to fix the paraphrase. That plan, announced February 6, called for the current paraphrased quote to be removed and replaced with the entire text of the exact quotation as delivered by Dr. King.[316] Within days of the announcement, the King Memorial Foundation announced its opposition to the plan, believing that it would "threaten the design, structure, and integrity of the Stone of Hope."[317] Eventually, the two sides found a suitable compromise. Secretary Salazar announced in December 2012 that the phrase would be removed and covered with scratch marks to blend in with the rest of the stone.[318] Lei Yixin completed that work in August 2013, in time for the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

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[316] U.S. Department of the Interior. Press Release. "Salazar, Jarvis Announce Plan to Correct 'Drum Major Quote' on the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial." Released February 6, 2012. http://www.doi.gov/news/pressreleases/Salazar-Jarvis-Announce-Plan-to-Correct-Drum-Major-Quote-on-the-Martin-Luther-King-Jr-Memorial.cfm. Last accessed May 31, 2012.

[317] Melanie Eversley. "MLK Memorial Fundraiser Opposes Changing Quote at Site," *USA Today*, February 12, 2012. http://content.usatoday.com/communities/ondeadline/post/2012/02/mlk-memorial-fundraiser-opposes-changing-quote-at-site/1#.T8fmF5lYs2E/ Last accessed May 31, 2012.

[318] Emmarie Huetteman, "In Response to Criticism, Officials to Remove Quote from Memorial to King," *New York Times*, December 13, 2012, A21.

Summary

The National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in the District of Columbia marks yet another *lieux de mémoire* dedicated to preserving the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. in America. The task set before the King Memorial Foundation challenged them to crystalize the national memory of King in a way that elucidates the collective identity and shared values of the nation while remaining authentic to the historical record on King. This was certainly no easy task. Senator John Warner had warned King's fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, about the perils of creating the Memorial when he suggested to them "simplicity would go a long way and send the strongest of messages—simplicity and elegance."[319] Yet, how does one capture such a complex historical figure under a rubric of simplicity and elegance?

For a national monument to have lasting resonance it must be universal enough to handle multiple interpretations while simultaneously representing its subject matter faithfully, though not necessarily completely. Pierre Nora writes that the most fundamental purpose of a site of memory, such as a national memorial, is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial … in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs."[320] The resiliency and enduring relevance of sites of memory lie in "their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning, and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications."[321] The National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

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[319] Forgey Benjamen. "King Memorial Takes a Step; Senate Bill Would Secure Prominent Site to Honor Slain Leader," *The Washington Post.* Published Feb 27, 1998. D01.

[320] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Reverberations*, Spring 1989, 19.

[321] Ibid.

immortalizes King and “materializes” four abstract principles commonly attributed to his legacy: hope, democracy, justice, and love. It is abstract and flexible enough to enable its meaning and ramifications to be altered by time, circumstance, and/or audience. Thus, the Memorial can begin as a creative materialization of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and symbolically elevate King to the same status as Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson. Yet the Memorial’s dedication ceremony can also transform it into a site of protest against capitalism and militarism left unabated, as discussed in the next chapter.

By contrast to the primarily prophetic approach of Martin Luther King Jr.'s own work to civil religion in America as one nation "under God," the National King Memorial as a site of memory features King’s priestly approach to civil religion in America as a nation “with liberty and justice for all.” This approach shifts its moral vision and discourse from a *promise made to* America by a transcendent deity to the *promise of* America as a self-transcendent nation, asking the nation to trust in a particular vision or imagination of universal values that make the nation great.[322] In this case, the National King Memorial celebrates and asks us to trust in a particular formulation of universal values--hope, democracy, justice, and love--presumably embodied both in the ethos of the nation and in the person being memorialized, Martin Luther King Jr. These values represent not only a promise and commitment to American citizens; they represent an example to and for the world.

Finally, the National King Memorial, as a site of memory and a sacred shrine of American civil religion, mediates between the antithetical liberal and republican ideals of

[322] Martin E. Marty, "Civil Religion: Two Kinds of Two Kinds," in a collection of his essays, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 89.

the American polity. Robert N. Bellah locates the tension between these two sets of ideals in the very founding documents of the nation: the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*.[323] Contemporary debates between political "liberals and conservatives," particularly conservatives devoted to laissez-faire or libertarian ideals and liberals devoted to Keynesian economics and federal regulation, reflect this underlying tension between philosophical liberalism that seeks to reduce "welfare-state" impediments to individual liberty and free enterprise, on one side, and classical republican ideals of checking self-interest to nurture public participation and service to the commonweal. One can see the same tension in the National King Memorial, particularly in the quotations on the inscription wall. While most of the quotations lift up social justice and shared service for the common good, King also speaks out for individual rights and liberties for all. Taken as a whole, the quotations remind us of our responsibilities as individuals to nurture our own gifts and skills, but to do so in ways that contribute to the good of society at large. The selected quotations also allow the National King Memorial to articulate American moral values without relying too explicitly on Christian religious symbolism, a necessity perceived in light of increased cultural and religious pluralism in America. This allows a broad American audience, from secular humanists to deeply committed evangelicals, to identify with Dr. King and the moral values he embodies in the memorial.

The National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. provides ample evidence for considering King's legacy in the American cultural landscape. A detailed look at the creative process, design elements, selected quotations, and public

[323] Robert N. Bellah, "Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic," *Society*, January/February 1998, 196.

controversies reveals the existence of a dominant, state-supported vision or revision of King and his meaning to American society, as well as marks of dissenting or subversive visions of how King's legacy challenges American state power and embodies moral protests against economic injustice. However, such protest found expression not so much in the Memorial itself, but in the dedication ceremony that presented the King Memorial to the public. The next chapter will discuss and analyze that ceremony.

Chapter 5

Recovering the Prophet of Social Justice:

Remembering King at the King Memorial Dedication Ceremony

> Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. … The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?
>
> "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963.

Despite its myriad of conflicts and controversies, the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in the District of Columbia remembers King as an eloquent spokesperson for the all-American virtues of justice, democracy, hope, and love. In granite the memorial casts the living spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. as the stone of hope that broke through the walls of social despair in which America imprisoned its Black citizens, even though it leaves individual visitors to imagine the details of that despair for themselves.

On Sunday, October 16, 2011, the United States officially dedicated the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial to the public. The original dedication was scheduled for Sunday, August 28, 2011, but Hurricane Irene blew in, forcing a postponement. The expected turnout for the steamy summertime ceremony was 400,000 people,[324] larger than the number that attended the original March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963. The officials waited until the Friday evening before the scheduled dedication ceremony to postpone the ceremonies, presumably hoping that Hurricane Irene would change course leaving all plans intact. Sojourners from all over the country had already filled the nation's capital, me included, in anticipation of this special event.

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[324] Melanie Eversley. "Fewer expected at Rescheduled King Memorial Dedication," *USA Today*. Published October 16, 2011. Last accessed June 13, 2012. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-10-15/mlk-memorial/50764056/1

The memorial itself had been open to the public the previous week and many had already visited it. Because many visitors made a vacation of the opening, rather than a quick trip to celebrate and go home, it was easy to predict that the rescheduled dedication ceremony would not involve nearly the same number of people, with estimates of only 50,000 people in attendance.[325]

I attended both the abbreviated opening week in August and the rescheduled dedication ceremony in October. While the August date was perfect for symbolic reasons (it marked the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and King's best-known speech) the October date was much better in terms of weather and comfort. The day before Hurricane Irene wiped out the first dedication ceremony, the temperature was a humid, unbearable 96 degrees. In fact, the weather was extremely hot and humid the entire week. If those temperatures had persisted into Sunday, there might have been more than a few medical emergencies that could have marred the experience, especially if one considers the sheer number of people who would have been sitting out in the hot sun, uncovered, for hours. The weather for the October ceremony was splendid: cool without being cold and a cloudless sky with no precipitation and little humidity.

While the Memorial itself does little to contextualize Martin Luther King Jr. or explain *what* he actually accomplished, the same cannot be said of the dedication ceremony that accompanied the opening of the Memorial. The ceremony, primarily consisting of leaders who were active allies of Dr. King during the civil rights movement, executives of the corporate sponsors of the Memorial, leaders of the King Memorial Foundation, a few public officials (including the President of the United States), and

[325] Eversley.

various choirs and performing acts, at least partially filled in the gaps in King's legacy left by the National King Memorial. Taken together, the Memorial and its dedication ceremony present a detailed, if not wholly complete, framing of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. The National King Memorial presents memorable quotations from King that remind the nation to fulfill the promise of its values. The speakers at the dedication ceremony emphasized the challenges facing America today, and showed how King's legacy provides insight in meeting those challenges. They underscored that King's legacy is not lodged in the letter of a dead past, but expresses the living spirit of America's present and future.

As early as 6 a.m. on the day of the dedication ceremony, attendees lined up along Independence Avenue, adjacent to the park that borders the National King Memorial. The dedication ceremonies did not occur inside the Memorial's space; that space was reserved for the Presidential family's visit to the memorial and the President's speech. The Memorial was blocked off to the public and remained so until two hours or so after the official ceremony were over. A free concert by Stevie Wonder, James Taylor, Sheryl Crow, and Ledisi featuring Ray Chew Live assuaged the crowd until the National Parks Service could remove the set-up from the President's speech.

The set-up for the ceremonies consisted of a stage with lighting and effects, a VIP area where the performing choirs watched the ceremony after their performances, a general seating area for the audience, several risers for the television cameras, a media area, a huge video screen by the stage, and several booths where people could purchase the program book and receive a free hat commemorating the memorial. The day was divided into three segments: the "Morning Joy," hosted by CNN contributor Roland

Martin, the official dedication ceremony, hosted by the moderator of PBS' *Washington Week*, Gwen Ifill, and the post-dedication concert. The ceremony is noteworthy for our purposes because it gives us a deeper understanding of King's legacy. The proceedings affirm the values that are embedded in the National Memorial and use those values as a more critical lens to address contemporary concerns. This corrective lens recaptures some of the history of Martin Luther King Jr. that has been lost in our collective memory of him, thereby demonstrating the fluidity and contestation of collective memory and civil religious narratives.

Historical Contextualization at the Dedication Ceremony

Every group's collective memory is rooted and justified by a historical narrative, however scattered or incomplete that history is. The National King Memorial is no exception. Its dedication ceremony filled in the historical context left ambiguous by the Memorial itself. It did so without contradicting the general message of the memorial, though a few speakers managed to reflect on the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Memorial and ponder whether collectively they appropriately represented Martin Luther King Jr.

The contextualization of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and legacy began with a video tribute to King entitled, "A Living Legacy," developed by the AARP.[326] The video, broadcast on the large video screen near the stage, featured reflections from former Secretary of State, General Colin Powell (Ret.) and Attorney General Eric Holder, Jr., as well as participants in American freedom struggles of the past spanning four distinct interest groups: Reverend Perry A. Smith, III, a former Freedom Rider; Colman

[326] The nine-minute video can be viewed online. "Martin Luther King Jr.'s Living Legacy," AARP.org, published on July 21, 2011 at http://www.aarp.org/politics-society/history/info-07-2011/video-living-legacy-of-martin-luther-king-jr.html.

McCarthy, a journalist who covered the Civil Rights Movement; Delores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers union whose membership struggled for worker rights in the American Southwest during the King years; Karen N. Narasaki, member of the Asian-American Justice Center whose parents were sent to internment camps after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor; and Zainab Al Suwaij of the American Islamic Congress. Interlaced between these reflections were images associated with the movements addressed by these representatives. The themes arising from this short documentary film became a microcosm of the themes addressed in the speeches given throughout the day.

Colin Powell declared, "What King did, and all the others who were with King (we can't talk about King alone) …What King did was hold a mirror up to the face of America and say, 'Is this who we are? Is this who we are?' "[327] Journalist Colman McCarthy distilled King's philosophy of nonviolent social action as "fight[ing] fire with water . . . The water of organized resistance [and] defying corrupt governance."[328] Revered Perry A. Smith III, veteran of the Freedom Rides, stated that the primary lesson King taught the movement was how to employ the love ethic. "No matter what you are doing to me," Smith proclaimed, "I still love you. I refuse to let you make me hate you. I love you."[329] Delores Huerta, comparing the work of the United Farm Workers Union with those of the Black Freedom movement, declared, "People were beaten ... we went to

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[327] From Gen. Colin Powell's reflections in the excerpt from the video tribute, "A Living Legacy," as broadcast at the National King Memorial October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's transcription of his audio recording of the event.

[328] From Colman McCarthy's reflections in the excerpt from the video tribute, "A Living Legacy," as broadcast at the National King Memorial October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's transcription of his audio recording of the event.

[329] From Rev. Perry A. Smith, III's reflections in the excerpt from the video tribute, "A Living Legacy," as broadcast at the National King Memorial October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's transcription of his audio recording of the event.

jail many times ... Sometimes you have to create conflict. And of course this is what Dr. King did. He had to create conflict."[330]

Attorney General Eric Holder Jr. also reflected on King's impact in the video:

> The essence of Dr. King was that he saw laws that were unjust, he broke them, but was willing to suffer the consequences of breaking those laws. He was a person, I think, who believed in the rule of law. And he wanted to change those laws that were unfair. And I think that is why Dr. King is such an important person in our history. [He was] a private citizen, not a person with an official title, but [he] changed this nation in fundamental and positive ways.[331]

Holder highlights King's status as a private citizen and affirms King's willingness to suffer within the parameters of the system in order to reform it. For Holder, this was the key to King's enduring impact and worthiness of national recognition. He reaffirms the idea that a committed citizenry acting to reform society, not to overthrow it, is the cornerstone of democracy. The virtue of democracy is also explicitly celebrated in the National King Memorial.

This short nine-minute video tribute presents Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a man who employed his love ethic of returning love for hate to fight against unjust laws in America that denied the full humanity of some of its citizens. The nonviolent social action used by King and his supporters created a healthy conflict that fundamentally changed America and inspired similarly afflicted groups around the world to use the same tactics in securing their own human rights. It provided an appropriate historical

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[330] From Delores Huerta's reflections in the excerpt from the video tribute, "A Living Legacy," as broadcast at the National King Memorial October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's transcription of his audio recording of the event.

[331] From Attorney General Eric Holder Jr.'s reflections in the excerpt from the video tribute, "A Living Legacy," as broadcast at the National King Memorial October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's transcription of his audio recording of the event.

context that justifies the elevation of King's legacy to national hero and his memorialization in the pantheon of American heroes: the National Mall.

Rabbi Israel Dresner, a participant in the Freedom Rides of the 1960s and "the most arrested Rabbi in America," added some historical contextualization to the proceedings. Celebrating the notable Jewish participation in the Civil Rights Movement, Dresner gave some interesting remarks contrasting those who participated in the Movement with those who funded the National King Memorial:

> Dr. King was truly a genius, and not just spiritually, ethically, intellectually. But he was practically a genius in terms of politics and economics. He understood that in the United States, where at that time 85% of the population that was White, the 1/9 of Americans, a little over 11%, who were then called Negroes, not African-Americans, could not bring down the walls by themselves. They needed supporters in the White community. And he sought out those segments of the White community whom he knew would support the movement. … Just as last night at the gala … all of the corporations who have contributed money to build this magnificent monument took pride in the fact that they had given a million or two million or three million dollars of their billions of dollars; I want to take pride in the group that I came from, whom next to Blacks, I think were the leading group in the Civil Rights Movement, namely, the Jewish community. … Jews throughout the movement in '61, '62, '63, '64, and '65 provided half the Whites even though we were only 4% of the Whites in the country. So I want to take pride the way that General Motors did last night at the gala, and all of the other big corporations. In those days, they weren't giving any money to the movement. They weren't giving any bodies to the movement to go to jail and protest.[332]

The Rabbi paints a stark picture regarding White support of the Civil Rights Movement in general (and of Martin Luther King Jr. in particular) that corroborates the 1966 Gallup poll that revealed King to have only a 33% favorable rating.[333] This highlights the dramatic change in race relations brought about by the work of Dr. King.

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[332] From Rabbi Israel Dresner's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National King Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[333] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Divided on Whether King's Dream Has Been Realized." http://www.gallup.com/poll/149201/Americans-Divided-Whether-King-Dream-Realized.aspx. Last Accessed August 26, 2011.

More importantly, Dresner reminds those assembled for the ceremony not to get swept up in the sentiment behind the creation of the Memorial. He juxtaposes his (earned) pride in the Jewish social activism of that period with the (suspect) pride displayed by corporations who gave "a million or two million or three million dollars of their billions of dollars" to build a monument decades after the real struggle in which they did not participate. Dresner's slight rebuke of the way the National King Memorial was funded (via $80 million of corporate funding) is more prescient than even he let on. Not only did corporations not provide support for the Black freedom struggle, Martin Luther King Jr. was a vocal opponent of the excessive materialism, economic exploitation, and military industrial complex, which he saw as a terrible byproduct of capitalism. The fact that anti-union corporations, military contractors, and exploitative financial institutions would be among the primary financial backers of the $120-million National King Memorial seems both a financial necessity and an unfortunate irony that contributes to the muting of King's prophetic voice on economic and military issues.

Nevertheless, Dresner does not dwell on the irony of corporate sponsorship of King after the fact and instead keeps the focus on the coalition between Blacks and Jews that he suggests started during the Civil Rights Movement and remains in place today. He reminds the audience that President Barack Obama won 78% of the Jewish vote and asserted that a broadened coalition that included all minorities in America would be needed to re-elect him and defeat the pessimism of the current age. In doing so, Rabbi Dresner celebrates King for transcending racial boundaries and links the presidency of Barack Obama to Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. This linkage, and other political sentiments, would reoccur in countless speeches throughout the day.

Political Sentiments at the Dedication Ceremonies

Many of the speakers emphasized the idea that Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream remained incompletely fulfilled in American society and posited political solutions to move the country towards greater fulfillment of the dream. Vincent Gray, mayor of the District of Columbia, expressed pride that his city would forever host the National King Memorial. Nevertheless, he decried the Congressional treatment of the nation's capital:

> In 1966, Dr. King marched in our streets calling for an end to this injustice. He decried the plight of our residents when he said, "Congress has been derelict in their duties and sacred responsibility to make justice and freedom a reality for all citizens of the District of Columbia." And yet, all these years later, those who live in our city are still denied the basic rights of self-determination and representation as afforded other Americans. The District of Columbia can't even approve our own budget, our own local laws without permission from a Congress in which we have no voting voice. Day in and day out, DC residents live under the yoke of injustice. And ladies and gentlemen, it is time for this to end. And so, as we celebrate this momentous dedication, I implore all of you, I implore you Mr. President, I implore the members of Congress, stand with the people of the District of Columbia, stand with the legacy of Dr. King, remove the shackles of oppression, so that when Americans dutifully recite the Pledge of Allegiance, we truly mean "Liberty and Justice for All!"[334]

Mayor Gray recovers the history of King's advocacy for D.C. voting rights and invokes language reminiscent of the American Revolution to promote the contemporary political cause of D.C. statehood. He demonstrates one of the useful functions of collective memory: providing commonly held, resonant imagery to address contemporary issues. Phrases such as "state of tyranny," "sacred responsibility," and "Liberty and Justice for All!" evoke a seamless connection between the American Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and the contemporary national disenfranchisement of District of Columbia citizens.

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[334] From the speech of Vincent Gray, Mayor of Washington, D.C., at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

Reverend Al Sharpton, tasked with speaking specifically on the Memorial's theme of justice, invoked a myriad of contemporary issues for which he claimed King would advocate:

> [Dr. King] was not just a historic figure, he was a conduit of a spirit of justice. Justice had been denied in those times. He brought us from the back of the bus. He brought us to voting rights. But we must continue to fight for justice today. Justice is not trying to change the voting rights act and deny us in 34 states our right to vote, with voter ID laws. Justice is not executing people on recanted testimonies. Justice is not sending children to [a] school that is not funded. Justice is not 1% of the country controlling 40% of the wealth. Just like Dr. King talked about occupying Washington, just like there are those occupying Wall Street, we are going to occupy the voting booth and we are going to take those in that stand up for justice and retire those that stand in the way.[335]

Here, Sharpton employs the values embedded in the collective memory of King to issue a call to arms to resist societal trends that contradict King's legacy. He uses the history of King advocating for Black voter rights, planning an "occupation of the nation's capital," and marching against segregation to better understand how to address the issues of the present.

Lee Sanders, Secretary Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), spoke on the Memorial's (and King's) virtue of democracy.

> Democracy grants each of us a seat at the table of politics and civic life. It's the force that should level the playing field, the promise that our voices cannot be drowned out by the powerful, or the wealthy, or the well connected. … In 1968, Dr. King took his struggle for full democracy to Memphis, TN on behalf of 1300 sanitation workers, AFSCME members. These 1300 workers were asking for respect, demanding fairness, demanding to be heard. The fight in Memphis became Dr. King's last. He went because he understood the connection, the connection between workers' rights and civil rights. Those striking sanitation workers weren't simply fighting for better pay, and safer working conditions, they were asserting a claim on our democracy. But today's attacks on rights and worker

[335] From Reverend Al Sharpton's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

> rights, tell us the fight, the fight for democracy is not over. Victories that were decades in the making can be undone with a governor's signature, a legislature's vote, or yes, our own apathy. Laws are being passed that silence workers' voices [and] make it more difficult for millions of us to cast a vote. They denigrate the democratic principles on which we stand. But we cannot, we cannot be discouraged. Too much remains to be done. Dr. King issued a clarion call, a call for equality, a call to make democracy a reality for all of God's children.[336]

Sanders recalls the history of Martin Luther King Jr.'s commitment to worker unions to highlight historic and present-day concerns about economic justice. For Sanders, and presumably for King himself, unions were a vital part of a properly functioning democracy. Efforts to restrict the power of unions or even the ability of workers to form a union are a threat to democracy. Considering the King holiday debate, the Reagan reconstruction of King's importance, and the elements of the National King Memorial, one can deduce that King's commitment to worker unions is at best a tangential aspect of the American collective memory of him. Further, unionization does not seem to be a robust aspect of American civil religion. Sanders's effort here is to draw upon a little known (or forgotten?) fact about King to garner sympathy and support for contemporary unions.

It should not be lost on the reader that the political sentiments expressed at the National King Memorial dedication ceremony reflected more progressive or left-leaning political ideology. Thus, the ceremony offered a corrective to the politically right-leaning Reagan-era reconstruction and the politically moderate framing of the Memorial itself. The majority of the speakers attempted to recover a prophetic, radical King and invoke that prophetic image on behalf of liberal activism. One can only wonder what the climate would have been had 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain been elected

[336] From Lee Sanders' speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

president and been tasked with opening the King Memorial (would the Foundation even have asked him to speak at the ceremony?). Surely, rather than invocations of moving from "the outhouse to the White House"[337] and calls for social justice, there would have been more expressions of colorblind sentiments and celebrations of the nation's racial progress that did not include disclaimers of progress yet to come.

Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Speak

Notable veterans of the civil rights movement who worked with Dr. King reflected on their time with him and how his vision for society continues to animate their work. Reverend Jesse Jackson reminded the audience that Martin Luther King Jr.'s last acts were on behalf of economic justice.

> I remember my last birthday with Dr. King, January 15, 1968. We spent that day planning a Poor People's Campaign, a march on Washington. A poor people's campaign to occupy the Mall. We were willing to engage in civil disobedience, to go to jail and do whatever was necessary in the nation's capital to get the attention of the government to shift a war in Vietnam, killing and being killed, to a war on poverty at home, healing and being healed. [On] his last Sunday morning, a sermon delivered at the Washington National Cathedral, four days before his assassination, Dr. King said that we are coming to Washington to demand that the government address itself on the problem of poverty. Answering the rhetorical question of why such a gesture was necessary, Dr. King declared that it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for the Black people, [except] when it is confronted massively and dramatically in terms of direct action.[338]

Reverend Jackson refers to King's plans for the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) as a march on Washington to "occupy" the Mall on behalf of economic justice for the poor.

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[337] From Reverend Al Sharpton's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[338] From Reverend Jesse Jackson's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

Jackson's use of the term "occupy" was intentional given the growing influence of the Occupy Wall Street movement at that time. On the day of the Memorial dedication ceremonies, a remnant of that group, Occupy D.C., was encamped in McPherson Square, just a ten-minute walk away from the National King Memorial. Perhaps assuming that Occupy D.C. was close enough to hear him, Reverend Jackson offered them this advice:

> Forty-three years after Dr. King planned an occupation on this same spot, he would say to the occupiers at Wall Street, the movement has gone global, you are the children and offspring of Dr. King's poor people's campaign and resurrection city. … In that legacy, keep protesting, remain nonviolent, stay disciplined, [and] stay focused. Don't just fortify the system, restructure it. March on for an even playing field, public rules, clear goals, fair referees, and transparency. March on to fight racial injustice and economic inequality. Fight for economic and racial justice. ... Dr. King would say you must use the rights earned through the sacrifice and the blood of the martyrs. You must use your minds and bodies as living sacrifices. You must use your vote, our path to legislation, litigation, and laws to protect the vulnerable. Use your love-building coalitions. Remain focused on being the rope of hope to those in the hull of the ship, the 99%. Dr. King argued that leadership at its very best was not meant to follow opinion polls. It was meant to mold public opinion. Do, not what is convenient or popular, do what is right. Don't be corrupted or compromise your position, stay true to your convictions.[339]

Reverend Jackson explicitly connects the Occupy Wall Street movement to the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King's legacy by affirming the occupiers and calling them the "children" of the Movement. He suggests that their work is a twenty-first century equivalent to King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Further, he declares the causes of each to be similar, if not identical. He even borrows the signature phrase of the Occupy Movement ("the 99%") to show a rhetorical solidarity between King and the contemporary protesters. In many respects, this was an old veteran of the civil rights movement giving affirmation to a contemporary protest movement to use the images of

[339] Ibid.

his movement to animate their cause, and passing the torch to a new generation of justice seekers.

It is not certain, however, whether Occupy would have and should have willingly accepted this symbolic torch passing. The Occupy movement in Atlanta did not seem very open to Civil Rights Movement veterans when they denied U.S. Congressional Representative John Lewis, a legendary civil rights veteran, the opportunity to address them at a rally in Atlanta.[340] Additionally, rather than join Occupy D.C. at MacPherson square, Reverend Al Sharpton and his National Action Network held a separate march and rally in support of President Obama's 2011 Jobs Bill on the day before the National King Memorial's dedication ceremony.[341]

Thus, the seeming congruity between the Civil Rights-era veterans and their immediate offspring versus the participants in the Occupy Movement is more forced than an initial glance would indicate since, as I will discuss further below, the Occupy Movement has stressed uprooting the system rather than reforming it. Ironically, King's legacy could perhaps have served as a bridge to unite these two groups with adjacent goals. King was certainly a radical who believed in economic justice and equality, yet he

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[340] Video of that account can be found on the YouTube channel of user conservARTive, found here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QZlp3eGMNI#t=302, last accessed 18 September 2014. Joseph Diaz initiated the block of Representative Lewis because he believed giving special treatment to a politician violated the spirit of the radically democratic gathering which insisted that no individual was greater than any other. See Joan Walsh, "The Man Who Blocked John Lewis Speaks," *Salon.com*, published on October 13, 2011 at http://www.salon.com/2011/10/13/the_man_who_blocked_john_lewis_speaks/, last accessed September 18, 2014.

[341] Krissah Thompson, "Sharpton to March with Labor and Civil Rights Leaders for Obama Jobs Bill," *WashingtonPost.com*, published on September 28, 2011 at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sharpton-to-march-with-labor-and-civil-rights-leaders-for-obama-jobs-bill/2011/09/28/gIQAuJ8p4K_story.html, last accessed on September 18, 2014.

often worked to build coalitions to reform a corrupt system, rather than rejecting it outright.

Though denied an opportunity to address the Occupy Movement in Atlanta, Representative John Lewis did speak at the National King Memorial dedication ceremony. He began by explaining the significance of the memorial:

> I want to thank the men of Alpha Phi Alpha, corporate donors, and average citizens whose faith made this dream come true. Thank you for building a monument, a monument to peace, to love, and to nonviolent resistance, on the front yard of America to symbolize the cornerstone of our democracy.[342]

Lewis declares that the National King Memorial represents peace, love, and nonviolent resistance: cornerstones of the American democracy. Its placement in the pantheon of American heroes signifies an unofficial commitment from American society to support and uphold those values. At the very least, it symbolizes that the nation considers King's work to be just as important as the leadership of George Washington and the writings of Thomas Jefferson. Representative Lewis also said as much:

> Dr. King was our leader. He never, ever asked us to do anything that he would not do. He was arrested, jailed, beaten, and constantly harassed. His home was bombed, he was stabbed, he suffered the slings and arrows of hate in a grassroots struggle to prove that love had the power to overcome the limitations of hate. Had it not been for the philosophy of peace, the philosophy of nonviolence that he preached, and his insistence on the nonviolent resistance based on brotherly love, this would be a different nation. We would be living in a different place today. Martin Luther King Jr. must be looked upon as one of the founding fathers of the new America. For this man, this one man not only freed a people, but he liberated a nation. We're here, all of us, Black and White, Latino, Asian-American and Native American. We're here because this one man did what presidents have been unable to do. He ended what the civil war could not finish. He challenged the most powerful nation on earth to meet its moral obligation to look out for its people, to look out for those who are left out and left behind. This doctor, this

[342] From Representative John Lewis's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

> preacher, this man from Atlanta, GA taught us how to love. He taught us to lay down the burden of hate, that hate was too heavy a burden to bear.[343]

Lewis situates King as "one of the founding fathers of the new America," crediting him for liberating the nation, finishing the work of the American civil war, and teaching American society how to allow love to set aside the burden of hate. The rhetoric of his assessment of King's impact corresponds, in part, with the narrative of the King holiday debates, the Reagan-era reconstruction, and the imagery of the Memorial itself. In all three respects, King emerges as the primary figure responsible for leading American society out of the darkness of race-based segregation towards the light of liberty and justice for all. In each respect Lewis traces the implications of King's leadership for liberty and justice in America.

Representative Lewis also provided vivid imagery of the change King produced and the implications of the first African-American president of the United States:

> I hear too many people saying now, 48 years later, nothing has changed. Run and walk in my shoes, Dr. King is telling you, we have changed. That we are a better people. We're a better nation. Just think, a few short years ago, when Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial we could not register to vote in many parts of the deep south. We had to pass a so-called literacy test. We were asked to count the number of bubbles on a bar of soap. Count the number of jellybeans in a jar. But because of the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the work of hundreds and thousands and millions of people, because of the leadership of President Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson, we live in a different place. People ask me over and over again whether the election of President Barack Obama is the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream. I only say no, it's just a down payment. We're not there yet. Too many people, too many people have been left behind. Let's use this occasion to go out and finish the task and do what we must do to create a better world, to create a more perfect union.[344]

For Lewis, King changed the nation from one that authorized institutionalized racism against African-Americans to one that elected an African-American president forty years

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[343] Lewis.
[344] Ibid.

later. However, in a repudiation of colorblind ideology, Lewis also suggests that the promised land of King's dream has not been reached. He insists on broadening King's dream from what King outlined on that fateful day in August 1963 to one that encompassed King's commitment to economic justice and equality. The election of one Black man to the most powerful office in the world is not the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream, only evidence that the nation is headed in the right direction.

Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund and organizer of King's Poor People's Campaign (PPC), also followed the trend of sharpening the collective memory of King's dream by focusing on his economic agenda.

> We honor Dr. King today in granite. But, what's important is that we honor him tomorrow and every day, for as long as it takes, in transformed values, voices for justice, unrelenting nonviolent action to rescue his dream and America's vanishing dreams from the clutches of materialism, militarism, racism, and poverty he warned would undo America. In his last Sunday sermon at Washington's National Cathedral, Dr. King retold the parable of the rich man Dives, who ignored the poor man Lazarus who came everyday seeking crumbs from Dives' table. Dives went to hell, Dr. King said, not because he was rich but because he did not realize his wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf separating him from his brother and allowed Lazarus to become invisible. He warned this could happen in America if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life.[345]

For Edelman, Martin Luther King Jr. accurately predicted the nation's future economic conundrum: economic inequality. His last Sunday sermon analogizes the nation with Dives who was condemned to hell for ignoring the poor and downtrodden. This will be the fate of America, Edelman insists if it continues to allow the social sins of materialism, militarism, and racism to lead society towards the increased disenfranchisement of the poor, particularly children living in poverty.

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[345] From Marian Wright Edelman's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

Finally, Reverend Joseph Lowery, one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s lieutenants in SCLC, put King's legacy in broader perspective.

> We recognize here that in the midst of the amazing truth that an African-American preacher who never held public-political office is recognized here among the fathers of the country. Indeed, he has become a father of the country. For his leadership gave birth to a new America.[346]

Of course, Reverend Lowery is referring to King's leadership during the civil rights movement, which corresponds with the primary way American society remembers King. However, Lowery is not satisfied with this memory and chooses to give Dr. King the final word. Quoting from King's Nobel peace prize acceptance speech, Reverend Lowery implores the audience to yearn for King's vision for the future.

> Well let me say here that this is what Martin said. He said, "I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of humankind. I refuse to accept that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsom and jetsom in the river of life which surrounds him. I refuse to accept the view that man is so tragically bound to the light which surrounds him. I refuse the view that daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that even today's bombs that burst and bullets that whine there's still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nation, can be lifted from the dust of shame to [reign] among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have meal for their bodies, education for their minds, and dignity and equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what selfish-centered men have torn down, God-fearing men can build up. I believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the will of the land uncertainties that we share. We will give our tired feet new strength, as we continue to stride toward the city of freedom.[347]

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[346] From Reverend Joseph Lowery's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[347] Ibid. Reverend Lowery's oratory was powerful, but operating from memory, he did not get the quotation entirely correct.

Though giving an inexact quotation of King's speech[348], Reverend Lowery still managed to convey the fullness of King's Nobel peace prize vision: an abiding hope that injustice and despair will not have the final say, that peace and shared humanity will become a reality, and that nonviolent redemptive goodwill can overcome war and bloodshed. His use of King's Nobel peace prize acceptance speech was especially apropos given its prominence in the National King Memorial where it is quoted twice.

Regardless of whether this connection was intentional or coincidental, Reverend Lowery's stirring oratory best encapsulated King's impact, America's not-quite-completed progress, and King's audacious hope for social justice. Like Representative Lewis before him, Reverend Lowery resisted the temptation to view the election of President Barack Obama as the fulfillment of King's legacy. Nevertheless, he enthusiastically looked forward to President Obama's address at the National King Memorial, with good reason. The first African-American elected President of the United States, ironically, has seemed much more at ease discussing economics than he has race throughout his presidency. The dedication ceremony of the National King Memorial gave him an opportunity to speak on both.

The President's Speech at the Dedication Ceremonies

In addition to being a celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial, the entirety of the dedication ceremonies gave one the feeling of taking part in an extended campaign rally for President Barack Obama's re-election. Cheers

[348] For example, Reverend Lowery omits the following phrase from the middle of his quotation of Dr. King's speech: "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." See King, "Nobel Peace Prize 1964 Acceptance Speech."

spontaneously erupted from the audience any time a speaker mentioned President Obama's name. The same occurred when the video screen showed the presidential family touring the King Memorial with the King family and representatives of the National Parks Service. The *Lift Every Voice and Sing* video montage was certainly Obama-centric, concluding with a determined Obama posing in a manner similar to the National King Memorial, with the presidential seal in the background and the label "Mr. President." Many of the speakers either covertly suggested or outright declared that re-electing President Obama was essential for America to continue on the path of justice representative of King's dream. In this way, the dedication ceremonies directly tied Obama's presidency to Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.

President Obama, much to his credit, did not imply in his memorial dedication speech that his election was the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream. Rather than reflect on the synergies between Martin Luther King Jr. and his administration, President Obama imagined the memorial not just as a tribute to a great man, but as a tribute to the collective achievement of a generation of leaders and unnamed multitudes "whose countless acts of quiet heroism helped bring about changes few thought were even possible."[349]

President Obama declared that what we remember most about Dr. King is his booming voice across the Washington Mall "calling on America to make freedom a reality for all of God's children, prophesizing of a day when the jangling discord of our

[349] From President Barack Obama's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

nation would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."[350] It was the glorious words and vision of King, best represented by the "I Have a Dream" speech that gave America the courage to change its laws and the hearts and minds of its citizens.

The President proclaimed that it is right to celebrate Dr. King's dream and vision of unity, but insisted that we must also remind ourselves that progress did not come easily, or by words alone. "Progress was purchased through enduring the smack of billy clubs and the blast of fire hoses. It was bought with days in jail cells and nights of bomb threats."[351] This is a lesson that the architects of the National King Memorial, which primarily focuses on King's words without adequately contextualizing those words, seem to have forgotten.

The President also reminded the audience that King was not always a celebrated figure in his lifetime. King was vilified, denounced as a communist and radical, attacked by his own people for going too fast or too slow, and dismissed for speaking on subjects that were allegedly beyond his expertise, such as the Vietnam War and the rights of union workers. The President did not raise these points to challenge the hagiography surrounding King's legacy or to criticize the unquestioned appreciation of King as a national hero. Instead he sought to remind the audience that the progress towards Dr. King's vision is not yet complete. It will require Americans to "draw strength from those earlier struggles" and the realization that change is never quick, simple, or without controversy.[352] To accentuate this view of the social costs of change, President Obama mentioned the ten-year distance between the "Brown v. Board of Education" Supreme

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[350] Ibid.
[351] Obama, 2011.
[352] Ibid.

Court decision and the legislative enforcement measures of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. He then celebrated Dr. King's steadfast resolve when, despite the passing of those Acts, African Americans found themselves "trapped in pockets of poverty across the country." Rather than faint from weariness, Dr. King sought to broaden the mission from civil and political equality to economic justice. "When met with hardship, when confronting disappointment" the President declared, "Dr. King refused to accept what he called the 'isness' of today. He kept pushing towards the 'oughtness' of tomorrow."[353]

President Obama also touched on another aspect of Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision that was given little heed in the National King Memorial: the role faith played in King's dream and vision. King's clarion call for unity and the oneness of humanity was rooted in his Christian faith and his belief that "God resides in each of us, from the high to the low, in the oppressor and the oppressed."[354] It inspired him to seek social change for the sake of reconciliation rather than retribution and to free all Americans from their own prejudices and "Americans of every color from the depredations of poverty."[355] Further, Dr. King's faithful optimism about what America could become is the epitome of what it means to be American, for "ours is a story of optimism and achievement and constant striving that is unique upon this Earth."[356] Thus, President Obama suggested that despite the realities of his social context, Dr. King believed in and epitomized American Exceptionalism, or at the very least, the promise that America held for her citizens and

[353] Ibid. President Obama references Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1964 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance speech.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Ibid.

the world. That faith in America's promise led King to use tactics that inevitably would build bridges between difference, not burn them.

President Obama's narrative of what King's legacy means for American society was inclusive, thoroughly developed, and consistent with American ideals. While acknowledging the ways in which King went up against the system, the President nevertheless asserted, quite convincingly, that King was a champion of the all-American values that ought to have animated the system. His speech fit in well with the entire day's proceedings.

Collective Memory, Past and Present Distortions

Collective memory engages images of the past to make sense of the present, as we saw in chapter one. These images are passed on and sustained in society through ritual performances. Thus we find collective memories of the past sustained in commemorative ceremonies. While Paul Connerton locates social memory in repetitive ceremonies such as religious rites and holiday celebrations, we can also find memory of the past sustained in one-time ceremonies such as the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Images of the past often serve to both sustain *and* contest the present social order, sometimes simultaneously. This process of simultaneously sustaining and contesting the present was on full display during the National King Memorial dedication ceremony.

Speakers at the dedication ceremonies frequently referenced images of King's work, crediting him with leading the nation towards racial social justice. Rabbi Israel Dresner declared that King brought down "the American walls of Jericho, the walls of segregation and Jim Crow," and declared pride for his and his fellow Jewish cohort's

participation in the Movement with Dr. King.[357] That distortion of the past, over-crediting King for the onset of racial equality in America, proves interesting given that Rabbi Dresner's first entry into the civil rights movement was as one of the Mississippi Freedom Riders, activity for which King did not plan or participate. Nevertheless, this distortion of the past leads to a claim on the present. King's success came about because of the multiracial, multi-religious coalition he put together and today, according to Rabbi Dresner, an expanded version of that coalition is necessary to sustain a present order in which Barack Obama is the president of the United States and the nation is moving towards greater justice.

Representative John Lewis reflected on sharing the dais with King during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Dr. King was a leader who never asked his followers to do what he himself was unwilling to do, Lewis declared. King was "one of the founding fathers of a new America [who] not only freed a people, but . . . liberated a nation."[358] Like Rabbi Dresner, Representative Lewis credits King, indeed over-credits him, with "liberating" the nation from the morass of legalized racial inequality. This exaggeration distorts the past in service to elevating King to the status of national hero. It pushes to the side the contributions others made during the civil rights movement to cement Black progress, especially those who clashed with King over methods and outcomes, as Lewis himself at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Nevertheless, as Lewis argues, the evidence is quite clear that times have

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[357] From Rabbi Israel Dresner's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[358] From Representative John Lewis's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

changed, and America is a better nation for these changes. There are no more Colored and White signs. Blacks can freely register to vote, no more literacy tests block their way. An African-American presides in the White House. This is all just a down payment for a fully just social order to be achieved.

These are just a two examples of how the speakers distorted the past by primarily attributing King with America's racial progress. Yet, this does not tell the full story of how past images of Martin Luther King Jr. collide with present articulations of King's legacy at the National King Memorial dedication ceremonies. For not only does the past distort our understanding of the present, the present circumstances influences our recollection of King's past.

One way that the present distorts the past, evident at the dedication ceremony for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, lies in the re-imagining of King's "Poor People's Campaign" as the precursor to the 2011 "Occupy Wall Street" movement.[359] Martin Luther King Jr. developed the idea for a Poor People's Campaign at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) retreat in May 1967, one month after his historic anti-Vietnam war address at the Riverside Church in New York. He led SCLC to expand its focus from civil rights to economic justice and anti-Vietnam war activism. In so doing, he sought to bring revolution to American society, not merely reform. The Poor People's Campaign was conceived to be the start of such a revolution. King's plan was to bring in poor, homeless, and indigent Americans to the nation's capital in a campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience, focused on jobs and income. He wanted the campaign to be "nonviolent, but militant, and as dramatic, as dislocative, as disruptive, as attention-

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getting as the riots [of 1967 in Newark and Detroit] without destroying property."[360] The goal of the campaign was to pressure Congress into passing an Economic Bill of Rights.

Occupy Wall Street, on the other hand, began on September 17, 2011 when protesters camped out in Zuccotti Park in New York City's Wall Street financial district to protest the growing income inequality between the wealthy and the rest of American society, the lack of legal accountability for financial firms believed to be responsible for the Great Recession of 2008-9, and the unchecked power that multinational corporations have over the democratic process. That moment sparked a global movement that spread to one hundred cities in the United States and fifteen hundred cities globally.[361] The Occupy movement is best known for its motto, "We are the 99%," coined in response to a 2011 report by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) showing that the after-tax income of the top one percent of households grew by two hundred seventy-five percent betwee 1979 and 2007, more than three times that of the next highest group.[362]

Given the similarities, it should come as no surprise that the Occupy movement cast a deep shadow over the King memorial dedication ceremonies. With the OccupyDC protests occurring about a mile and half away from the King Memorial dedication ceremonies, many of the speakers, including Reverend Jackson, felt compelled to draw comparisons of the Occupy movement, both directly and indirectly, with the Poor People's Campaign. Elder Bernice King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s youngest daughter,

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[360] Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 20.

[361] This claim made by the website *Occupy Wall Street*. See http://www.occupywallst.org/about/.

[362] See Congress of the United States Congressional Budget Office, "Trends in the Distribution of Household Income Between 1979 and 2007," October 2011, http://cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/10-25-HouseholdIncome.pdf, Last accessed December 2, 2012.

essentially co-opted OccupyDC's message in her remarks. Speculating on the divine motivations behind the hurricane that forced the postponement of the ceremonies from the symbolically important date of August 28 to October 16, Elder King suggested that "God wanted to remind us that 43 years ago ... [her father] was in the midst of starting a 'Poor People's Campaign,' where he was galvanizing poor people from all walks of life to converge on this nation's capital and stay here and *occupy* this place, until there was change in the economic system and a better distribution of wealth."[363] Martin Luther King, III aligned his father's ideals to those embodied by "the young people of the Occupy movement all over this country and throughout the world seeking justice."[364] They, like his father, are after socioeconomic justice. Reverend Jesse Jackson, as discussed earlier, called the participants in Occupy Wall Street the children of the civil rights movement, counseling them to remain committed to the principles of nonviolent protest. Reverend Al Sharpton also cited the 1% controlling 40% of America's wealth statistic in urging the crowd to mimic "those occupying Wall Street" by occupying the voting booth to prevent the roll back of voting rights and civil rights, as well as attacks on Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security.

Occupy Wall Street served to highlight economic injustice in contemporary society and many speakers at the King memorial dedication ceremony recalled the Poor People's Campaign as a historical analogue. Nevertheless, the comparison slightly distorts the past because we lose some of the radical nature of the Poor People's tactics

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[363] From Elder Bernice King's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[364] From Martin Luther King, III's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

and demands. The Poor People's Campaign was focused on economic justice for the poor, and sought to bring homeless people from across the country to D.C. to force the government to take proactive steps to reduce poverty. King intended their civil disobedience to be more than just occupying public spaces, but also to include interfering with traffic, bumping into their political representatives, disrupting the business of legislating, and the like. The rhetoric of Occupy Wall Street, on the other hand, groups the ninety-nine percent of society against the wealthiest one percent. Though their concern is for a broader coalition, or, rather, against a much narrower coalition, the composition of their participants,[365] the governance of their organizations,[366] and the focus of their goals fits an educated, middle-class profile.[367] Although there are certainly parallels between the two movements, King most likely would be concerned with the omission of a focus on the poor.

Another key difference, lost in the memory of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC), is between the tactics King sought to employ in the PPC and the tactics used by the Occupy Movement. King's grand plan was to raise nonviolent protest to a new level by employing an open-ended strategy of wave after wave of campaigners arriving in D.C.,

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[365] For a discussion of the profile of Occupy Wall Street protestors, see Gloria Goodale, "Who is Occupy Wall Street? After Six Weeks, a Profile Finally Emerges," *The Christian Science Monitor*, published November 1, 2011, online at http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2011/1101/Who-is-Occupy-Wall-Street-After-six-weeks-a-profile-finally-emerges.

[366] For a discussion of Occupy Wall Street's commitment to an internal structure that models a radical, participatory democracy, see W.W. "Leaderless, Consensus-Based Participatory Democracy and Its Discontents," *The Economist*, published October 19, 2011, online at http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/10/occupy-wall-street-3.

[367] . For a reflection of the academic roots undergirding Occupy Wall Street, see Dan Berrett, "Intellectual Roots of Wall St. Protest Lie in Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, published on October 16, 2011, online at http://chronicle.com/article/Intellectual-Roots-of-Wall/129428.

setting up makeshift camps, and becoming nonviolent public nuisances. This would provoke the D.C. authorities to arrest the campaigners, filling up the D.C. jails, and triggering an outcry of national protest that would embarrass Congress and force them to address the grievances of the poor.[368] King was assassinated in Memphis before the PPC could begin. In the time between his death and the beginning of the PPC, the strategy changed. Rather than militant, nonviolent mass protests leading to arrest and overflowing jails, Ralph Abernathy, King's long-time confidante and successor at SCLC, decided to create a semi-permanent camp, eventually named Resurrection City, which would serve as a symbolic reminder of the broken promise of the Great War on Poverty and as a model of governance and mutuality for the nation to emulate.[369]

The Occupy Movement, with its focus on lawful, nonviolent occupation of public spaces and its desire to model a radical democratic ethos in which every person has an equal voice, resembles Abernathy's Resurrection City, rather than King's vision of militant, disruptive, arrest-provoking protests. King was prepared to grind the nation's capital to a halt, not simply occupy public spaces in the hopes of drawing the nation's attention.

By downplaying the subversive nature of King's vision for the PPC, as well as his growing pessimism of the American experiment, the speakers at the National King Memorial dedication ceremony were able to connect the PPC with the Occupy Movement, giving that movement the stamp of Martin Luther King Jr.'s approval. Despite the King Memorial solely depicting King as one who embodied universal American values, the speakers retrieved the King who was so committed to economic

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[368] McKnight, 112.
[369] Ibid., 112.

justice that he was willing to agitate against the powers that be to make it a reality. This slightly altered image of the past serves to contest the present order.

King Themes Uplifted and Omitted

The King Memorial Foundation identified four universal themes which it believed best reflected Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideals: hope, justice, democracy, and love. The dedication ceremony explicitly drew out this thematic structuring of King's legacy by explicitly inviting four speakers to reflect on each of these four themes. While the intent was clear and well-intended, the results were a bit muddled.

Actress Diahann Carroll spoke on the theme of hope. She crafted a narrative of Martin Luther King Jr. that imagined him as one who "breath[ed] a fire of hope all over us [and] turned our hopes and dreams into action."[370] On the theme of democracy, Lee Sanders, Secretary Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), defined democracy as the principle that grants everyone a seat at the table of politics and civic life and heralded both Lee's union and Dr. King as champions and defenders of democracy. Reverend Al Sharpton reflected on justice, transposing King's ideas about justice to the political issues of 2011. If we channel King as a "conduit of a spirit of justice," we fight against contemporary threats to justice such as voter ID laws, executions on recanted testimony, underfunded schools, and one percent controlling forty percent of the nation's wealth.[371] Marian Wright Edelman eschewed her task of speaking on the universal theme of love to focus on the need to

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[370] From Diahann Carrol's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

[371] From Reverend Al Sharpton's speech at the dedication ceremonies for the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on October 16, 2011. The quotation comes from the author's audio recording of the event.

address poverty in America, particularly for the 16.4 million children in poverty today. For Edelman, King's warning that "the clutches of materialism, militarism, racism, and poverty . . . would undo America" is just as true today as it was in King's day.

Summary

As I discussed in chapter one, James Fentress and Chris Wickham argue that the bearers of national memory in Western capitalist societies come chiefly from the upper middle classes and professional strata.[372] Thus, they suggest that the function of national memory, then, is "less to analyse the 'pastness' of the past than to give an objective veneer to the preoccupations and self-legitmizations of national bourgeoisies."[373] In sum, national memory serves to stabilize and legitimize the status quo.

Seen in this light, in rendering Martin Luther King Jr. as an inspirational figure for all Americans, the National King Memorial clearly seeks to legitimize the thin veneer of commonly held American values by serving as an ode to hope, democracy, justice, and love and thereby mediating between the underlying impulses of philosophical republicanism and liberalism to define the soul of America's body politic. At the same time, however, the memorial's dedication ceremony no less clearly, if not always intentionally, seems to circumvent that goal. By recapturing some of what made King a change agent in society, the speakers challenge the universalism of the values embedded in the memorial. They thicken and specify those values, employing King's legacy to articulate their concerns about race and poverty in America. They affirm that America has indeed made great progress, but they stress that there is much more work to be done. If King is truly inspirational, they imply, then let him inspire us to action for economic

[372] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 127.

[373] Ibid.

justice. Let him inspire us to vote and protect our voting rights. Let him inspire us to defend the existence of unions. Let him inspire us to eliminate poverty and reverse the rollback of the freedoms and privileges won by King's generation. They simultaneously lift up King as an idealized American hero, while freeing him from the confines of a historical box with little relevance for America here and now.

The dedication ceremony, as I have mentioned, also had a decidedly politically progressive bent. In fact, no political conservatives were invited to speak at this party, with the possible exception of the business leaders responsible for raising the corporate funds to build the Memorial, all of whom refrained from making overtly political statements. This may be consistent with Martin Luther King Jr.'s own progressive political views, but it is not representative of King's broader American legacy that transcends political parties as well as economic classes and racial divisions. Martin Luther King Jr. has become a hero to Americans of all political persuasions and his image has been used to trumpet progressive, conservative, and moderate causes alike, as previous chapters have demonstrated. The decision to exclude conservative voices from the dedication ceremony may signal an attempt to reclaim King's legacy from political forces that would translate his "dream" into a colorblind vision of society that would obviate the need for any further efforts to achieve racial justice. Whatever the reasons for excluding political conservatives, the dedication ceremony of the National King Memorial deepened and enlarged its meaning in America’s collective memory by underscoring the radical nature of King's work and urging Americans today to work toward greater economic justice for all. This move repositions and revives Martin Luther King Jr. as America's prophet of social justice.

Chapter 6

Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

> He drew no distinction between the high and low; none between the rich and the poor. He believed especially that he was sent to champion the cause of the man farthest down. … He was supra-race, supra-nation, supra-denomination, supra-class and supra-culture. He belonged to the world and to mankind. Now he belongs to posterity.[374]
>
> Benjamin E. Mays, Eulogy for Martin Luther King Jr.

Collective memory and civil religion are the interpretative lenses I have used both to explain how King came to be canonized, and to interpret the functions that King's legacy has served in American society, namely the values his legacy has come to represent. Each theory has roots in the works of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, but their emphasis and directions diverge enough to represent two distinct trajectories in sociological literature. Neither theory alone is sufficiently robust to account for the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in American society.

The ascension of Martin Luther King Jr. from social pariah to national hero did not unfold automatically, nor did it take place overnight. For some Americans, the fifteen-year gap between King's death and the establishment of a national holiday in his honor signified a tragic embarrassment. How could anyone object to honoring the man who was killed for prodding the nation to live up to its founding principles? Others argued, however, that King did not deserve the honor and cost of a national holiday, even if his accomplishments and influence were worthy of celebration. After all, Americans honor only Jesus Christ and Christopher Columbus by recognizing each with a national holiday of their own, while obliging George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to share

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[374] From Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971).

their holiday with each other. History had not yet had the final say regarding Dr. King, others argued. There remained the alleged communist associations to uncover, the illegal FBI wiretaps to release, the anti-war rhetoric to probe, and the nonviolent protest philosophy to question for provoking so much violence in response. Surely the nation ought to pause and allow history to have its full say? Finally, there were those who considered King completely unworthy of any national recognition, let alone a national holiday, given his communist associations, his betrayal of our troops in Vietnam, and his unlawful protests.

These opposing narratives highlight the contestation behind the establishment of King's legacy and America's collective memory of him. Before King could become a part of civil religion in America, discrepancies in these accounts had to be worked out in public. As chapter two in this volume demonstrates, a general consensus developed to thin out and revise the national narrative enough to allow large enough numbers of Americans across a wide enough social and political range to accept King as a national hero.

This consensus was worked out via public discourse expressed in newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, school celebrations, public protests and the like, as well as carried out in political debate advanced in political speeches and congressional hearings. Discussion ensued about which facts were most important to consider when thinking about King, how great an impact King had on American society, and whether King's accomplishments measured up to those of American heroes such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Yet the discussion about the best way for the nation to honor Martin Luther King Jr. did not merely focus on the facts of King's life.

The cost of the proposed holiday to the federal government came under consideration. So did the importance of celebrating America's repentance and deliverance from the structural sin of institutionalized segregation, and the question of whether a national day off was the most appropriate way to honor King.

This study has brought theories of collective memory and civil religion to bear on the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. in American society. Collective memory helps us understand the establishment and maintenance of memorials, holidays, and other sites of memory that highlight what a nation most wants to remember about its past. Civil religion and religious legitimation help us understand the fluidity of the meanings of these fixed sites as well as the contestation of values carried out in their ongoing reinterpretation. Taken together, these analytical tools give us a clear picture of how and why Americans reconstruct the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. We can also use the example of King's canonization to sharpen our interdisciplinary tools to analyze the public moral discourse and consensus building in light of collective memory and civil religion.

The canonization of Dr. King demonstrates that in a democracy, collective memory is a contested consensus about the past and its relation to the present that develops discursively through public discourse and debate. This challenges the idea that establishing national heroes or values belongs solely or even primarily to the state or social elites. Certainly the state had a hand in elevating and institutionalizing King's status. Only Congress could create a national holiday or set aside public land on the National Mall for a national memorial. Nevertheless, neither of these decisive acts could have come to fruition without a groundswell of public support. Further, as I noted in

chapter one, the state might establish these *lieux de mémoire*, but it does not and cannot maintain exclusive control over them.[375]

One can already see the loss of exclusive control over the meaning of the National King Memorial at its dedication ceremony. Its creators envisioned a memorial that testified to King's commitment to the national values of justice, hope, democracy, and love. They clearly sought to celebrate an America that had progressed to fully embracing these values. Yet the speakers at the dedication ceremony sought to disrupt this narrative. They wanted King's legacy to be more than the saintly relic of a mythic past because the fullness of his dream for the nation was far from the reality of America.

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. also reveals how society uses collective memory to sort and filter images of the past to determine what ought to be remembered, and how each image of the past fits into a broader, meaningful narrative. The facts of "archival" history essentially comprise a database of records, which collective memory weighs and values in determining which records are important and why within the larger story of a legendary whole. As I discussed in chapter one, Michael E. Geisler observes that the way these facts often get appropriated results in collective memory conceiving a "shared mythic past," preserved in its national symbols such as holidays, anthems, monuments, museums, and the like.[376]

Geisler declares that these narratives take on a life of their own, eventually becoming separate and distinct from the history from which they are derived. His

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[375] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

[376] Michael E. Geisler, "Introduction," in Michael E. Geisler, editor, *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative* (Middlebury: Middlebury College Press, 2005), xvi.

explanation alerts us to how national myths inform collective understandings of present circumstances, but it also implies that the narratives lack fidelity to historical accuracy. Thus Geisler's account seems to validate Pierre Nora's sense of a competition between history and memory, as discussed in chapter one.

The purpose of collective memory is not an "accurate" account of history, but the identification and articulation of the shared values of a group. Social groups will always need to develop and articulate the values that bond its members together. Therefore history cannot eradicate memory, contrary to Nora's theory. We can better understand the relationship between history and memory by imagining collective memory as a values-based filtering of historical data. All stages of the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. bear out this principle. The congressional and public debates about establishing a national King holiday settled on dismissing the more controversial aspects of his life such as the social tension caused by King's civil rights activities, his activism against the Vietnam War, his associations with alleged former Communists, his adultery, and the like in order to highlight King's leadership in prophetically urging the nation to end segregation. One could easily say that American collective memory has over-credited King for this social change. The Reagan-era reimagining of King further restricts history by ignoring King's work for economic justice, and applying the colorblind thesis to reinterpret King's legacy. President Reagan and his supporters did acknowledge some of their political disagreements with King, but they minimized those differences because they believed King's goal of racial equality too important to ignore.[377] This minimization allowed them

[377] A more cynical view would suggest that President Reagan gave in to the public avalanche in support of a National King Holiday and simply calculated the minimal consensus it would take for him to accept its existence, however grudgingly.

to align themselves with Dr. King by linking him to their vision for America in terms of limited government, economic freedom, a race-neutral public policy, and a reduction in government entitlements.

The National King memorial metaphorically enshrines the "Dream" as King's primary contribution to American society, and universalizes his message to accord with American democratic principles. It presents Martin Luther King Jr. as an inspirational figure, eschewing much of his more radical, prophetic challenges to the nation. Finally, the dedication ceremony of the National King Memorial attempts to recover some aspects of King's lost legacy, not for the sake of historical accuracy, but to address contemporary social ills and injustice epitomized by growing economic hardship and the growing income gap between the top 1% of America's wealthiest families and the rest of the nation.

Despite the appearance of a static minimal consensus for canonizing Dr. King, our analysis of the process of the creation of a consensus on Dr. King reveals that collective memory is fluid and subject to change. One reason for this fluidity stems from previously "forgotten" events of the past that have taken on new relevance in helping to make collective moral sense of contemporary crises. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Empire in 1941 emerged as a crucial historical reference for commentators trying to make sense of the 9/11 attacks in 2001,[378] by contrast to the struggle against

[378] For example, Gallup published a poll on December 7, 2001 asking whether Pearl Harbor or 9/11 would be more historically significant. See Frank Newport, "Americans Say Sept. 11 Will Be More Historically Significant Than Pearl Harbor," *Gallup.com*, http://www.gallup.com/poll/5101/americans-say-sept-will-more-historically-significant-than-pearl-harbor.aspx, published on December 7, 2011, last accessed on October 6, 2014. Also, in the White House Daily log for that day, President George W. Bush called the attacks "The Pearl Harbor of the 21st Century." See David Kohn, "Bush

Nazi Germany. After the 9/11 attacks, December 7, 1941, vividly re-emerged as "a date which will live in infamy" because it best exemplified the shock and awe of the contemporary situation, as well as the anger and resolve for justice and vengeance that would inspire the nation. More recently, in canonizing Martin Luther King Jr., some have sought to reimagine King's Poor People's Campaign as an "occupation" of the nation's capital to demonstrate the commonality between King's activism and the contemporary Occupy Wall Street movement, lending credibility to the Occupy movement.

We can also understand the fluidity of collective memory by exploring the continual contestation of social and moral consensus. In the light of collective memory, we should not think of "consensus" as a settled agreement supported by a vast majority. Rather, consensus connotes the imagery most commonly evoked when a subject or issue is under public scrutiny or moral consideration. Contestation, then, is the attempt to alter, change, or challenge this imagery as a fixed or settled agreement.

One can see both principles at work in the canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. During the King holiday debates, the primary image evoked when discussing Martin Luther King Jr. was the "Dream." Supporters and detractors of the holiday attempted to challenge this image by bringing in more historical facts and advancing sharper analyses to support their respective views of Dr. King. Those alternative views did not gain much traction. Many opponents became mitigated supporters of the holiday by reasoning that the Dream and related changes in national attitudes regarding race relations were sufficient for the nation to fully commemorate Dr. King. President Reagan's celebration

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on 9/11: Moment to Moment," *CBSNews.com*, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/bush-on-9-11-moment-to-moment/, published on September 2, 2003, last accessed October 6, 2014.

of that commemoration at the holiday bill signing ceremony generally stayed within the parameters of the Dream, adhering to it as a minimal consensus on what was most important to remember about King.

However, Reagan's articulation of the *meaning* of this narrative offered an alternative way of thinking about the meaning of King's legacy. For Reagan,

> Dr. King had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind, and that among white and black Americans, as he put it, "Their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom; we cannot walk alone."[379]

President Reagan's emphasis on the notion of a colorblind society reflected his own stance in behalf of race-neutral public policy. Rather than working to reverse or repair the social damage caused by legalized racial discrimination, he sought to eliminate any consideration of race in public policy, in an attempt to obviate the need to remedy racial disparities to achieve social justice. In Reagan's view, the lesson of King's legacy is that actively considering race in relation to social opportunities is a social sin. This reshaped the consensus on the moral norms and values represented by King's legacy that developed out of the King holiday debates in terms aligned with Reagan's own ideology.

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. also reveals that the contestation embedded in collective memory often turns on the historical facts underlying the memory, the very values delineated by the memory, or some combination of both. Theories of collective memory tend to focus on differences between historical facts and collective narratives, treating the values as incidental. Civil religion theorists tend to

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[379] Ronald Reagan: "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., a National Holiday," November 2, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40708. All subsequent quotations from President Reagan's speech at the King holiday signing ceremony are from this source.

focus on the moral values and norms expressed in a group's civil religion, treating historical facts as incidental. Nevertheless, just as the canonization of King helps us clarify and refine collective memory theory, it does the same for civil religion theory.

The canonization of King confirms Robert N. Bellah's thesis that civil religion tends to be contested most explicitly in times of national crisis, what he calls "times of trial." King becomes elevated to national hero status because he is one of the most accessible figures to arise in that time of trial with a voice and vision that rang true to tradition in Americans' shared experience. If the problem underlying the era of Civil Rights and the Vietnam War was "responsible [American] action in a revolutionary world,"[380] who better to represent the best of those times than the one who led a responsible, nonviolent revolution to reconcile its divisions and resolve its conflicts? In the aftermath of the turbulent sixties, when the nation was trying to make sense of its progress and plan for its future, it found in King a figure who led in transforming the racial conflicts that the nation had just experienced, and whose life continued to inspire the nation to do better.

The debates over the King holiday bear this out. Advocates of the holiday, such as Coretta Scott King, Representative John Conyers, singer Stevie Wonder, and Reverend Ralph Abernathy all argued that King's commitment to democracy, justice, equality, and brotherhood made him worthy of national acclaim. They believed that a National King Holiday would signal to all Americans that their society was truly committed to these ideals. Speakers at the memorial dedication ceremony likewise sought to respond to the contemporary crisis of the "Great Recession" and growing economic inequality by

[380] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96.1 (Winter 1967), 16.

revising the consensus on King to recover his commitment to economic justice. They aimed to convince the nation to commit itself to the same cause. Thus dynamic conceptions of civil religion and religious legitimation better capture the sense of contestation that defines how groups develop a thin consensus for their collective values within a continuity of conflicts among public theologies and philosophies across different moral traditions in American culture than do theories of sentimental collective memory set at odds with factual history.

The canonization of King also demonstrates that civil religion is concerned about the collective values that ought to be shared by all Americans across groups defined by race, class, region, and generation. For example, the main point of contention in the holiday debates was whether King truly embodied all-American values. Opponents such as Representative Larry McDonald believed that King acted against American values. He criticized King for "deliberately violat[ing] the laws by holding marches without parade permits, by violating court injunctions, and provoking law enforcement officials."[381] King's willingness to engage in civil disobedience against the rule of unjust laws in the name of racial justice did not conform to the way Representative McDonald and his allies believed citizens should act. By contrast, supporters of the King holiday such as Representative John Conyers believed that King's nonviolent social action "embodied the political tradition in America that originated with the Pilgrims [and] continued with the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution."[382] At stake for both sides were the

[381] "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service House of Representatives," Serial No. 97-38, February 23, 1982, 21.

[382] John Conyers, "To Honor a Man and a Spirit," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1979, A-27.

values that the nation as a whole should embody and celebrate. We can also understand the Reagan-inspired reimagining of Martin Luther King Jr. as an attempt to use King's legacy to enshrine a particular set of conservative political values as all-American. Having begrudgingly accepted King as a figure important to American civil religion and worthy of canonization, President Reagan found a way to frame King's legacy according to his own political ideology. He established King as a colorblind priest who would have opposed any racial considerations in making public policy.

Finally, the National King Memorial frames King as an ambassador of the all-American ideals of hope, democracy, justice, and love, as well as the prophet who dreamt of a unified American society and called for its full realization. Yet the memorial does so broadly enough to allow multiple coalitions to retain their thick understandings of those values while supporting a thinner consensus. As I discussed in chapter four, Clayborne Carson, director of the King Papers Project at Stanford University, criticized the King Memorial committee for intentionally leaving out alternative themes such as religion, poverty, nonviolence, and peace, as if these moral themes were not central to King's legacy and its challenge to America and its civil religion.[383] Carson argued that a King memorial that also explored these additional themes in King's body of work would more fully represent this American hero. Their omission suggests that these themes, with the possible exception of religion, are not values cherished by American society as a

[383] Clayborne Carson, "Designing the King Memorial," *Encyclopedia Britannica Blog*, http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2011/08/designing-king-memorial/, last accessed December 7, 2012.

whole.[384] At the very least we can presume that they are not unarguable tenets of the nation's civil religion.

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. reveals that civil religion is shaped by the inherently dynamic and arguable nature of competing moral visions of the nation's meaning and purpose in its ongoing history. Particularly in a democracy such as ours, there is always contestation, and consensus is always being remade and reformed. Although public debate over the King holiday hammered out a social consensus on the meaning of King's legacy, the actual implications of that consensus varied greatly. Agreeing that King is a national hero because he led the nation away from racial injustice means one thing to political conservatives who advocate for colorblind, race-neutral public policies to replace affirmative action, and quite another thing to political liberals who defend affirmative action in the face of growing economic hardship and the massively disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. The capacity of King's legacy to inform both of these divergent views, and a myriad of other opposing views, suggests that the moral imagery and modes of discourse that sustain America's collective memory and civil religion often center on "thin" universal values such as freedom, democracy, justice, and love to which a large majority can identify as values that define the society. As Michael Walzer attests in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, thick, maximal accounts of morality, deeply integrated and fully resonant within particular communities, form the basis of thin or minimalist accounts that resonate across communities.[385] Therefore, if a site of memory is to resonate across communities within

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[384] I would presume that religion was omitted because of the establishment clause.

[385] Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 4.

the nation seen as a societal moral community, then it must only turn on minimalist accounts that allow a broad swath of particular communities to construe it in terms of their own thick accounts of moral meaning.

The canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. also demonstrates that King's legacy is located in both the superstructure and infrastructure of American society, as identified by Robert N. Bellah in "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic." In particular, the sites of memory dedicated to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., namely the national holiday and the national memorial, reveal that civil religion and public theology in dramatic dialogue can sustain, judge, and reform the nation as a moral community. The National King Holiday, seen as infrastructural, provides an explicit time and setting for citizens to join in practices of public-spirited commitment to serve their local communities and follow King's footsteps as a social activist, community member, and congregational leader. The National King Memorial, seen as superstructural, explicitly details the unimpeachable universal principles that the state must embrace and embody. Both the holiday and the Memorial allow Americans to celebrate King as a social prophet who called the nation to live up to its founding principles and highest aims, which his legacy has come to embody. Americans from all political ideologies look to King's example for inspiration and justification of their own commitments to racial justice and equality, which the nation as a whole should recognize and embrace. Americans often invoke King's example to chastise both the nation and their fellow citizens to practice what they preach about justice and equality. President Reagan did this to great effect whenever he argued for colorblind social policies. The speakers at the

National King Memorial dedication ceremony did likewise when they rallied the audience to enact economic justice in public policy and provision.

Further Steps and Final Words

This work lays the foundation for further studies on how Americans engage the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. Moving beyond charges of domestication and co-optation, it offers a detailed, nuanced analysis of how King came to be celebrated as a national hero despite living a life deeply and publicly critical of the nation. This study also shows what King means both thinly for the nation as a whole and thickly for specific groups within American society. Yet there is more work to be done. During the course of my research, I could not help but notice the impact Coretta Scott King had in shaping King's legacy. She testified before several congressional hearings urging Congress to pass the holiday bill, led multiple rallies and public events over the course of several years to engage the public on this cause, and founded her own center dedicated to advancing her husband's philosophy and practice of nonviolent social change. I did not fully explore her commitment to forging a long-lasting tribute to her husband, independent of the influence of even Dr. King's most trusted advisors. Her determination and independent spirit was so strong that she refused to become a figurehead president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, choosing instead to make her own way. Coretta Scott King was extremely influential in helping the nation remember Dr. King as an ambassador of nonviolent social change rather than as a man who provoked violence behind the veneer of a nonviolent philosophy. He would not be so universally celebrated, I believe, were it not for the work to which Coretta Scott King committed the rest of her life. This work deserves greater recognition and exploration.

In addition to a deeper exploration of the role Coretta Scott King played in establishing her husband's legacy, an analysis of the King Center in Atlanta as a *lieux de mémoire* would be useful, particularly by comparison with the National King Memorial in the District of Columbia and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta created by the National Park Service. The King Center is a memorial, museum, and programmatic nonprofit organization that provides educational and community programs based in Atlanta. It could prove informative to track the history of its development as well as the numerous issues and communities it has engaged throughout the years, as well as its status as a site of American civil religious pilgrimage.

Finally, scholars have not yet adequately addressed how the Civil Rights Movement engaged, contested, and changed American civil religion. As I have previously written, Robert N. Bellah's 1967 exploration of the nation's "third time of trial" in "Civil Religion in America" gave less attention to Civil Rights activism as a direct challenge to how the nation failed to practice what it preached than to the challenge mounted by the peace movement against the Vietnam War.[386] More attention must be given to the ways in which Martin Luther King Jr. used and transformed civil religious discourse, and led civil religious rites at the nation's sacred sites. King's impact is generally if tacitly accepted from the theoretical perspective of American Civil Religion, but it remains to be thoroughly explored. Because Martin Luther King Jr. championed civil-religious discourse and used it prophetically to challenge the nation to live up to its

[386] See Jermaine M. McDonald, "A Fourth Time of Trial: Towards an Implicit and Inclusive American Civil Religion," *Implicit Religion* 16.1 (2013), 47-64.

sacred promise, King's legacy opens the door to wider exploration of American civil religion and race, which has barely begun.[387]

Martin Luther King Jr. is rightfully canonized as a national hero. His leadership changed the nation, his rhetoric inspires the world, and his example demonstrates that nonviolent social action can bring about social justice. It is fitting that so many people and coalitions, spanning every political ideology and party, gravitate to him to inspire and justify their causes. Though he most certainly would not agree with all of the causes that political liberals and conservatives espouse, the social unity his moral image evokes, however thin, is laudatory. I would be remiss if I did not allow Dr. King to have the final word on his legacy.

> But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment.

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[387] See "Interpretations of Black Religion in America" in Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Fortress Press: Aurora, CO, 1986).

> Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.[388]

This work is the story of how a self-proclaimed "extremist for love" became an All-American hero.

[388] Martin Luther King Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle,* online at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/, last accessed October 8, 2014

Appendix A

Chronology of the National King Holiday[389]

- April 8, 1968 – Four days after Dr. King is assassinated, Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) introduces first legislation providing for a Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday.
- June 26, 1968 – The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center is founded in Atlanta. The mission is to establish a living memorial to Dr. King, to preserve his papers and promote his teachings. Shortly after, King Center Founder Coretta Scott King directs the small staff to being planning for the first annual observance of Dr. King's birthday.
- January 15, 1969 – The King Center sponsors the first annual observance of Dr. King's birthday with an ecumenical service and other events and calls for nation-wide commemorations of Dr. King's birthday. This observance becomes the model for subsequent annual commemorations of Dr. King's birthday nation-wide, setting the tone of celebration of Dr. King's life, education in his teachings and nonviolent action to carry forward his unfinished work.
- April 1971 – Petitions gathered by SCLC bearing 3 million signatures in support of King Holiday are presented to Congress. But Congress takes no action to move holiday legislature forward.
- 1973 – First state King Holiday bill (sponsored by then Assemblyman Harold Washington) signed into law in Illinois. The law was originally passed in 1971,

[389] From "Making of the King Holiday: A Chronology" online at http://www.thekingcenter.org/making-king-holiday.

but then Governor Ogilvie tried to make it conditional on the passage of National King holiday.

- 1974 – Massachusetts, Connecticut enact statewide King Holidays.
- 1975 – New Jersey State Supreme Court rules that state must provide a paid holiday in honor of Dr. King in accordance with the state government's labor contract with the New Jersey State Employees Association.
- November 4, 1978 – National Council of Churches calls on Congress to pass King Holiday.
- February 19, 1979 – Coretta Scott King testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in behalf of the King Holiday. She urges Rep. Conyers to bring up the holiday bill for a floor vote in the House of Representatives.
- March 27, 1979 – Mrs. King testifies before Joint Hearings of Congress in support of King Holiday bill.
- 1979 – Mrs. King directs King Center staff to begin intensive organizing of a nation-wide citizens lobby for a national Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. King Center launches new nationwide King Holiday petition campaign, which is signed by more than 300,000 before end of year. President Carter calls on Congress to pass national King Holiday. The King Holiday bill finally begins to move through Congressional committees.
- November 1979 - The Conyers King Holiday bill is defeated in floor vote in U.S. House of Representatives by just five votes.

- 1980 – Stevie Wonder releases "Happy Birthday," a song celebrating Dr. King and urging a holiday in his honor. It becomes a hit and a rallying cry for the holiday.
- May 2, 1980 – Coretta Scott King testifies in U.S. House of Representative in support of establishing a National Historic Site in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.
- September 11, 1980 – Mrs. King testifies in U.S. Senate in support of establishing a National Historic Site.
- 1981 – King Center President Coretta Scott King writes to governors, mayors, chairpersons of city council across the U.S., requesting them to pass resolutions and proclamations commemorating Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and send them to The King Center's Archives. She asks them to recognize celebrations and programs of observance.
- February 23, 1982 – Mrs. King testifies in support of the Holiday before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service.
- 1982 – The King Center calls for and mobilizes a conference to commemorate and serve as cosponsors of the nineteenth anniversary of the March on Washington. More than a hundred organizations participated. King Center mobilizes coalition to lobby for the holiday. Stevie Wonder funds holiday lobbying office and staff based in Washington, D.C.
- 1982 – Mrs. King and Stevie Wonder present King Center petitions bearing more than six million signatures in support of King Holiday to Tip O'Neil, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

- June, 1983 – Mrs. King again testifies before Congress in behalf of The King Holiday bill.
- August 1983 – The House of Representatives passes King Holiday Bill, providing for the King Holiday to be observed on the third Monday in January. The bill, which is sponsored by Reps. Katie Hall (D.-IN) and Jack Kemp (R-NY), passes by a vote of 338 to 90.
- August 27, 1983 – King Center convenes the "20th Anniversary March on Washington," supported by more than 750 organizations. More than 500,000 people attend the March at the Lincoln Memorial, and all of the speakers call on the U.S. Senate and President Reagan to pass the King Holiday.
- October 19, 1983 – Holiday Bill sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy (D.-Mass.) passes U.S. Senate by a vote of 78-22. November 3, 1983 - President Reagan signs bill establishing the third Monday of every January as the Martin Luther King Jr. National Holiday, beginning in 1986.
- November 3, 1983 – President Reagan signs bill establishing the 3rd Monday of every January as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday, beginning in 1986.
- April-May 1984 – King Center develops legislative proposal to establish the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. Mrs. King meets with leadership of the House and Senate and appeals to Congress to legislate the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. The legislation passes Congress by a voice vote.

- August 27, 1984 – President Reagan signs legislation providing for the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, to last for a term of five years, with an option to renew for another five years.
- November, 1984 – First meeting of the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. Coretta Scott King is unanimously elected chairperson.
- January 20, 1986 – First national King Holiday Observed. By this time seventeen states had official King holidays. The King Holiday Commissioners are sworn in by federal district Judge Horace Ward.
- January 16, 1989 – As a result of leadership of the King Holiday Commission, the number of states which enacted a MLK holiday grows to forty-four.
- 1990 – The United Auto Workers negotiate contracts with the big three auto companies requiring a paid holiday for all their employees.
- January 15, 1990 – The Wall St. Journal Reports that only eighteen percent of 317 corporate employers surveyed by the Bureau of National Affairs provide a paid King Holiday.
- November 3, 1992 – After a coalition of citizens for an Arizona King Holiday launches successful protest and boycott campaigns, the people of Arizona pass referendum establishing Martin Luther King Jr. state holiday.
- January, 1993 – Arizona observes first statewide King holiday, leaving only New Hampshire without a state holiday in honor of Dr. King.
- 1994 – Citing Dr. King's statement that "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve," Coretta Scott King testifies before congress in support of making the King Holiday an official national day of humanitarian service.

- August 23, 1994 – President Clinton signs the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday and Service Act, expanding the mission of the holiday as a day of community service, interracial cooperation, and youth anti-violence initiatives.
- 1996 – Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission concludes mission, transfers responsibility for coordinating nationwide holiday programs and activities to The King Center.
- 1998 – A Bureau of National Affairs survey of 458 employers found that 26 percent provide a paid holiday for their workers on the King Holiday. The survey found that 33 percent of firms with union contracts provided the paid King Holiday, compared to 22 percent of nonunion shops.
- June 7, 1999 – Governor Jean Shaheen of New Hampshire signs the King Holiday legislation into law, completing enactment of holiday in all states.
- October 29, 1999 – U.S. Senate unanimously passes legislation requiring federal institutions to fly U.S. flag on the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday.
- August 2000 – The King Center's National Holiday Advisory Committee is established to promote the Holiday throughout the fifty states. Each governor of the fifty states is asked to appoint two state representatives to coordinate celebration in their state.
- Today – The King holiday is celebrated in U.S. installations and is observed by local groups in more than one hundred other nations. Trinidad and other nations have also established a holiday in honor of Dr. King.

  The King Holiday should highlight remembrance and celebration and should encourage people everywhere to reflect on the principles of nonviolent social

change and racial equality as espoused by Martin Luther King Jr. It should be a day of community and humanitarian service, and interracial cooperation.

The King Holiday should be a day on which the majority of local and state governments close, and one on which private organizations and the majority of businesses honor Dr. King by encouraging their employees to undertake community service work to address social needs.

The King Holiday should officially and appropriately be observed by the United Nations and its members. Mrs. Coretta Scott King, who severed as chair, Martin Luther King Jr., Federal Holiday Commission and founding president of the Martin Luther King Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, is quoted as saying:

"As a nation chooses its heroes and heroines, a nation interprets its history and shapes its destiny. The commemoration of the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr., can help America realize its true destiny as the global model for democracy, economic and social justice, and as the first nonviolent society in human history."

Appendix B

Timeline of the King Memorial

The following timeline is partially adopted from the "History of the Memorial" page of the official Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial website (www.mlkmemorial.org). I have omitted the announcements of major corporate donations (though those are illustrative of a broader point about just who gets to attach themselves to King's legacy) and have added more detail about critical decisions and conflicts that arose during the development of the memorial.

- January 1984 – George Sealey, Alfred Bailey, Oscar Little, Eddie Madison, and John Harvey propose to their brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity to build the national King memorial. Presented at the Fraternity's Board of Director's meeting, under the leadership of President Oxell Sutton.
- September 28, 1996 – U.S. House of Representatives passed Joint Resolution 70 authorizing Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. to establish a memorial in Washington, D.C. to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The Senate followed by passing Joint Resolution 426 on October 3, 1996.
- November 12, 1996 – President William Clinton signs Congressional legislation proposing the establishment of a Memorial in DC honoring MLK.
- July 16, 1998 – President Clinton signs a Joint Congressional Resolution authorizing the building of a memorial.
- October 1, 1998 – National Capital Memorial Commission approved Area 1 – Constitutional Gardens for the King Memorial location.

- February 15, 1999 – The King Memorial Foundation announces the International design competition for the National King Memorial. The design competition attracts more than 1,900 registrants and over 900 submissions from architects, landscape architects, students, sculptors, and professors representing 52 countries around the world.[390]
- March 4, 1999 – National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) votes 6-5 in favor of the East end of Constitution Gardens as the site for the Memorial, against the recommendation of the committee and the staff.
- April 8, 1999 – The King Memorial Foundation project team goes before the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) and recommends a site along the Tidal Basin. The Commission rejects the earlier NCPC ruling and recommends studying two additional sites, one on the West end of Constitution Gardens and another on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.
- December 2, 1999 – NCPC votes unanimously to rescind its earlier action and approves the East end of Constitutional Gardens, a four-acre site adjacent to the Tidal Basin along with the design parameters, as indicated in the October 21, 1999 agreement.
- December 2, 1999 – The King Memorial Foundation names the competition panel assessors:
    - Dr. Ed Jackson, Jr., Jury Chair, American Institute of Architects, Professional Practice Division, D.C.

[390] "Fact Sheet" *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Website*. http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/c.hkIUL9MVJxE/b.1777009/k.1B32/Fact_Sheet.htm. Last accessed February 24, 2012.

- Prof. James Chaffers, ArchD., AIA, University of Michigan, School of Architecture
- Charles Correa, Hon. FAIA, Bombay, India
- Professor Randalf Hester, Jr., ASLA, University of California, Landscape Architecture, Berkeley, CA
- William Lawson, FAIA, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C.
- Professor Jon Lockard, Artist, University of Michigan, School of Art and Design, Ann Arbor, MI
- Karen Phillips, FASLA, Abyssinian Development Corporation, New York, NY
- Professor LaVerne Wells-Bowie, Florida A&M University, School of Architecture, Tallahassee, FL
- Ricardo Legorreta, Hon. FAIA, Mexico City, Mexico
- Professor Wu Liangyong, Hon. FAIA, Tsinghua University, School of Architecture, Beijing, China
- Dr. Suha Ozkan, Ankara Turkey: Secretary General, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Geneva, Switzerland

- September 12, 2000 – The Design Competition assessors select the entry submitted by ROMA Design Group of San Francisco, CA as the winning design.
- March 2001 – The King Memorial launches a quiet fundraising campaign. General Motors becomes the first sponsor of the Memorial.

- April 18, 2002 – The CFA votes in favor of the proposed design for the memorial.
- November 2002 – The National Parks Service and the King Memorial Foundation initiates an environmental assessment of proposed site.
- May 7, 2003 – Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist host the launch of the national media campaign developed by the Ad Council in conjunction with the advertisement firm, Saatchi & Saatchi. Public Service Announcements feature Halle Berry and Al Roker.
- January 31, 2005 – Total fundraising for the memorial reaches the $5 million mark. The King Memorial Foundation begins an aggressive public fundraising phase.
- June 28, 2005 – The U.S. Senate votes to provide $10M matching funds towards the construction of the memorial.
- February, 2006 – The $10 million Congressional match is achieved with the announcement of The Walt Disney Company Foundation donation. Senators Robert Byrd (D-WV) and Thad Cochran (R-MI) were the driving force behind the match.[391]
- March 2006 – The CFA grants approval for the NPS to add a Visitor's Information Center at the Memorial site to include a donor's wall of those who gave $1M or more.
- April 2006 – The NCPC praises design and gives approval to proceed with the final design phase of the project.

[391] Not so incidentally, Senator Byrd led the historic filibuster *against* the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

- June 2006 – The King Memorial Foundation launches the Faith-based direct-mail initiative.
- November 13, 2006 – Thousands attend the Ceremonial Groundbreaking hosted by Tavis Smiley and Soledad O'Brien. The National Dinner Gala held at the John F. Kennedy Center nets $5.2M.
- December 2006 – The Council of Historians recommends quotations from Dr. King's opus to be inscribed on the Memorial's inscription wall. The named Council of Historians[392] include:
    - Dr. Maya Angelou (Reynolds Professor of American Studies, Wake Forest University)
    - Mr. Lerone Bennett, Jr. (Executive Editor and Historian, Ebony Magazine/Johnson Publishing Company)
    - Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Chair, Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University)
    - Lonnie G. Bunch (Director, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History & Culture)
    - Dr. James Chaffers (Professor University of Michigan)

[392] "Council of Historians Selects Martin Luther King Jr. Quotations to Be Engraved Into Memorial". *Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Website*. http://www.mlkmemorial.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=hkIUL9MVJxE&b=1601407&ct=3560637. Last accessed February 24, 2012. In the announcement of the council's selected quotes, Dr. Jackson of the memorial foundation describes the Stone of Hope. He says King's own eulogy, "Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter" was to go on the side of the King statue. However, this was shortened for artistic reasons (they wanted the font sizes to match on both sides of the memorial).

- Dr. Johnetta B. Cole (President, Bennett College)
- Dr. John Hope Franklin (Duke University Department of History)
- Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chair, Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University)
- F. Michael Higginbotham (University of Baltimore School of Law, John and Frances Angelos Law Center)
- Mr. Jon Lockard (Professor University of Michigan)
- Dr. Cornel West (Professor of Religion and African American Studies, Princeton University)
- Marianne Williamson (Spiritual Leader)

- February 15, 2007 – The Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, Inc. announces the selected quotations from Dr. King's writing, sermons, and speeches to be engraved onto the Memorial Wall as well as the sculptor who will carve the image of Dr. King into the Stone of Hope. The selected quotations reflect "King's ideals of hope, democracy, and love, the three main themes of the memorial."
- February 15, 2007 – The Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, Inc. announces Master Lei Yixin of China[393] as the Sculptor of Record who will carve the image of Dr. King into the "Stone of Hope," the centerpiece of the Memorial.

[393] Mike Xiong wrote and self-published a book about Lei Yixin's work on the King Memorial. See Mike Xiong. *The Stone of Hope: Martin Luther King Memorial and Master Sculptor Lei Yixin* (United States of America: Mike Xiong, 2011).

- September 18, 2007 – The Dream Concert is held at Radio City Music Hall. Featured artists include Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Carlos Santana, Robin Thicke, Bebe Winans, Cece Winans, Jessye Norman, Garth Brooks, Joss Stone, Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds, and Queen Latifah.
- January 15, 2008 – New York City Ministers, convened by Dr. Calvin O. Butts III, Dr. Floyd H. Flake, Dr. James A. Forbes, and Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood, pledge support for the "Build the Dream" campaign by making personal pledges of $10K each towards the goal of $500K.
- October 1, 2008 – The Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation submits to the National Parks Service, a request for the construction permit to build the memorial.
- December 4, 2008 – Civil Rights Movement pioneers visit the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Site and vow to support the memorial.
- October 29, 2009 – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar signs the permit allowing construction of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall.
- August 22, 2011 – The National King Memorial opens to the public. Dedication ceremonies scheduled for Sunday, August 28th postponed due to the approach of Hurricane Irene.
- October 16, 2011 – The official National King Memorial Dedication Ceremonies are held at a site adjacent to the memorial.
- February 10, 2012 – U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announces that the paraphrased quote on the King Memorial, which reads,

"I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness," will be changed to better reflect MLKs humility. Salazar declares, "With a monument so powerful and timeless, it is especially important that all aspects of its words, design and meaning stay true to Dr. King's life and legacy."[394]

- February 11, 2012 – The King Memorial Foundation announces its objection to the place set forth by the Department of the Interior and the National Parks Service to "fix" the poorly constructed paraphrase on the right side of the Stone of Hope. They believe the fix will do irreparable damage to the artistic and structural integrity of the Memorial.
- December 11, 2012 – U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced that the 'Drum Major' paraphrase would be removed by carving striations over the lettering to match the scratch marks on the sculpture from the 'Stone of Hope.'[395]
- August 1, 2013 – The controversial 'Drum Major' paraphrase is removed from the monument with no replacement by Master Sculptor Lei Yixin.[396]

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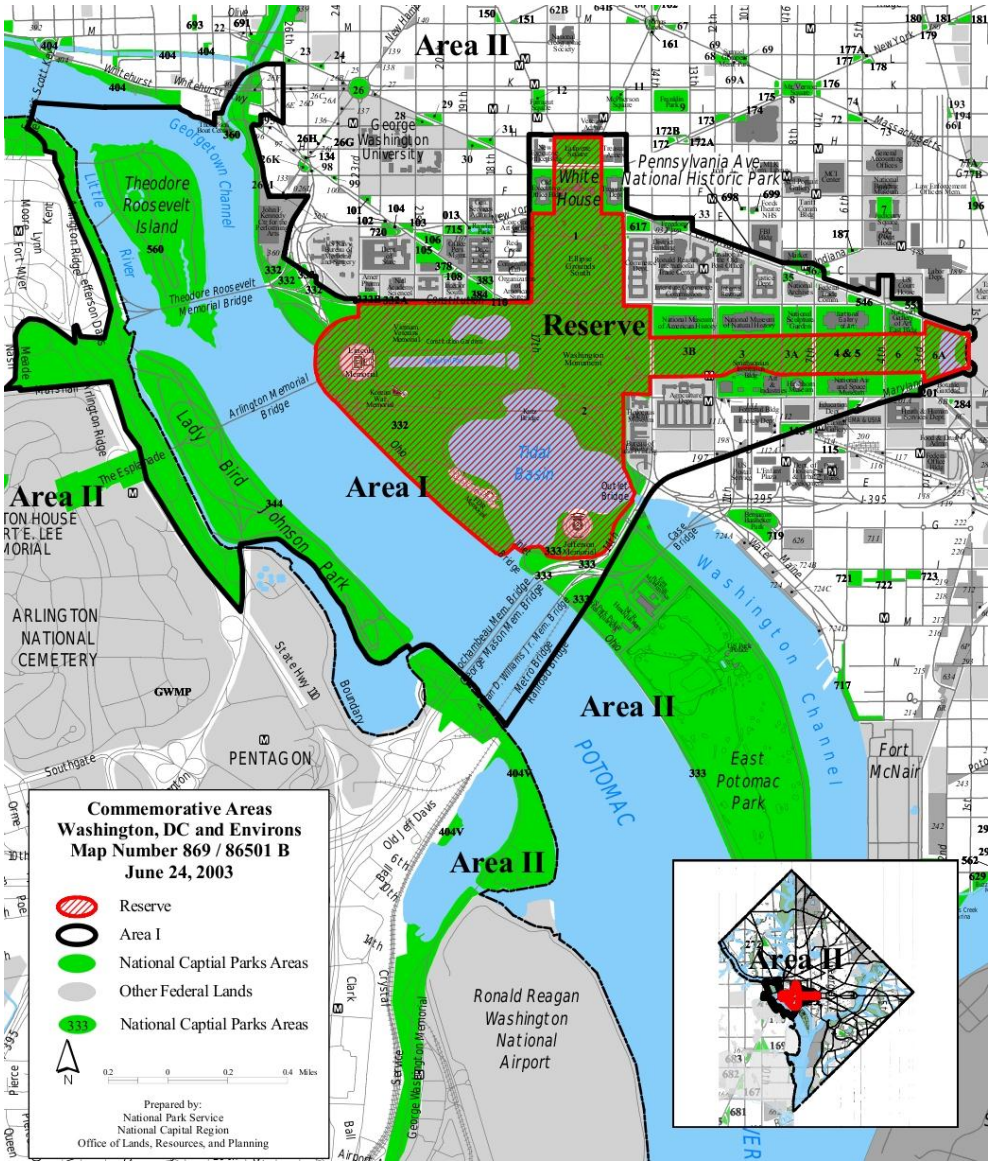
[394] Michael Winter, "King's Full 'Drum Major' Quote to Be Restored on Memorial," http://content.usatoday.com/communities/ondeadline/post/2012/02/kings-full-drum-major-quote-to-be-restored-on-memorial/1#.T0f433KXQmE, last accessed February 24, 2012.

[395] Krishnadev Calamur, "Inscription on Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial To Be Removed," *NPR.org* published on December 11, 2012 at http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/12/11/166993431/inscription-on-martin-luther-king-jr-memorial-to-be-removed, last accessed on September, 19 2014.

[396] Alana Abramson, "Inscription on Martin Luther King Memorial Removed," *ABCNews.com*, published on 2 August 2013 at http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2013/08/inscription-on-martin-luther-king-memorial-removed/, last accessed on 19 September 2014.

Appendix C

National Mall Area Map[397]



[397] This map was produced by the National Park Service in 2003 to identify the National Capital Park areas. See http://www.ncpc.gov/DocumentDepot/Planning/area1_map.pdf. I have zoomed in on Area I and moved the wide view from the top to the bottom of the map.

Appendix D

Inscription Wall Quotation Matrix

Quotation	Wall Citation	Secondary Source
We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.	"Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" – March 31, 1968 address at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC	"Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March" - March 25, 1965 at the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, AL.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.	"Loving Your Enemies" in *Strength to Love* (1963)	"Black Power" in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos of Community* (1967)
I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.	Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech – December 10, 1964 in Oslo, Norway	
Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in.	Speech before the Youth March for Integrated Schools – April 18, 1959	
I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as a moral example of the world.	"The Casualties of the Vietnam War" – February 25, 1967 address in Los Angeles, CA	

Quotation	Wall Citation	Secondary Source
If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.	"A Christmas Sermon on Peace" – December 24, 1967 at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA	
Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.	"Letter from a Birmingham Jail" – April 16, 1963 in Birmingham, AL	
I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.	Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech – December 10, 1964 in Oslo, Norway	
It is not enough to say, "We must not wage war." It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but on the positive affirmation of peace.	"The Casualties of the Vietnam War" – February 25, 1967 address in Los Angeles, CA	Nobel Peace Prize Lecture – December 11, 1964 in Oslo, Norway

Quotation	Wall Citation	Secondary Source
The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.	"On Being a Good Neighbor" in *Strength to Love* (1963)	
Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.	"Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence" – April 4, 1967 in New York, NY	
We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs "down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."	"Address to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting" – December 5, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama	
We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.	"Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March" - March 25, 1965 at the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, AL.	
True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.	"Montgomery Before the Protest" in *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958)	

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