

Session I. Rethinking the Civil Rights Movement

Session I will explore current thinking on the Civil Rights Movement, its origins, its reach throughout the country, and its visionary purpose that extended far beyond the legal gains. We will discuss how viewing the movement in this way shows us what everyday people can achieve, the forces with which they have to contend, and what remains to be done.

Readings:

- Theoharis, Jeanne, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2018. ix-xviii.
- Lewis, Earl, "Civil Rights and the Changing World: How history was made and how it's being written," *Humanities*, January/February 2013. 1-7.
- King Encyclopedia, "Beyond Vietnam," April 4, 1967. 1 page.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," April 4, 1967, Speech given at Riverside Church, New York, N.Y. 1-3.

Videos: We will watch and discuss these in class

- Hall, Jacqueline Dowd, "What are the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement?" The Gilder Lehrman Institute, 2012. <https://vimeo.com/39462515>
- Interview with Nelson Peery on his book *Black Radical: The Education of an American Revolutionary*, New Press, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S33j7YdrCOc>

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Thapar's, Beautiful + Terrible History

PREFACE

A Dream Diluted and Distorted

It's a system of power that is always deciding in the name of humanity who deserves to be remembered and who deserves to be forgotten. . . . We are much more than we are told. We are much more beautiful.

—Eduardo Galeano¹

American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.

—James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”²

BY THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM, the history of the civil rights movement had become a national story. When asked to name a “most famous American” other than a president “from Columbus to today,” high school students most often chose Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks.³ Students chose two freedom fighters who in life had challenged the racial injustice at the heart of American society and who had often been treated as “un-American” for doing so. Now the civil rights movement had come to embody American grit, courage, and resolve, and these two activists could be invoked as the country’s most famous emblems.

Arguably beginning when President Ronald Reagan signed the bill in 1983 to make the third Monday of January a federal holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., the political uses of memorializing the movement took on heightened possibility as a national narrative. Fifteen years of opposition to the holiday gave way to recognizing its political utility. The civil rights movement became a way for the nation to feel good about its progress—and King’s legacy became enshrined in his “dream speech.” His popularity expanded. By 1987, 76 percent of Americans held a favorable opinion

of the civil rights leader, almost the reverse of his popularity at the end of his life (only 28 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of him in 1966).⁴ President after president, from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Obama, hailed King's "dream" in their tributes to him. With these national stamps of approval, the civil rights leader's broader commitments to challenging the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism" and his legacy of sustained struggle shrank further into the background.⁵

At the same time, memorials to the civil rights movement became national events—from President Bill Clinton's trip to Little Rock for the fortieth anniversary of the Little Rock Nine's desegregation of Central High School, to Congress's decision to have Rosa Parks's coffin lie in honor in the Capitol, to the First Family's trip to Selma, Alabama, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. These national events honored not just the work of the civil rights activists but the advancement of the nation itself. They marked the Americanness of the civil rights struggle, and held up the power of US democracy and progress to the world.

Political leaders, pundits, and citizens came to see and tell the story of the modern civil rights movement as one of progress and national redemption.⁶ Jim Crow was framed as a horrible Southern relic, and the movement to unseat it became a powerful tale of courageous Americans defeating a long-ago evil. Activists from Paul Robeson to Malcolm X—who had once been deemed national security threats—showed up on postage stamps. A movement that had challenged the very fabric of US politics and society was turned into one that demonstrated how great and expansive the country was—a story of individual bravery, natural evolution, and the long march to "a more perfect union."

A story that should have reflected the immense injustices at the nation's core and the enormous lengths people had gone to attack them had become a flattering mirror. The popular history of the civil rights movement now served as testament to the power of American democracy. This framing was appealing—simultaneously sober about the history of racism, lionizing of Black courage, celebratory of American progress, and strategic in masking (and at times justifying) current inequities. This history as national progress naturalized the civil rights movement as an almost inevitable aspect of American democracy rather than as the outcome of

Black organization and intrepid witness. It suggested racism derived from individual sin rather than from national structure—and that the strength of American values, rather than the staggering challenge of a portion of its citizens, led to its change.⁷ The movement had largely washed away the sins of the nation, and America's race problem could be laid to rest with a statue in the Capitol.

In the process, politicians and others shrank the progressive, expansive, challenging vision of the modern Black freedom struggle into something more passive, individualistic, and privatized—a dream diluted and distorted. The celebration of the movement became a way to avoid acknowledging the "enormous gap between [America's] practices and its professions," as historian John Hope Franklin had explained.⁸ And it became a way to take the beauty and power away from one of the most successful social movements of the twentieth century and the vision it offers us for today.

The recounting of national histories is never separate from present-day politics. What of the past is remembered, celebrated, and mourned is at the core of national identity—and the process of what is told and not told is often a function of power. The act of making an historical tribute necessarily resolves it and fixes it in time and place. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes, the task of commemoration "help[s] to create, modify or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration . . . to create a past that seems both more real and more elementary."⁹ The use of the word "history" itself is slippery; Trouillot reminds us: "In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.'"¹⁰ Thus, reflection on popular uses of history is crucial as "we move closer to an era when professional historians will have to position themselves more clearly within the present, lest politicians, magnates, or ethnic leaders alone write history for them."¹¹ Memorials in their essence are for the dead, for events long since over. And the task of honoring can also be a form of stripping and silencing.¹²

Racial injustice is America's original sin and deepest silence.¹³ The ways the country came to honor the civil rights movement were not simply about paying tribute to these courageous acts and individuals in the past but also

about sanctioning what will—and will not be—faced about the nation's history and present. Explained former Birmingham mayor David Vann: “The best way to put your bad images to rest is to declare them history and put them in a museum.”¹⁴ So, paradoxically, the ways the nation has memorialized the civil rights movement has become a way to maintain such silences. The history of American racism had become just that . . . history. While these tributes honored the movement, they simultaneously depoliticized the scope of the struggle, distorted the work of the activists honored, demonized Black anger, and obscured ongoing calls for racial justice through a celebration of a nearly postracial, self-correcting America.

No better proof of the country's progress was the election and presidency of Barack Obama. Movement symbolism was highlighted throughout the 2008 election, both by the Obama campaign itself and by others. Candidate Obama accepted the Democratic nomination for president on August 28, 2008—the forty-fourth anniversary of the March on Washington.¹⁵ Posters decorated churches and community centers, telephone poles and schools, delineating this historical progression: “Rosa sat so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so our children could fly.” By voting for him, individuals could help realize the dream. Many trumpeted Obama's victory as the culmination of the civil rights movement and a testament to a “postracial America”—an America that had largely moved past its history of racism. Even those who did not share such a rosy view of American progress were awed by the immensity of seeing the election of a Black man to the presidency of the United States. Given the momentous nature of his victory, referencing the history of the movement became more central to the presidency of Barack Obama than that of any of his predecessors—and the president himself, his supporters, and many commentators regularly appealed to its legacy.

And the public who elected him rejoiced in it. Used as a way to bask in our own association with this grand historical line, the civil rights movement had become our national redemption song. The election of President Obama made many of his supporters feel like *we had overcome*. It had delivered us. And therein lay the danger—rather than a rung on a steep ladder, the election became the zenith, the top of that climb, where all who wished could take credit for the triumph.

Many people, President Obama included, didn't subscribe to this postracial idea. Indeed, he explicitly said that the United States was *not*

a postracial society. But he did subscribe to the idea that we were almost there. At the historic Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama, during the campaign in 2007, he said the civil rights generation “took us 90 percent of the way there, but we still got that 10 percent in order to cross over to the other side.”¹⁶ Just 10 percent—not a fundamental, woven-into-our-institutions racism requiring policy and institutional transformation but a remnant racism. And therein lay the seduction of the almost-there.

To support this almost-there, 10-percent-to-go idea, the version of the movement promoted in these memorials and public tributes distorted and diminished the history of the period. The genius of this almost-there frame was that it acknowledged the history of racism but then simultaneously claimed that America had now largely moved past it. It honored the role of courageous struggle but then asserted that we didn't necessarily need such civil disobedience anymore (and, in fact, contemporary protesters were often treated as an affront to King's legacy).

A narrative of dreamy heroes and accidental heroines, the story was narrowed to buses and lunch counters and Southern redneck violence. It became a key way that Americans publicly acknowledged the country's legacy of racial injustice—in the past—where the death-defying courage and sacrifices of these heroes and heroines vanquished it, as opposed to in the present, where our own resolve might be needed as well. And it became a way the nation celebrated its own identity: President Obama at the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery march characterized the civil rights movement as a “manifestation of a creed written into our founding documents.”¹⁷

This frame was advanced not just by liberals; conservatives joined in. In the second Republican presidential debate in 2015, contenders Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump all named Rosa Parks as *the* woman they would chose for the ten-dollar bill. Weeks before the 2016 election, Trump lawyer Michael Cohen tweeted a photo of Trump, Muhammad Ali, and Rosa Parks to demonstrate that candidate Trump was “a man for ALL people!” When controversy over President Trump's nomination of Jeff Sessions for attorney general sparked massive controversy, supporters of Sessions detailed his long embrace of Rosa Parks. And when he met with the pope on his first foreign trip, in May 2017, Trump gave him a first-edition set of Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings and a piece of granite from the King memorial sculpture in Washington, DC.¹⁸

Invoking the civil rights movement had become a clever suit to assert one's enlightened bona fides. It crossed party and ideology. Simply everyone was doing it. In the process, these inspirational stories, with their distortions, embellishments, and omissions, had taken on the power of a national fable. This fable became a new way to paper over the long history of struggle and enduring racial injustice in the United States today. With their element of self-congratulation, these often bipartisan acts of memorialization whitewashed the history of the movement, becoming a veil to obscure enduring racial inequality, a tool to chastise contemporary protest, and a shield to charges of indifference and inaction.

While seemingly bestowing great honor on freedom fighters of old, this national mythologizing of the civil rights movement also took the movement away from everyday people. From community leaders and young activists and elder freedom fighters seeking to understand where the country was and how to build movements today. It turned it into scratchy church clothes, admirable but uncomfortable, and not meant for daily use but appreciation from afar. The iconization of King and Parks and the erasure of many other leaders and participants seemed to suggest that Americans, particularly young people of color today, could not do what these civil rights heroes and heroines did. At a time when new movements for racial and economic justice have emerged on the national scene, this fable of the movement became a potent obstacle and bludgeon used to diminish contemporary efforts, making today's activists seem inappropriate troublemakers who lacked the gravitas of yesterday's activists and who just weren't going about it the right way.

The public spectacle of these memorials at times provides a shield for present-day action and inaction, a live-action "split screen": a coterie of political leaders dedicating the Rosa Parks statue on the day the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Shelby County v. Holder* (the suit that successfully challenged part of the Voting Rights Act); President Trump taking Martin Luther King's writings as a gift to Pope Francis in the same week he introduced a budget that gutted many of the social programs these freedom fighters had won. The "split screen" was not simply ironic; it was useful in rendering contemporary issues and injustices as far different from the ones these movements fought against.

During President Obama's second term, a new movement brewing over years blossomed onto the national scene. Growing outrage over the

"new Jim Crow,"¹⁹ the execution of Troy Davis, the killing of Trayvon Martin and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, the incarceration of Marissa Alexander, the police killing of Michael Brown and the movement on the streets of Ferguson that subsequently erupted, and the death in custody of Sandra Bland and the "Say Her Name" campaign galvanized into what has become known as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Alongside these were courageous struggles for immigrant and indigenous rights, in which new generations of Latinx and Native Americans joined elders to carry the fight in new directions, from United We Dream, undocumented student organizing, and #NotMore (opposing deportations) movements to Standing Rock and #NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline).

For many participants and longtime activists, including Harry Belafonte and many former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the continuities of struggle were readily apparent. But this national fable of the civil rights movement became a weapon some used against these new movements for justice, as comparison after comparison was made to the civil rights movement to find BLM wanting. Across the political spectrum, from presidential candidate Mike Huckabee to Reverend Barbara Reynolds to Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed, many made comparisons with the civil rights movement to criticize and chastise new movements for justice, holding up the civil rights movement as the "right" way to do it and Black Lives Matter as the wrong way. In advance of the grand jury verdict in Ferguson, former Republican presidential candidate and Arkansas governor Huckabee wrote a blog post instructing the protesters in Ferguson to be more like Martin Luther King Jr. The Reverend Barbara Reynolds, herself part of the civil rights movement, took to the pages of the *Washington Post* to draw a deep distinction:

Many in my crowd admire the cause and courage of these young activists but fundamentally disagree with their approach. Trained in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., we were nonviolent activists who won hearts by conveying respectability and changed laws by delivering a message of love and unity. BLM seems intent on rejecting our proven methods.²⁰

In July 2016, Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed invoked King's spirit and the power of free speech but then explained to reporters the large police

presence at demonstrations following police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile: “Dr. King would never take a highway.”²¹ There is something deeply ahistorical and ironic to call for voices muted, tactics softened, disruption avoided, and more honorable spokesmen located, when these very criticisms were lobbed at the civil rights movement as well. And there is something convenient, too—a way of justifying reform, by making it seem as if people would join movements such as BLM if the upstanding likes of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were part of it, but these new movements were just going about it the wrong way. Looking more deeply into the Black freedom struggle challenges such misuses of civil rights history and reveals the politics behind this mythmaking.

Public tributes and invocations of the movement provide lessons on the past to secure our national identity in the present.²² The fable of the civil rights movement traffics in an “epistemology of ignorance,” as philosopher Charles Mills has explained it, selective and distorted in what is seen and remembered. “*White misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion and self-deception on matters of race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years,” Mills writes. “And these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* . . . which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.”²³ These stories flatter us as a country, minimizing our failings and marking our progress as inexorable, as opposed to deeply contested and often eroded.

This book thus takes up the political uses and radical possibilities of civil rights history in twenty-first-century America. Given the centrality and misuse of civil rights history in current American politics, a considered analysis is urgently needed to grapple with the “structured blindnesses” in this national fable—to see the ways the stories they tell and the elements they leave out and distort are perilous for our present. These civil rights mis-histories befuddle us. Inspiring and powerful, they leave us in our feelings of sadness, surprise, awe, and guilt, and in doing so, help to obscure what the movement entailed, how it happened, what it stood for, and how it challenges us today. By diminishing the substance and scope of American racism and what the movement actually involved, these renderings work to maintain current injustice, at times chastising contemporary

protesters in ways similar to the ways civil rights activists were demonized, and blind us to how we might do it again.

They are not the histories we need. As a nation, we need fuller histories—uncomfortable, sobering histories—that hold a mirror to the nation’s past and offer far-reaching lessons for seeing the injustices of our current moment and the task of justice today. “The historian’s task,” as British historian Tony Judt reminds, “is to tell what is almost always an uncomfortable story and explain why the discomfort is part of the truth we need to live well and live properly. A well-organized society is one in which we know the truth about ourselves collectively, not one in which we tell pleasant lies about ourselves.”²⁴ To know the truth about ourselves collectively reveals the immensity and ongoing nature of the modern Black freedom struggle, the injustices that continue in many of our current policies, and the problematic assumptions that support them.

The modern Black freedom struggle remains one of the most important examples of the power of ordinary people to change the course of the nation. But the popular stories we get impoverish our ability to see how change happens. A more expansive history transforms how we imagine what a movement looks like, sounds like, and pushes for, and understand how it is received and often reviled. It shows us that leadership, vision, steadfastness, and courage came in many forms, as did the opposition to it. Giving us necessary tools for understanding the past, it suggests lessons for long-distance runners in the struggle for racial and social justice today.

This book, in certain ways, expands on my last. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* opened with an analysis of Rosa Parks’s funeral. In October 2005, Parks became the first woman and second African American to lie in honor at the US Capitol.²⁵ But, as I argued in the book’s introduction, the congressional and presidential stampede to honor her could not be separated from the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina two months earlier and the growing national outrage about the federal government’s inaction and negligence. Searing, persistent racial and social inequality had pierced national and media consciousness in the aftermath of the storm, and Rosa Parks’s coffin on display at the Capitol became a way to paper over those more unsettling images from New Orleans. Resurrected in the Capitol as a national saint, this honor for Parks became a

way to lay the nation's history of racial injustice to rest—a gross distortion of what the lifelong freedom fighter had believed. This, however, necessitated a distorted, gendered image of a quiet, tired Parks confined to the bus on that long-ago December evening—an “accidental” heroine rather than a long-standing activist whose belief in the need for continuing struggle lasted until her death.

The outpouring of interest in *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* and in numerous other recently published civil rights histories suggest that many Americans hunger not only for a more substantive civil rights history but also for a critical analysis of the ways these popular fables are wielded in the present. As I have traveled around the country, it has become clear to me how much people crave analyses of the political uses of these fables and wish to know *why* we get the histories we get and what the stakes are in turning Rosa Parks into a quiet, meek, children's book character. There is a deep desire to understand the process by which she, and by extension the movement, are honored and simultaneously distorted in ways that diminish her legacy; the work of other activists; and the movement's disruptive, far-reaching challenge.

At the same time, I have seen a profound hunger for a fuller history of the modern Black freedom struggle—an abiding desire for a more accurate accounting of how it happened, to understand the long history of racial struggle in this country and *how* we might continue to build struggles for justice today. Over and over, I have heard people say that they suspected that there was more to the story; they describe feeling uneasy with popular accounts of the movement but didn't have the knowledge to upend them. Over and over, from fast-food workers in the Fight for \$15 to activists of the Moral Mondays movement to BLM organizers across the country, I have heard how these fuller histories of Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement are more challenging and empowering for where we are today, sustaining community organizers in their work, identifying the forces of injustice more fully, and furthering their imagination in the struggle for a more just society. And so this book, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, seeks to accomplish a related goal—to deconstruct the stories and memorials of the civil rights movement we have received and construct new knowledge and the more robust and fuller history we need for today.

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Earl Lewis, "Civil Rights and the Changing World How History was Made and How it's Being Written," *Humanities*, January/February 2013

Longtime social and civil rights activist, educator, and propagator of nonviolence Bernard Lafayette has told me more than once that professional historians, while getting the main story correct, miss part of the essence of what occurred during the American civil rights movement. In their concern for social movements (and their associated theories about those movements), showdown encounters with intransigent southern hardliners, charismatic leaders and iconic events, they fail to recognize the importance of strategy. To Dr. Lafayette, the story of the modern civil rights movement in the United States is about how the famous and the unknown systematically dismantled the edifice of segregation through dogged action and concerted strategy. He insists that while spontaneous actions may have prompted a few telling moments in the years after World War II, in most cases those who acted did so in a planned, orchestrated fashion. Even if every actor did not take part in the planning, the sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, and other engagements, the outcomes reflected long, quiet work before their more recognizable public displays.¹

Lafayette, in his critique, called on historians and other scholars to rethink the ways they write about the great American story of democracy-making at home after World War II. And, indeed, especially in the past twenty years, scholars and journalists have found ways in books, articles, and multimedia presentations to tell an increasingly complicated story about the descendants of enslaved people and their allies. In the process, we have not only learned about the heroines and heroes who burst onto the international stage a decade after the end of the war, but we have also peered into organizations and institutions to discover the importance of coordinated sustained action, and have met average citizens who wanted nothing more than to be treated equally and fairly at home, after helping end Hitler's tyrannical reign abroad. In time, we came to learn that the battle for civil rights cannot be so easily limited to 1954 through 1968, the period usually heralded as the civil rights era.² As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall maintained, mindful of scholarship that grew in volume and importance in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a long civil rights history in the United States, with its culminating summation of activism moving to center stage in the 1950s and '60s. And while critics have debated the exact periodization, few disagree with the conclusion that the pursuit of civil rights parallels the entire history of racial subjugation and the struggle for opportunity in the United States.³

Yet for all of the powerful work that has been produced since the late 1960s, often lost in the narrative arc is the broader context that gave form to the events of postwar America. If we need to understand civil rights actors as strategists, we also need to be mindful of them as citizens of a changing world. From biography to case study, from grand synthetic histories to monographs, more and more studies have hinted at a people tied to others seeking relief from social and cultural domination based on color and national origin. On the global stage this emerged as a story in large measure about colonial and decolonizing efforts. What linked the global and the local was a prevailing sense by those who chose to act that they could be the architects of their destinies. This profound sense of being able to change the world accelerated after World War II, even though earlier antecedents prefigured what was to follow.⁴

This essay centers on three interconnected themes. It accepts Lafayette's challenge and describes civil rights actors as intellectual strategists. It distinguishes between the modern civil rights era

and the history of civil rights in American history, which has a longer timeline. And it seeks to remind all that the modern era dovetailed with significant societal changes, including elsewhere in the world. Thus, we have the thesis of civil rights and the changing world.

Scholarship on the civil rights era began with a focus on leaders and institutions or organizations they headed. Among the first accounts was David Levering Lewis's biography of Martin Luther King Jr.⁵ Lewis, who earned a Pulitzer for his towering biography of W.E.B. DuBois, crafted the first notable biography of King, which appeared in 1970. Imperfect and somewhat hagiographic by later standards, the biography nonetheless told the remarkable story of a young man who dared believe he could join with others to change the world by holding America and its citizens to the highest ideals. Born into the secure comfort of a middle-class black family in pre-World War II Atlanta, King wrestled with life choices before deciding to follow his grandfather and father into the ministry. Unlike them, he would marry a developing fondness for intellectual pursuits with his sense of call, ultimately earning a PhD from Boston University and pastoring a church in Montgomery, Alabama. There the confluence of homegrown social activism, dense institutional networks linked to black churches, mobilized working-class blacks willing to sacrifice, and middle-class blacks willing to render assistance, plus a dynamic and educated young preacher gave rise to a new moment in American history. In Lewis's account, it was King's brilliant command of language, cultivated belief in nonviolence, and untiring commitment to improve America and the world that kept him trudging on, even when tired.

Charismatic leadership undoubtedly played a significant role in how many saw and understood the era. But later biographies of King and others revealed men and women of their times who could not escape the vicissitudes of the human condition. They quarreled, sniped and cajoled, they told lies about and to one another, they succumbed to temptations, and they also challenged the nation to find its better self. All were children of Jim Crow America, whether they grew up in the South, North, Midwest, or West. They all found themselves shaped by color in an age when some immigrants were made white, and most newcomers learned that anything was preferable to being called black.⁶

A magisterial accounting of the systematic and methodical fight for inclusion in the age of race-making came in the form of the 1976 book by Richard Kluger, eloquently called *Simple Justice*.⁷ While other early works would capture the actors behind the creation of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Kluger outlines in careful detail the people who brought us the *Brown* decision.⁸ The actors are men and women, children and the old, black, white, and other, learned and uneducated. They exist across time, because the events that led up to *Brown* occurred across multiple generations. In his rendering, the struggle for equality for blacks in America began early on, when the first Africans were indentured in colonial Virginia. From indentureship to slavery to emancipation to segregation, new eras demanded new approaches, tactics, and strategies.

At the core of Kluger's narrative is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, and the lawyers who crafted a strategy for attacking the efficacy of segregation in public education. And I would add that equally important are the average citizens who joined them in the fights. While scholars have previously contrasted the more gradual approach stemming from precedent-based litigation with the direct action flowing from sit-ins,

marches, boycotts, and rallies, a close reading of the historical record reveals this to be too limited a view of the dynamics of change over time. Both legal agitation and social activism threatened the status quo; more important, segregation would never have ended without work on all fronts.

Consider for a moment the story of Harry and Liza Briggs. Harry grew up in Clarendon County, South Carolina. Excluding a few years in the navy, he spent his entire life in Clarendon. According to accounts, he knew everyone there and they all knew him. He also knew things were not equal, and he took a stand and endured the consequences. Briggs's challenge of segregation in public schooling in South Carolina became a part of the bundle of cases we recall today as *Brown*. But before the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown* (known as *Brown I* and *II* because of decisions in 1954 and 1955), families such as the Briggses had to decide if and when to stand up. Years later Harry Briggs would recall:

“We figured anything to better the children’s condition was worthwhile. There didn’t seem to be much danger to it. But after the petition was signed, I knew it was different. The white folks got kind of sour. They asked me to take my name off the petition. My boss, he said did I know what I was doin’ and I said, ‘I’m doin’ it for the benefit of my children.’ He didn’t say nothin’ back. But then later—it was the day before Christmas—he gave me a carton of cigarettes and then he let me go. He said, Harry I want me a *boy*—and I can pay him less than you.⁹”

Both Harry and his wife, Liza, suffered job loss and other reprisals, and although blacks greatly outnumbered whites in Clarendon county in 1950, they were not yet prepared to wage an economic boycott of white stores. Most were too timid. The Briggses, nonetheless, decided to hold the course and sacrifice jobs, stability, and security so that their child had a better chance of gaining a quality education and a more prosperous future in America. Their willingness to fight should be viewed as courageous action, enabled in part by the concerted efforts of a legion of lawyers with names such as Houston, Hastie, Marshall, Robinson, Greenberg, and Carter and by a changing world characterized by the fight for freedom from subjugation.

While the Briggses were part of a campaign to end segregation in public schooling, occasionally, the course of history was changed by individuals who simply wished to be left alone to pursue the life they sought for themselves. A few short years after *Brown II* called for public schools in Virginia and the nation to be desegregated “with all deliberate speed,” Mildred Jeter, who was black, and Richard Loving, who was white, married in Washington, D.C. It was 1958, and across Virginia cities and districts shuttered schoolhouses to avoid integration, with some barring public attendance for nearly a decade. When Mildred and Richard returned to Virginia to reside, they found themselves in local court for violating the state’s prohibition on interracial marriage. As the NEH-supported documentary on the *Loving* case indicates, the couple simply sought to practice a punishable form of family values: They sought to honor their love through marriage, a right the Supreme Court affirmed in 1967.¹⁰

Scholarship in the seventies gave way to more deeply researched and theorized accounts during the eighties, nineties, and early 2000s. Sociologist Aldon Morris jumpstarted this effort with his highly influential study, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (1986). Beginning with the bus boycotts in Baton Rouge in 1953 rather

than those in Montgomery in 1954–55, Morris argues that protest had taken root in black communities over many years. It was not that black people had previously simply tolerated oppression. Rather, the modern civil rights struggle marked the first time everyday men, women, and children organized to disrupt the smooth operations of white southerners, their businesses, and institutions.¹¹

A decade later the historical sociologist Charles Payne moved the argument again. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, Payne reminds readers of the depths of this organizing impulse in black communities. Giving credit for the insight to Bob Moses, whose organizational skills helped give form to the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, Payne distinguishes between a mobilizing tradition and an organizing tradition. The former entails highly visible sit-ins, marches, and boycotts of relatively short duration, designed to galvanize public sentiment against segregation in all of its forms. By contrast, the organizing tradition sought to promote the “long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women,” a tradition best exemplified by the work of Ella Baker and Septima Clark, Payne writes.¹²

Nearly two decades of scholarship have shown how textured was the organizing tradition that ran in black communities throughout the South. Working-class blacks in Birmingham, Norfolk, and beyond refused to surrender seats to whites on a regular basis during World War II. In rural locales, co-ops had been formed and blacks had organized to promote economic and social empowerment, long before college students descended on Mississippi en masse in the summer of 1964.¹³

Others have echoed Payne's framing to varying degrees in their more recent works. In her award-winning biography of Ella Baker, Barbara Ransby tells us at the outset, “Ella Baker was concerned with the plight of African Americans, but she was also passionately committed to a broader humanitarian struggle for a better world.” Over the course of a lifetime she belonged to more than thirty organizations fighting for that better world, embracing the white left and the black community at the same time. She fought for Puerto Rican independence, against apartheid, for women's rights, and for democratic justice on many levels. As she sought to instill in others the power to shape their world, she emerged over and over again as an intellectual, one cognizant of the international currents and crosscurrents, and one who believed people, irrespective of education and learning, could help produce a more just world.¹⁴

If the participants can be seen as strategists, they can also be seen as intellectuals, despite their differing levels of education. Ransby portrays Baker as an “organic” intellectual who read Freire and understood Gramsci but learned mostly from professors of practice on the streets and byways of America.¹⁵ Her age-wise contemporary, Fannie Lou Hamer, at the outset traveled in less sophisticated circles than Baker but represented another example of such an intellectual. A repeated participant in the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, Hamer not only registered to vote when doing so invited injury, she managed to survive the physical extremes of southern racism to house students who came to Mississippi to promote change and to challenge leaders in the Democratic party. The credentials committee of the Democratic party had to decide which delegation to seat in 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party delegates or those representing the traditional party. Hamer addressed the group, nearly in tears, and said, “All of

this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, . . . where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"¹⁶ By framing her question as a question about the integrity of America, and its promise of justice for all, Hamer demonstrated the intellectual work that went into organizing for change.

A number of local community studies augment biographical accounts, illustrating an important historiographical fact: For all of the thousands of African Americans who migrated out of the South during two important twentieth-century waves, more stayed put.¹⁷ Through the violence that could rob a teenage visitor named Emmett Till of his life, a violence that was a daily constant, they understood that Frederick Douglass was indeed correct, and power would never concede anything without a fight, it never had and never would. Notwithstanding that daily reality of racial tyranny, they believed that home was worth fighting for and they resolved to fight for change there. John Dittmer's prize-winning account of local people in Mississippi who long struggled for civil rights is one such study. It recounts the stories of returning GIs, who joined forces through a range of organizations with others to fight for the right to vote, among other rights. Some, such as Medgar Evers, become well known in martyrdom; scores, however, went about the job of fighting for change, working with allies when feasible, demonstrating a willingness to confront violence with armed resistance, when required, and embracing non-violence, when practical. These local studies paint a more textured reality, one that complicates the prevailing master narrative of the battle for civil rights as simply a nonviolent affair until the radicalization of SNCC and the emergence of Black Power.¹⁸

If anything, Black Power reflected the emergence of a latent sentiment in the battle for civil rights that animated a range of social groups over the course of the twentieth century. The Garvey Movement of the 1910s and early 1920s, for example, professed a steadfast commitment to black empowerment through economic independence. The Nation of Islam appealed to a similar impulse. With their own creation narrative, economic enterprises, religious centers, and iconic figures, the Nation found converts all over America, including one Malcolm Little, known more broadly as Malcolm X. But, as much as anything, the Nation offered a recipe for social reintegration for many discarded by the dominant society, and the prospect of doing so without reliance on white society. The Prophet Elijah Muhammad, the titular head of the Nation of Islam, appealed to many because he offered an answer to a vexing question: Was there a place for me in America? He answered yes, of course, but one you must define. The Black Panther party, on the other hand, asserted itself as a viable political force in numerous cities across the nation—and adopted a style, with oversized afros, bandoliers, and heated rhetoric that made them targets of the authorities and symbols of a brash independence in many black communities. Beyond style was substance and a community action plan that sought to improve basic conditions in many urban black neighborhoods. For all of the bravado, one should not forget the Panthers sought to change America and not separate from it. Some black nationalist groups that came of age during the period recommended separation.¹⁹

If civil rights figures in general frightened the state and law enforcement leaders, proponents of Black Power terrified them. Police departments, often in tandem with the FBI, orchestrated massive disinformation campaigns, disruptions, and other tactics aimed at sowing discord. At

times the tactics became personal, such as when J. Edgar Hoover and Robert Kennedy authorized spying on Martin Luther King Jr. On other occasions, investigations turned lethal, as we now know from details about shootouts with the Panthers in Los Angeles, Oakland, and Chicago.²⁰

To fully comprehend both Black Power and the civil rights movement, we now know we have to move outside the South. When Lyndon Johnson endorsed affirmative action and Richard Nixon expanded it during their respective presidencies, white backlash, always a part of postwar American life, intensified. Calls for busing, black political ascendancy, and deindustrialization conspired to accelerate white flight from a number of core urban areas, aiding the Republican party's southern strategy and reminding us that de facto segregation could be as deleterious as de jure segregation. In fact, a number of scholars argue that the political realignment and the collapse of the New Deal coalition emanated from the battle for civil rights in the North.²¹

The history books are written about those who claim center stage, even if only for a moment, to change the world in some fashion. Less is known and written about ordinary men and women who simply went about the art of living. They got up each day, went to work, attended school or completed assignments, aware of the changes around them, but a step or two from the main action. It is a common joke, after all, that more people remember participating in civil rights events than photos, interviews, and other sources can reliably document. In the end, it was a movement many wished they hadn't missed.

New scholarship does, however, offer a glimpse into the social milieu activists and nonactivists came to inhabit. Music trends shifted from blues and jazz to rhythm-and-blues. Detroit became Motown, and an industry brought into the spotlight a new generation of artists whose rhythms, words, styles, and performances made a broad cross section of Americans move to a new beat. And just as the songs of the civil rights movement spoke to aspirations and longings for change, R&B partnered with rock and folk music to give a pulse to an era, fusing social change with generally urban realities. Some songs spoke of love and loss, others addressed the day's contradiction, such as life as a "ball of confusion," while others simply proclaimed, "I'm black and I'm proud." Among the changes stemming from civil rights activities was the emergence of a new generation of entertainment giants, and, for the first time, a small group of black music moguls.²²

If through the 1950s, radio had been used in support of the dominant social lesson plan predicated on black social inferiority, television came to realize it could not hide the real and varied black America from viewers.²³ Images of fire hoses, rabid crowds, and peaceful marchers; confrontations and intransigent politicians; assertive youths and rainbow coalitions all told a far more powerful story about the change gripping America. Of course, the entertainment space through much of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies on television still reflected prevailing attitudes, but without question the modern civil rights movement and television grew up together.²⁴

Finally, scholarship since the early 1990s reminds us that civil rights participants embraced the larger world. Of course, the story of Gandhi and King is well rehearsed in the literature, as too are the trips of Malcolm X to Mecca. We are now coming to understand that student activists studied the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and conferred with African leaders who

assumed positions of prominence following independence from European power. (After all, several of those leaders had attended historically black colleges and universities in the United States.) When some activists ran afoul of the United States government, they found safe haven in Cuba, China, and elsewhere. Just as their intellectual forebears, who at one time had gone to the USSR to gain a perspective on America, men and women of the civil rights era understood that the changes were not limited to laws and mores in America, or the changing pace of technology; they comprehended a shift in the geopolitical map, and sought to ground their local understanding in a global context. Over time, they came to see themselves as part of an African diaspora.²⁵

This expansion in the literature offers great promise. More work is still to be done on those who never demonstrated or protested but still supported civil rights and social change. As well, we need a deeper understanding of why the period of broad-based affirmative action (1970–1978) was half as long as the period of “all deliberate speed” (1955–1970). Indeed, communities, processes, the interplay between average citizens and elites, and new claims on the civil rights legacies all demand added attention.

Still, in the past three decades a remarkably human portrait of social change has taken form. The change has not always been linear or progressive. What has emerged is a series of connected stories about a changing world and the people who attempted to shape it on behalf of social justice.

Note: For reasons of space the footnotes are not included. If you would like them, email me at brooke@gocatgo.com.

King Encyclopedia, Martin Luther King, “Beyond Vietnam,” Speech, April 4, 1967.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/beyond-vietnam>

On 4 April 1967 Martin Luther King delivered his seminal speech at Riverside Church condemning the Vietnam War. Declaring “my conscience leaves me no other choice,” King described the war’s deleterious effects on both America’s poor and Vietnamese peasants and insisted that it was morally imperative for the United States to take radical steps to halt the war through nonviolent means (King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 139).

King’s anti-war sentiments emerged publicly for the first time in March 1965, when King declared that “millions of dollars can be spent every day to hold troops in South Viet Nam and our country cannot protect the rights of Negroes in Selma” (King, 9 March 1965). King told reporters on Face the Nation that as a minister he had “a prophetic function” and as “one greatly concerned about the need for peace in our world and the survival of mankind, I must continue to take a stand on this issue” (King, 29 August 1965). In a version of the “Transformed Nonconformist” sermon given in January 1966 at Ebenezer Baptist Church, King voiced his own opposition to the Vietnam War, describing American aggression as a violation of the 1954 Geneva Accord that promised self-determination.

In early 1967 King stepped up his anti-war proclamations, giving similar speeches in Los Angeles and Chicago. The Los Angeles speech, called “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,” stressed the history of the conflict and argued that American power should be “harnessed to the service of peace and human beings, not an inhumane power [unleashed] against defenseless people” (King, 25 February 1967).

On 4 April, accompanied by Amherst College Professor Henry Commager, Union Theological Seminary President John Bennett, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, at an event sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, King spoke to over 3,000 at New York’s Riverside Church. The speech was drafted from a collection of volunteers, including Spelman professor Vincent Harding and Wesleyan professor John Maguire. King’s address emphasized his responsibility to the American people and explained that conversations with young black men in the ghettos reinforced his own commitment to nonviolence.

King followed with an historical sketch outlining Vietnam’s devastation at the hands of “deadly Western arrogance,” noting, “we are on the side of the wealthy, and the secure, while we create a hell for the poor” (King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 146; 153). To change course, King suggested a five point outline for stopping the war, which included a call for a unilateral ceasefire. To King, however, the Vietnam War was only the most pressing symptom of American colonialism worldwide. King claimed that America made “peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments” (King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 157). King urged instead “a radical revolution of values” emphasizing love and justice rather than economic nationalism (King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 157).

The immediate response to King’s speech was largely negative. Both the Washington Post and New York Times published editorials criticizing the speech, with the Post noting that King’s speech had “diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people” through a simplistic and flawed view of the situation (“A Tragedy,” 6 April 1967). Similarly, both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Ralph Bunche accused King of linking two disparate issues, Vietnam and civil rights. Despite public criticism, King continued to attack the Vietnam War on both moral and economic grounds.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," (excerpt) April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York, N.Y.

(The whole speech is available at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>)

.... The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality [applause], and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing "clergy and laymen concerned" committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. [sustained applause] So such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God.

In 1957 a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of U.S. military advisors in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru.

It is with such activity that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." [applause] Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin [applause], we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see than an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. [applause]

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western

arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. [sustained applause]

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.

This kind of positive revolution of values is our best defense against communism. [applause] War is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. Let us not join those who shout war and, through their misguided passions, urge the United States to relinquish its participation in the United Nations. These are days which demand wise restraint and calm reasonableness. We must not engage in a negative anticommunism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy [applause], realizing that our greatest defense against communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice, which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops.

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. We in the West must support these revolutions.

It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch antirevolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. Therefore, communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores, and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low [Audience:] (Yes); the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that 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.

.... We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood—it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, “Too late.” There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. Omar Khayyam is right: “The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on.”

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world, a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message—of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

.... And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

[sustained applause]