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Claiming Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Right: The Martin Luther King Day Holiday in the

Reagan Era

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ABSTRACT: The article traces how American conservatives laid claim to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. We focus on a key moment in that process, when Republicans in the early 1980s battled other Republicans to establish King's birthday as a federal holiday and thereby distinguish a conservative position on racial inequality from that associated with southern opposition to civil rights. The victory was consequential, aiding the New Right's efforts to roll back gains on affirmative action and other race-conscious policies. We use the case to explore the conditions in which political actors are able to lay claim to venerated historical figures who actually had very different beliefs and commitments. The prior popularization of the figure makes it politically advantageous to identify with his or her legacy but also makes it possible to do so credibly. As they are popularized, the figure's beliefs are made general, abstract, and often vague in a way that lends them to appropriation by those on the other side of partisan lines. Such appropriation is further aided by access to a communicative infrastructure of foundations, think tanks, and media outlets that allows political actors to secure an audience for their reinterpretation of the past.

Introduction

Conservative campus activists today invoke Martin Luther King, Jr. in their opposition to speech codes, affirmative action, and what they see as unjustified attacks on white privilege (Coltrain, 2018; Dietrich, 2015). They argue that while King fought for, and won, equality, other 1960s activists then went much further, and too far, by demanding special rights and precisely the race-conscious policy that King opposed. Indeed, they say, King's legacy has been betrayed by the activists today who mistakenly blame whites for inequalities rather than recognizing problems within Black communities (Riley, 2019). That campus conservatives would use Dr. King to make these claims is perhaps surprising. But it reflects the long struggle that activists on the right have waged to claim King's memory.

In this article, we explore contention over the memory of Dr. King, focusing on efforts to establish a national holiday in King's honor. We show that while progressives were successful in winning national recognition for the holiday, their success in defining the meaning of the holiday—and in defining King's legacy more broadly—was mixed. It is perhaps not surprising that King's more radical aspirations were obscured as his memory was embraced by the state. What is more surprising is that activists in and outside government used King's memory to promote a conservative agenda. Notably, they used King's own statements to challenge the very idea of government policies that took account of race.

How much freedom do political actors in the present have to attribute beliefs to well-known figures in the past? Can current actors claim as ideological forbears people who actually had very different views and commitments? These are the questions with which we wrestle. Certainly, scholars of collective memory have shown that people cannot invent the past at will. What really happened exercises some constraint on their efforts (Schwartz, 2000). But so too do

beliefs about the past and conventions of remembering (Fine, 2001; Olick and Levy, 1997). There is a kind of “cultural inertia” (Corning and Schuman, 2015) that produces stability in collective memory, along with critical junctures in which the sequence or meaning of events is reworked (Jansen, 2007).

The interpretation of historical people rather than events—famous figures’ beliefs and commitments—generally displays the same stability. Yet political speakers do sometimes claim surprising historical figures as forebears. For example, two years into his first term, President Barack Obama on several occasions praised former president Ronald Reagan (Duffy and Scherer, 2011). Given what we know about the two men, who differed on most policy issues, one wonders why Obama, a Democrat, would claim commonality with Republican Reagan—and why he would be believed if he did so. The answer to both questions, we argue, is the same. Political speakers in the present assert their commonality with historical figures who are from opposing parties or who in reality had quite different beliefs because those figures have become more broadly popular. They are acclaimed now beyond the bounds of their party or constituency. They have become American heroes rather than Democratic, Republican, feminist, or civil rights movement heroes. That is why they are worth claiming as inspiration. Speakers who invoke the figure suggest that what is different about them is less important than their common commitment to certain goals and values.

What makes this kind of cross-partisan appropriation sometimes successful is that as the memory of historical figures is institutionalized, it is also made anodyne. The particularities of the person’s vision are made abstract; the figure becomes associated with shared public values, not contentious ones. Thus no one interpreted President Obama to mean that he was inspired by President Reagan’s determination to slash government spending on social services or support

authoritarian regimes abroad. Reagan is popularly remembered mainly for his can-do political optimism and love of country, and it was these virtues that Obama called up in naming him. In similar fashion, Martin Luther King, Jr. cited Abraham Lincoln as a champion of Black equality. This was historically inaccurate: Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but he never believed that African Americans were the equals of whites (Schwartz, 2000: 2). Yet Lincoln's role in having "freed the slaves" allowed King to credibly stretch Lincoln's support for African Americans to encompass their equality. Ronald Reagan often talked about his admiration for John F. Kennedy, and said he was directly following his example in proposing tax cuts to strengthen the economy. In fact, Reagan had opposed Kennedy's election. And the tax cuts associated with Kennedy (which Lyndon Johnson actually passed) had entirely different purposes: they were aimed at putting money in the hands of middle- and working-class consumers and, unlike Reagan's proposed supply-side cuts, they were opposed by 90 percent of businesspeople. But Kennedy's association with innovation, growth, and sheer heroism made those differences worth ignoring (von Bothmer, 2010: 49). Yet another example: Once South African activist Nelson Mandela had come to be celebrated as the peaceful liberator of his country, he also came to be seen as an avatar of nonviolence in the Gandhian mold. This was despite the fact that Mandela had been the commander of the armed wing of the African National Congress (Seidman, 2001).

The fact that venerated public figures are made broad, abstract, and often downright vague in their commitments means they can be made champions of diverse policy initiatives. What Merrill Peterson (1960) calls the "Old Hamiltonians" at the turn of the twentieth century interpreted Alexander Hamilton's brief for active national government as protecting the inalienable rights of corporations. "New Hamiltonian" Progressives a decade later understood the

same brief as requiring that government control the excesses of capitalism (Peterson, 1960: 334). Groups whose positions conflict in the moment may also claim the same figure as inspiration. This was true of the North and South in the Civil War with respect to George Washington (Schwartz, 1991). In his comparison of the use of the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata by challengers to the modern Mexican regime and of Augusto Cesar Sandino by challengers to the Nicaraguan dictatorship, Robert Jansen (2007) shows that it was easier for regime challengers to appropriate Zapata as hero. This was not despite the fact that the government had already attached itself to the figure of Zapata but precisely for that reason. The fact that Zapata was well-known and publicly celebrated meant that, if challengers could make a plausible claim to better aligning with Zapata's vision than the regime did, they would gain real advantage. In a move that, we will show, was remarkably similar to that used by American conservatives against civil rights activists, Mexican activists argued that the professed "revolutionary" state regime was in fact not that, but rather a puppet of neoliberalism. They, the activists, were the true revolutionaries, and the true bearers of Zapata's vision. By contrast, since the Nicaraguan regime some time before had explicitly disavowed the revolutionary figure of Sandino, describing him as a vicious bandit and pardoning his murderers, he had dropped out of public memory. Sandanistas had to *recover* the legacy of Sandino, which meant that they spent most of their time trying to articulate just who Sandino was and in what his legacy consisted.

In these cases, then, once a figure has become popularly associated with a shared and uncontroversial goal rather than a partisan one—Mandela with peaceful liberation, Reagan with political optimism, Lincoln with Black emancipation, Zapata with Mexico's independence—speakers who are ideologically farther afield can claim him as their symbolic forebear. To be sure, there is often a good deal of work done by reputational entrepreneurs to secure the popular

acclaim that a once radical figure like Mandela eventually secures (Fine, 2001). Once that work has been done, however, the historical figure becomes available to those further right or left or otherwise politically opposed to the historical figure. This is why one of the largest pro-life anti-abortion lobbying groups today can call itself the Susan B. Anthony List without fear of scorn. Susan B. Anthony never opposed abortion (Sherr and Gordon, 2015). But for most of the people to whom the organization devotes its lobbying, messaging, and fundraising efforts, Anthony is simply an American hero who won women the vote: a now-uncontentious victory. Her likeness is on a dollar coin, which is a sure sign of acceptance within the pantheon of American heroes.

So far, we have described political actors' appropriation of surprising historical figures as the result of a calculation that the combination of the popularity of the figure and the generality of the values with which he or she is associated mean that aligning with that figure will garner them support. They do not need to *fully capture* or monopolize the memory of the figure; simply making the case credibly that the figure entertained views that were closer to their own than popularly thought is likely to bring attention to their cause. Still, that kind of calculation is by no means straightforward. Political actors gamble that the assertion of ideological kinship will not backfire: that they will not be seen as hypocritical or manipulative; that the alignment they propose will not end up drawing attention to the gap, instead of the likeness, between themselves and the venerated figure. Recall 1988 Democratic vice-presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen's famous put-down of his counterpart, Republican Dan Quayle, who had likened himself to former president, Democratic John F. Kennedy: "I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy" (Clayman, 1995: 120).

Ideally, political actors should be sure they can carry off their claim to be acting on the legacy of the historical figure before they try. They should probably test how their assertion of

ideological kinship will “play in Peoria”— that is, among people who already have a sense of what the historical figure represents. Just as mnemonic entrepreneurs depend on an infrastructure of commemoration—on holidays, school textbooks, political rituals, and museums—to win approval for their preferred version of the past (Armstrong and Crage, 2006; Savelsberg and King, 2011), here too, political actors are advantaged by having access to vehicles of communication that can gain exposure and support for their rendering of the historical figure’s beliefs.

In the following, we give empirical flesh to these claims. We trace how conservatives positioned themselves vis-à-vis the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: first refusing that legacy, and then claiming it. Conservatives’ ability to use King to oppose government action on racial inequality depended on the prior popularization of an image of King as effecting social change through the power of moral suasion. It also depended on conservatives’ access to a new network of think tanks, foundations, and media for the production and dissemination of conservative ideas. That organizational infrastructure allowed them to gain a hearing for an interpretation of Dr. King that turned his vision of a world without racism into a vision of government properly ignoring race. Our account synthesizes histories of the New Right, rhetorical analyses of Ronald Reagan’s speeches, and recent analyses of the rise and reach of conservative think tanks in order to highlight the roles both of cultural popularization and organizational infrastructure in accounting for the successful cross-partisan appropriation of King. After sketching the rise of the New Right, we focus on the debate over legislation making King’s birthday a federal holiday. We show that the holiday was first a test for a movement that sought to dismantle federal efforts to combat racial inequality without being seen as racist—and then a resource for that movement.

The New Right and the Dilemmas of Reform

When conservative activists in the 1970s set out to take over the Republican party, they knew that doing so required winning a war of ideas. Accordingly, they set out to develop the novel organizational structures that would gain a hearing for their unconventional combination of free-market economics, social traditionalism, and militant anti-communism (Hijaya, 2003; Medvetz, 2012; Bjerre-Poulsen, 1991).

Richard Viguerie, for example, developed the mailing list for conservative causes and campaigns that would evolve into a direct mail empire. Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner secured a grant from beer magnate Joseph Coors to create the conservative Heritage Foundation in 1973. It was followed by the establishment of the Cato Institute and the Manhattan Institute and by infusions of funding from business into the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institute. This was a new brand of think tank: more partisan and activist than earlier technocratic think tanks like the Brookings Institution and more focused on getting conservative ideas to policymakers and into the public (Medvetz, 2012; Bjerre-Poulsen, 1991). The new think tanks funded scholars, produced and marketed books, and produced op-ed pieces and radio programs featuring conservative viewpoints. Another new medium of conservative communication was the result of Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich joining evangelical minister Jerry Falwell to create the Moral Majority in the late 1970s. The group bridged the secular right with evangelicals concerned about homosexuality, abortion, and government incursions on religion, but also brought the power of television evangelism to the New Right (Wilentz, 2008). New conservative legal foundations and centers, meanwhile, set out to create a legal reform movement capable of competing with what New Right activists saw as the dominance of legal liberalism (Teles, 2009).

These new organizational vehicles for conservative ideas were part of a self-conscious movement, but a movement that operated within electoral politics, foundations, law, academia, churches, and eventually the federal executive. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 was a mandate for the movement's bold agenda of dismantling the welfare state, banning abortion, breaking the power of big labor, and deregulating industry. But the movement had always been a fractious one. Proponents of the free market and deregulation had little in common with the religious right, for example, which sought government protections for prayer in schools and laws against homosexuality. What held the movement together, say some historians, was its anti-communism and opposition to a vaguely defined "sixties" (Wilentz, 2008; Perlstein, 2015). Other historians argue that the common bond was opposition, more specifically, to the egalitarian social policies of the 1960s (Hijaya, 2003; MacLean, 2009).

If that was the case, though, it was a bond that was difficult to name openly. The failed presidential bid of segregationist George Wallace in 1968 made clear that many white Americans were uncomfortable with the kind of racism they associated with a retrograde south. Even as the Republican party sought to appeal to white southerners, they had to do so carefully. In his examination of the anti-busing movement in Charlotte, North Carolina in the late 1960s, historian Matthew Lassiter shows just how important it was to the middle-class whites protesting two-way busing that they not be seen as segregationists. This had "nothing to do with race or integration," they insisted; they believed that Black children should go to any school they wanted to. But they had worked hard to buy homes in middle class neighborhoods and to send their children to neighborhood schools, they said. Citizens with "initiative and ambition should not be penalized for possessing these qualities." "Why should a child's color deprive him of the opportunity of choosing where he will attend school?" they asked (Lassiter, 2006: 562) As

Lassiter points out, this was the language in which opposition to government remedies for racial inequality increasingly would be cast: firm support for the goal of equality, claims of middle-class innocence, rights associated with property ownership, praise for a principle of color blindness, and a rejection of race-conscious policy as a violation of individual rights.

The challenge for the New Right—and for its new president—was to appeal to white southern voters like those in Charlotte and at the same time to distinguish New Right conservatism from that of the segregationist south. Striking that balance was not easy. In fact, the Reagan administration initially seemed to be strikingly bad at it. The incoming administration had committed to enacting proposals outlined in *The Mandate for Leadership*, produced by the Heritage Foundation, a blueprint for how to move government in a conservative direction, and one of the first clear wins for the new conservative think tanks (Edwards, 2013). Among the *Mandate's* proposals was to “reshape public discourse on civil rights issues,” by reining in remedies pursued by previous administrations. The Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department was the most ideologically committed agency in the executive branch (Teles, 2009), and it stepped up to the task immediately—and into controversy. The Justice Department declared its intention to oppose court-ordered school busing and to scale back litigation against segregated schools (Days, 1984). It sought to relax provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, relenting only when it became clear that Congressional Republicans would not accede (Raines, 1983: 16). In an embarrassing episode, the administration backed the all-white evangelical Bob Jones University in its appeal to the Supreme Court for an exception to the ban on tax breaks for racially discriminatory schools (Raines, 1982a; Taylor, 1982). And after announcing his plan to roll back affirmative action in his very first press conference, the president appointed chair of the formally nonpartisan Civil Rights Commission a man who had declared affirmative action to be

a “bankrupt policy” (Pear, 1982: 5). The administration’s touted cost-cutting efforts, meanwhile, focused almost immediately on programs dedicated to the poor, including job training, public assistance, food stamps, and school lunches (Wilentz, 2008).

Each one of these moves spurred media attention and criticism. By the second year of his administration, Reagan’s advisors worried not only that the president was losing Black voters, but that he might be losing white moderates as well (Raines, 1982b: 16; Clines, 1983; Wilentz, 2008: 182). Going after the hallowed victories of the southern civil rights movement—the ruling against segregated schools, the Voting Rights Act—was unacceptable even to Americans who associated the sixties with radicalism and big government. If conservatives were to undo liberal reforms when it came to race, they would have to better distinguish between a good sixties and a bad sixties. The 1983 debate over the King holiday gave them an opportunity to do that.

Jesse Helms and the “past that the vast majority of Americans have overcome.”

The idea of a federal holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. was first introduced by Congressional representative John Conyers four days after King’s assassination in 1968. Although the proposal met with little interest initially, Conyers reintroduced a holiday bill each year, joined by Edward Brooke (R-Massachusetts) in the Senate. Over time, it attracted increasing numbers of first Democratic, and then Republican co-sponsors.

Congress held its first hearings on the proposal in 1979. President Jimmy Carter had pledged his support, as had his competitor for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Edward Kennedy, and the Senate bill was sponsored by Republican heavyweight Bob Dole.

However, the hearings on the bill gave its opponents, southern Democrat Larry McDonald and Republican Ohioan John Ashbrook, the opportunity to attack King for his supposed communist sympathies. A former communist testified that her organization had frequently raised money for King and had been instructed to deny his communist associations. The author of an anti-communist tract titled *It's Very Simple: The True Story of Civil Rights* argued that King had intentionally provoked violence in his protests (Chappell, 2014).

But the attacks garnered little support in Congress. Southern officials had long sought to dismiss even the most grassroots civil rights protest as the work of communists. Even though the charges of communist association now were leveled by a Midwestern congressman, they had the ring of a past that most Republicans wanted to move beyond. More effective opponents of the legislation cited prosaic concerns, notably the cost of paying federal employees to take the day off. The possibility of a Sunday commemoration was floated as an alternative. Together, these objections carried the day, with the measure narrowly defeated (Chappell, 2014).

By 1983, the next time the measure came up for a vote, it was promoted not only by King's widow, Coretta Scott King, his former organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Black Congressional Caucus, but also by pop stars, a massive citizen petition, and major corporations such as Coca Cola and the Miller Brewing Company. Democrats in the House spoke forcefully for the holiday. And Republicans who had opposed the legislation in the past now signaled their intention to vote for it. When Speaker Tip O'Neill closed debate by observing that "Martin Luther King changed America—changed all of America," he was met with a standing ovation by his colleagues. The vote in favor of the holiday was overwhelming: 338 to 90 (Wolfensberger, 2008).

When debate moved to the Senate, however, it encountered a roadblock. Again, Republicans objected to the holiday's cost and questioned whether King as a private citizen merited this national veneration. But several white Southern senators leveled additional charges, with North Carolina's Jesse Helms launching a filibuster to do so. Helms again brought up charges of King's communist alliances, declaring that King's "action-oriented Marxism, about which he was cautioned by the leaders of this country, including the president at that time, is not compatible with the concepts of this country" (Dewar, 1983: 1). Helms submitted a 300-page document alleging King's association with communists as well as his sexual philandering and demanded that the FBI unseal documents it had agreed to keep sealed under the terms of a lawsuit with the King estate.¹ When Senator Edward Kennedy protested, Helms shot back that since John and Robert Kennedy had authorized wiretaps on King, Kennedy's argument was really "with his dead brother[s]" (*New York Times*, 1983a: 27).

By the time Helms attacked the slain Kennedy brothers, he lost any Republican allies he had. As a Republican consultant put it, "You don't talk about JFK yet here in dirty terms" (*New York Times*, 1983a: 27). What was becoming clear was that it might not be possible to talk about MLK in dirty terms either. Senator Bill Bradley accused Helms of speaking for a "past that the vast majority of Americans have overcome" (Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1983: 601). And Southerner Bennett Johnson explained, "an awful lot of sensible people say we don't need another holiday. But they voted for it because of the sensitivity of the issue; the symbolism has just become too heavy"—the symbolism of a white southerner attacking a civil rights hero (Alpern, 1983). Helms was persuaded to call off the filibuster and the legislation won the Senate votes of all but eighteen members. Senator Bob Dole congratulated his fellow Republicans: "I'm proud of my party today. We're in the mainstream" (quoted in von Bothmer, 2010: 63).

For the president, however, Helms's outburst was more than awkward. Far from an anachronism, Helms had been a key figure in the conservative resurgence. He shifted parties to run as a Republican in 1972 and as senator, introduced legislation against abortion, for budget cuts, and against Soviet détente—all New Right issues. Reagan owed a personal debt to Helms, whose support for his improbable campaign for president in 1976 won him the North Carolina primary, and made viable his run in 1980 (Perlstein, 2015). And it simply was not clear whether Helms's southern white constituents shared the views that his congressional colleagues did. Helms's staff acknowledged frankly that they did not know whether Helms's intemperate remarks about King had served to drum up disaffected whites' votes or alienate moderates (*New York Times*, 1983a: 27).

Reagan's own views of King and the King holiday, for their part, were ambivalent. He had praised the sacrifice and courage of the slain leader in the years since his assassination. But he opposed the idea of a federal holiday (Reagan, 1983c, 1983d). Early in the 1983 debate, he assured a supporter that sentiment for the holiday was "based on an image not a reality" about King—i.e. that concerns about King's communist sympathies were legitimate—and that he would not support the legislation (Clines, 1983: 7). But to appear to be siding with Helms was to align with the southern white opposition to the early civil rights movement. It would be easy for voters—including white moderate Republicans—to see the administration's recent actions on civil rights as of a piece with Helms's opposition to a civil rights hero.

Reagan's first response to the debacle was fumbling. At a news conference the night the Senate voted in favor of the legislation, Reagan said that he would have preferred leaving it up to the states to decide whether to observe the holiday. "But since they seem bent on making it a national holiday," he went on, "I believe the symbolism of that day is important enough that I'll

sign that legislation when it reaches my desk.” Asked about Helms’s charge that King had communist ties, Reagan responded, “We’ll know in about 35 years, won’t we?” referring to the date at which the FBI files would be opened (Clines, 1983: 7). White House Communications Director David Gergen later admitted, “I almost lost my dinner over that” (quoted in Cannon, 1991: 462). The remark caused a firestorm, with Reagan forced to call Coretta Scott King to apologize. After that, he left for a golfing weekend at an all-white country club, spurring further criticism (Clines, 1983: 7).

By the time the president signed the King holiday bill two weeks later on November 3, he seemed to have recovered his customary eloquence. “Dr. King had awakened something strong and true,” he declared. Quoting King, he said that Black and white Americans’ “freedom is inextricably bound...we cannot walk alone” (Reagan, 1983a). In his celebration of King, however, he attacked policies won by the movement King led. What King had “awakened,” Reagan explained, was “a sense that true justice must be colorblind” (Reagan, 1983a). King’s opposition to government efforts to maintain inequality by taking account of citizens’ race, Reagan implied, extended to opposing government efforts to remedy inequality by taking account of citizens’ race. He thus drafted King in support of efforts to dismantle policies of affirmative action and busing. This was a bold interpretation.

By 1985, Reagan had gone even further, using King’s own words to suggest that he would have opposed affirmative action. “There are some today who, in the name of equality, would have us practice discrimination,” he observed in a radio address. “Twenty-two years ago, Martin Luther King proclaimed his dream of a society rid of discrimination and prejudice, a society where people would be judged on the content of their character, not the color of their skin. That’s the vision our entire administration is committed to” (Reagan, 1985). On the first

celebration of the King holiday in 1986, he noted the administration's opposition to "quotas," explaining "We want a colorblind society, a society that, in the words of Dr. King, judges people not on 'the color of their skin but by the content of their character'" (*New York Times*, 1986: 20).

Reagan was referring to King's "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the 1963 March on Washington, and to the passage, "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" (quoted in Hansen, 2003: 59). King's point in the speech was not that government should not pay attention to race in combating racism. Rather, he was describing his firm belief in the possibility of a society free of discrimination and calling on government to help bring that society about.

To be sure, on the issue of race-targeted policies, in other statements, King was ambiguous, probably deliberately so. Although affirmative action was not adopted formally until after King's death, in the debate around the 1964 Civil Rights Act, liberals had loudly proclaimed their opposition to preferential treatment in hiring. Civil rights leaders James Farmer and Whitney Young were both forced by their liberal allies to walk back proposals for compensatory treatment for African Americans (Graham, 1990). This was despite the fact there had long been preferential hiring, complete with point systems, for veterans, and hiring family members was not considered a violation of the principle of individual merit. It was also despite the fact that federal bureaucrats operating under the color-blind principle of pursuing only individual acts of discrimination found themselves adopting affirmative action policies in all but name simply because pursuing individual cases of discrimination was ineffective (Skrentny, 1996). Still, the principle remained a potent one. That said, in 1964, King praised the Indian government's preferential college admissions policy for members of the Dalit caste, writing that

his own government needed to find ways of “atoning for the injustices she has inflicted upon her Negro citizens” (1964: 147-48). He envisioned a “massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law” (King, 1964: 137). In 1967, he argued that “giving a man his due may often mean giving him *special treatment*” (King, 1967: 90; our emphasis). More commonly, King called for federal programs to benefit the Black and white poor. But he never used the phrase “content of their character” to argue against race-targeted policies. And he never suggested that government action thus far had done anything more than scratch the surface of racial inequality.

By contrast, as Bostdorff and Goldzwig (2005) show, Reagan described King as having been successful in ending discrimination against Black people. In the King holiday signing remarks, Reagan declared that King had brought about a “change of heart...the conscience of America had been touched” (Reagan, 1983a). On a subsequent King holiday, he explained, “Our national conscience told us to change and start to be fair. And we listened and changed, and we started to be fair” (quoted in Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 2005: 670). “Traces of bigotry still mar America,” Reagan acknowledged in his King Holiday signing remarks. But such attitudes were best overcome through individual reconciliation rather than government action. King himself had demonstrated “what a single life, well led, can accomplish” Reagan said on King’s birthday earlier that year (Reagan, 1983b), and he often emphasized the importance of Black entrepreneurial efforts and self-help. On the 1987 holiday, for example, the president told high school students that they might honor King, not by fighting for government action, but by “being diligent in [their] studies” and avoiding “temptations” such as drugs (quoted in Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 2005: 672).

If Reagan's interpretation of King ran contrary to King's own views of the obduracy of racism and of the need for government action in combating it, that interpretation did build on popular representations of King that were already circulating. Studies of news magazines (Lentz, 1990) and school textbooks (Aldridge, 2002, 2006) have shown that, after his death, King was made part of the "good sixties" of nonviolent moral appeal that was eclipsed by the "bad sixties" of Black radicalism, sexual licentiousness, and unpatriotic rebellion. Together, popular representations cast King's opposition as lying only in the South. And it cast his movement as operating by the power of moral suasion. Diverse cultural institutions thus produced a King that was useable by conservatives. Reagan's own contribution was to use King against reforms that many saw as a continuation of the civil rights agenda of the 1960s.

The president was an effective rhetorician but he did not arrive at the strategy on his own. Several years earlier, writers within the New Right network of activist foundations and think tanks had already begun to use King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and in particular, its aspiration that African Americans be judged by the "content of their character" to challenge affirmative action.

I Have a Dream

The first such use of the King speech seems to have been in Terry Eastland and William Bennett's 1979 book, *Counting by Race: Equality from the Founding Fathers to Bakke and Weber*, where the authors reference King's "I Have A Dream Speech" to illustrate "the unrelenting attack the movement made against Jim Crow and the idea that Jim Crow, at root, represented: namely, that race makes a difference in the assessment of character or qualification" (1979: 111-112; cited in Hansen, 2003). Bennett was one of the authors of the Heritage

Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership* that the Reagan administration took as its policy blueprint, and Reagan appointed him first as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities and then as Secretary of Education. Eastland went to work in Reagan's Justice Department under Attorney General William French Smith, and later became chief spokesman for Attorney General Edwin Meese.

As we noted, the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department was the most ideologically energetic of the executive branch in Reagan's first term. After the controversies stirred by its early missteps, its staff set out to use its speeches and writing more effectively to advance a conservative approach to civil rights (Teles, 2009). King would figure in those efforts. The division's head, William Bradford Reynolds, invoked King's "I Have a Dream" speech in speeches he made in 1982 and 1983 explaining the administration's opposition to affirmative action. "Classification by race was denounced by those within government and without, but by none more passionately than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who dreamed aloud in the summer of 1963 of a nation in which his children would 'not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,'" he told members of the American Bar Association in 1982 (Reynolds, 1982: 10). Reynolds thus interpreted King's dream for an egalitarian future as opposition to race-conscious policy in the present, which it was not. In 1983, Reynolds explained that King's "dream began to fade in the 1970's when the quest for equality of opportunity gradually evolved into an insistence upon equality of results" (Reynolds, 1983: 10). Dr. King's movement was being betrayed by a new generation of activists, Reynolds charged (1983: 10). As he told members of the Civil Rights Commission, "The curiosity is that there are those today who challenge the colorblind ideal that was so staunchly defended in the 1960's by the real titans of the civil rights movement" (quoted in Pear, 1983: 17). It was the conservative right that was

carrying forward King's agenda, in Reynolds's account, not those championing race-conscious government policy.

In Reagan's second term, under longtime conservative activist and new attorney general Ed Meese, the office ramped up its efforts to advocate for its ideas publicly (Teles, 2009). Speechwriter Terry Eastland, who had first used King's "content of our character" speech against affirmative action six years earlier, wrote in 1985 of plans to reorganize the department, "Ed Meese and I want to reorganize Public Affairs, which is now mainly a press office. Speechwriting will be under me, as will a 'public liaison' effort designed to reach out to academics and laymen. I will be the department's communications strategist, mapping plans for doing battle in the war of ideas" (quoted in Teles, 2009: 67-68). Dr. King continued to be a valuable rhetorical resource in that war. We noted President Reagan's use of King's "content of their character" speech to oppose "the use of quotas" on the eve of the 1986 King holiday. Just a few days earlier, Attorney General Meese proposed to eliminate minority hiring goals for federal contractors, a proposal, he said, that was "very consistent with what Dr. King had in mind" (quoted in Sokol, 2017: 21).

From then on, efforts to roll back civil rights remedies that went beyond prosecuting instances of intentional discrimination were described as in line with what King would have wanted, as consistent with his "dream," and as following his injunction that people should be judged by the "content of their character" rather than "the color of their skin." In 1988, for example, the president celebrated legislation that strengthened the penalties for discrimination but made discrimination more difficult to prove, declaring that the legislation "has brought us one step closer to realizing Martin Luther King's dream" (quoted in Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 2005: 675). The same year, he reminded Americans that King "helped awaken among his fellow

Americans a strong and true sense that justice, if it is ever to be genuine, must ever be color-blind,” and he called for “continual vigilance and constant effort” in ensuring that the tools of government be used in a colorblind way (quoted in Bostdorff and Goldzwig, 2005: 677).

The power of Reagan’s interpretation of King lie in its context and content.

Commemorative occasions, in the United States at least, are opportunities for sounding themes of unity and progress (Kammen, 1991). This made the administration’s interpretation of King’s aims on those occasions seem uncontroversial. The interpretation of King as loyal to a colorblind vision of government, meanwhile, deflected charges that those seeking to roll back civil rights remedies were racist. Instead, they suggested that conservatives were the true heirs to King’s movement. They aligned conservatives with King in battling an “establishment” that sought to deny African Americans their rightful autonomy—only the establishment now was of civil rights organizations and their liberal allies.

King as Opposition

Into the Bush and Clinton eras, conservatives would continue to use King to oppose race-conscious policy. And the conservative network of foundations and think tanks would become even more important in promoting the conservative King. African American English professor Shelby Steele published *The Content of Our Character* in 1990. Steele invoked King’s I Have a Dream speech to argue that race conscious policies had produced in African Americans a psychology of victimhood. Steele was one of a number of Black conservative intellectuals—Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, Robert Woodson, John McWhorter, and Walter Williams were others—whose critiques of liberal policy on race were supported and promoted by conservative

foundations (Walton, 2002: 150-152; Ondaatje, 2004; but see Onwuachi-Willig, 2004 on Black conservatives' differences from white ones).

In 1993, the Heritage Foundation sponsored a conference entitled “The Conservative Virtues of Martin Luther King,” designed to claim King for a conservative agenda. Keynote speaker William Bennett—again, one of the first to use King’s I Have a Dream speech to oppose racial entitlements and key drafter of the Heritage Foundation’s *Mandate for Leadership*--remarked that, “if you said in 1968 that you should judge people by the content of their character...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.” He went on to describe the criticism he had received from the “so-called civil rights establishment” for making that point (Woodson and Bennett, 1993: 4-5). In 1996, California businessman and University of California regent Ward Connerly led an initiative to end affirmative action in California. As part of the campaign, the Republican Party of California ran an ad showing King delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. The campaign was successful and California’s constitution was amended to prohibit the consideration of race, sex, or ethnicity in public employment, contracting, and education. And in 1997, Connerly launched his National Campaign Against Affirmative Action on the King holiday (Dyson, 2000: 25).

Conservatives’ claim to King did not go unopposed. Coretta Scott King, former King associates like Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy, civil rights movement leaders like Julian Bond, head of the NAACP, and Congressman John Lewis repeatedly challenged conservatives’ interpretation of the “I Have a Dream” speech specifically, and of King’s legacy more generally. They did so in the editorial pages of national newspapers like the New York Times (e.g. Jackson, 1983) and in magazines like the *New Republic* (Branch, 1986). When the Republican Party of

California ran a Prop 209 ad with a clip of King delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech, the King family was able to get them to pull the ad by threatening to sue (Dyson, 2000: 26).

So progressives certainly were able to contest conservatives’ interpretation of King. They had access to influential organs of political commentary to do so. And their view of King’s nonviolent fight for equality as being continued by contemporary civil rights organizations was the more common one. But conservatives were successful in gaining a hearing for their alternative interpretation. They did so in part by supporting and marketing the works of politically engaged intellectuals whose broadsides against the civil rights establishment made them newsworthy to mainstream media.

It is both the familiarity of the claim that King opposed race-conscious policy and its still-provocative character that has made it a valuable tool for generations of conservative activists. It has allowed conservatives to align with a civil rights hero against what they characterize as a narrow-minded establishment of mainstream civil rights activists and their liberal allies. Indeed, this claim has been particularly useful for today’s conservative campus organizers, who employ King’s memory to criticize college diversity initiatives. In his study of campus anti-affirmative action “bake sales” around the country, Dietrich quotes organizers frequently using some version of “Let’s live in a world where we are judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin” (2015: 116). With less subtlety, Prager U (not a university; rather, a conservative website whose videos have been viewed more than two billion times) captioned a clip of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech with the text, “Is the Left Killing the Dream?” (PragerU, 2019).

In an interview with the second author, the president of a conservative campus group explained that he remains friends with people who disagree with him politically “because people should be judged by the content of their character, not generalizations about their political

ideology.” Conservative student activists often describe themselves as outnumbered on campuses (Binder and Wood, 2014). This student said he was marginalized specifically for his conservative beliefs about diversity programs. But it was progressive activists who were failing to judge people by the “content of their character,” he protested, not conservatives. Mobilizing King’s memory thus assists young conservatives in their own fight against the establishment.

The New Right’s success, then, was in creating a useable tradition for the right. Given the fact that Dr. King’s memory is so powerfully wed to the bid for equality, to invoke King has been to affirm conservatives’ commitment to equality. It has allowed them both to deflect charges of racism and to claim King’s role in bravely battling the powers that be.

Conclusion

In this short account of contention over the commemoration of Dr. King’s birthday, we have shown how the issue in contention evolved from whether Dr. King was worthy of national veneration to what his legacy was. Was the point of commemorating Dr. King’s birthday to celebrate a nation that had overcome its racist past, or to inspire renewed efforts to overcome a still racist present? Was King’s dream that his children might one day be judged by the content of their character a call for vigorous government action to make that possible or was it a call to limit government action to prosecuting only individual expressions of racial prejudice? There was a great deal at stake in these questions.

Who won? Undoubtedly, the King that is most widely remembered is more conservative than the real man was, but less conservative than his interpreters on the right would have him. The real King mobilized against racism in the north as well as the south, called for a massive federal financial commitment to the poor, and questioned a capitalist society's capacity to make

that commitment. The fact that it is a “safer” King (Dyson, 2000) who is remembered in contemporary King Day celebrations surely owes to the themes of progress and unity that figure so powerfully in American commemorative discourse (Kammen, 1991). Those themes are evident in the representations of King produced by school textbooks, news media, and dramatic film and television shows. They cast King as having overcome the most significant barriers to racial equality, and having done so by touching the hearts of white Americans. But those same representations also made it easier for conservatives to produce a King in their own image. This King would have opposed further government action to remedy inequality, believing that judging people by the content of their character required only that government get out of the way. The popularization of King as having won change by way of moral suasion made it possible for the right to go one step further to claim that King believed in change only through moral suasion, not government action.

We have described another resource that conservatives drew on in their effort to appropriate King: an organizational network of ideological production and dissemination established to help the right compete with the left in the “war of ideas.” Conservatives saw themselves in the early 1970s as woefully underequipped in that war, marginalized as they were by the universities, foundations, and media that they saw as unapologetically liberal. They set out to rectify that imbalance by creating an infrastructure of foundations, think tanks, professional networks, writers, and intellectuals. These would bring conservative ideas into the mainstream, both into government and into the court of public opinion. Conservatives used that infrastructure to develop and publicize an interpretation of King that made him into an opponent of race-conscious government policy.

There is nothing nefarious about this. Movements constantly seek advantage over their opponents, and one of the chief ways they do so is by innovating tactically (McAdam, 1983). Originality—a new style of protest, a hybrid organizational form, a route to an untapped constituency—often brings political results. Here, conservatives’ success in building an organizational infrastructure for the development and marketing of conservative ideas helped them to gain an audience for their claim to be King’s true activist heirs, and indeed, some legitimacy for that claim.

More generally, we have suggested that these cultural and organizational dynamics may figure in other efforts to claim lineage with historical figures whose goals and beliefs were actually quite different. Earlier, we noted efforts to claim, variously, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Ronald Reagan, and Susan B. Anthony by political actors who were arguably on the other side. We suggested that, in these cases too, the prior popularization of the figure in a way that made his or her goals broad and uncontroversial helped to explain why later political actors would want to claim kinship the figure, and also why they could credibly do so. It would be valuable to know if the second dynamic we identified—privileged access to communicative vehicles for gaining a hearing for a new rendering of the historical figure—also operated in these cases.

It would also be useful to examine a corollary proposition: that contemporary political actors will not appropriate a well-known historical figure, even if his or her beliefs were similar, if the figure has *not* been associated with broad and uncontroversial goals. It is interesting, in this regard, that conservative Republicans never tried to claim Malcolm X as ideological forebear, despite the fact that he was a famous proponent of Black entrepreneurship and self-help. One might imagine conservatives associating themselves with his memory as a way to make the case

against government intervention on the issue of racial inequality. Arguably, that would have been easier than trying to draft Martin Luther King, Jr. in support of such an agenda. But Malcolm X was, and is, too radical: too associated with beliefs in racial separatism and armed self-defense. For conservatives to invoke him favorably would have sounded either dangerously provocative or bizarre. Another valuable line of investigation would be into instances in which contemporary speakers' efforts at cross-partisan appropriation failed, like that of Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice-presidential debate.

In the years before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr. was viewed unfavorably by most Americans (Jones, 2011). The irony is that the more popular King became, the more his memory became useable by those who, in important respects, opposed his agenda. This is not to say that King's memory has become as uncontroversial as, say, Abraham Lincoln's. As Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood (2013) show, although hundreds of American towns and cities have named a street after Dr. King, they have done so after often-contentious battles, with white property owners protesting, sometimes successfully, that the name change would lower their property values. In fact, overwhelmingly, King-named streets have been limited to predominately Black neighborhoods. So, if King's memory has been stripped of its more radical vision, in other respects, its association with real Black people and communities makes it a continuing lightning rod in a racialized society.

What, then, of the prospects for reclaiming King's more radical vision? Our guess is that such prospects depend on accessing new modes of commemoration. Relying on Op-Eds on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, speeches by King's biological and political heirs, and academic treatises on what King really wanted are unlikely to change popular views of King and his mission. As was the case for conservatives, tactical innovation in the vehicles of collective

memory is likely essential. In that vein, as Alderman and Inwood (2013) point out, bids for King-named thoroughfares running through cities' financial districts demand a different kind of commitment than efforts to rename a street in a Black neighborhood—but also send a different message. Current efforts, not to erect new memorials, but to support artists who are reimagining existing monuments (Mellon, 2020) have the potential to make what is currently anodyne once again radical. But as with the last initiative, which has required a quarter of a billion-dollar commitment from a prominent foundation, new infrastructures of remembering are rarely cheap.

Notes

¹ Tapes and transcripts gathered in the FBI wiretapping of King will be released by the National Archives in 2027 (NYTimes 1977: 12).

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