

Barack Obama, John Lewis, and the Legacy of the Civil Rights Struggle

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The watershed election in 2008 of Barack Obama as the first President of the United States to have African ancestry resulted from the life work of such civil rights activists as U.S. Congressman John Lewis. Born on a sharecropper's farm in 1940, the African American Lewis grew up in segregated Alabama. As a college student in Nashville, he joined the sit-in protests and volunteered for the original Freedom Ride in 1961. He was elected chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, becoming the youngest speaker at the March on Washington in 1963. The radical shift to Black ultimately forced Lewis out of SNCC. Consequently Lewis capitalized on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, turned his attentions to voter registration campaigns, and continued working within the system. In 1986 he won election to the U.S. House of Representatives to represent Atlanta's Fifth Congressional District, a seat he continues to hold today.

The political victory of Barack Obama on November 4, 2008 demonstrated the success of the civil rights movement and its legacies of minority political empowerment and ideology of toleration. A mere forty years before in 1968, reactionaries had silenced the voices of such apostles of racial change as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy who both promoted a vision of a multiracial "beloved community" that celebrated diversity and dreamed of an America where all citizens received political freedom and social equality. Indeed after assisting brother John F. Kennedy's race for the white house, the new U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy suggested in 1961 that the country seemed to be "moving so fast in race relations that a black could be President in '30 or 40 years.'" In the intervening time, several African Americans had placed their names in nomination, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Alan Keyes. Yet it took the campaign of a post-Jim Crow candidate, raised in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, to successfully transcend the issue of race and attract a majority of the nation's electorate. Winning the election with 52 percent of the vote, the nation's first president of mixed-race ancestry, Barack Obama, who was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia with family ties to a variety of religious and spiritual beliefs, demonstrated a seismic shift underway in a population destined to become majority multiracial—black, Latino, East Asian, South Asian—by 2042.¹

His campaign benefited from political empowerment movements of minorities derived from old civil rights struggles and from a new ideology of tolerance symbolized in memorials to the movement and taught through the public schools. The watershed election of Barack Obama in 2008 resulted from the life work of such living legacies of the civil rights struggle as U.S. Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta.

The victory of American forces in World War II ushered in an age of global hegemony that made the nation's ideology of democracy and free markets appear contradictory to local customs throughout the South and elsewhere in the country where authorities denied citizenship rights to African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Similarly a change in the region's political economy away from an old colonial system of extraction of wealth as collected in agricultural products and raw materials and towards a modern manufacturing sector of wage earners in a consumer-driven economy required changes in the marketplace and workforce that made segregation seem irrational and inefficient. From the top down, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the legal structure of segregation that Plessy vs. Ferguson allowed, culminating in the Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954 that reversed the previous policy. Meanwhile from the ground up, African Americans demanded the equality required of the separate but equal clause as demonstrated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956. Yet such nonviolent passive resistance seemed too slow for a new generation that embraced direct action confrontation. The growing expectations among young black consumers contributed to the spontaneous outburst of the sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960. The unwillingness to work within a segregated system while insisting on receiving citizenship rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution marked a

clear transition in the civil rights struggle.²

In Nashville, students already had participated in a sit-in that did not attract the media attention as the one in Greensboro. Led by the African American theologian James Lawson who attended Vanderbilt University, the students who included John Lewis discussed Mohandas Gandhi's strategies of nonviolence and soul force. The experience changed the life of Lewis. Born on a sharecropper's farm in rural Alabama in 1940, the African American John Lewis confronted a racist society that ostensibly provided him with few opportunities in life. His family protected him from the harshest aspects of the segregated society but as a youth he related to the lynching of Emmett Till who was just a year younger than Lewis. With the outburst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Lewis marveled over the black community's ability to come together and embraced the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a role model. With the help of King, Lewis attended the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville. An atypical youth to begin with, Lewis embarked on an education that quickly left the classroom for the civil rights battlefield in a campaign that has taken him to the halls of Congress (Lewis).

The idealism that accompanied the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Irish Roman Catholic president extended to many of his generation and their children the baby boomers who saw unlimited potential in a hegemonic United States that dominated the globe. The ideology promulgated internationally made omissions of equal rights at home particularly glaring. As Manning Marable argues in *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, "the Second Reconstruction actually began in earnest on the afternoon of 1 February 1960." On that day direct action nonviolence by four black men who sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter and demanded equal service as consumers in America provoked the series of protests against discrimination collectively known as the civil rights movement. The spontaneous acts of black youth were organized by a multiracial group called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or SNCC. As a veteran of the Nashville struggle, John Lewis along with Diane Nash and others joined with the black youth of Greensboro and elsewhere across the South including Atlanta in organizing SNCC in the spring of 1960 (Marable).

Out of the sit-ins came the Freedom Rides of 1961 that put pressure on local, state, and federal governments that allowed racial discrimination to persist. John Lewis joined a handful of black and white civil rights activists in the original Freedom Ride that left Washington, D.C. in May 1961 testing southern compliance with federal desegregation requirements in interstate travel. At Rockhill, South Carolina, some white vigilantes harassed the group, after which Lewis peeled off to attend a scholarship meeting in Nashville with the intent to rejoin the protest before it ended in New Orleans. The Freedom Ride traveled through Georgia without incident but ran into conflict in Alabama where Ku Klux Klansmen attacked them in Anniston and Birmingham. Completing his school interviews, Lewis rejoined the Freedom Ride in Alabama. When the bus reached Montgomery, Ku Klux Klansmen savagely beat him along with white activist Jim Zwerg (Arsenault).

These spontaneous acts of black youth—the sit-ins and Freedom Rides sponsored by such multiracial groups as SNCC—presented a decentralized approach to the reform from below as explained by historian Clayborne Carson in his seminal study *In Struggle*. King and the black ministers involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) followed a more bureaucratic and authoritarian approach to change from above as detailed in *Bearing the Cross* and other scholarship by David Garrow. These two approaches often clashed, for as the theorist Gene Sharp has discovered in his years studying nonviolence, there are many approaches to nonviolent resistance to oppression and discrimination. Nonetheless the era's idealistic view of America and the media's growing attention to the persistence of southern racial discrimination in a global environment where the medium is the message, forced self-reflection (Carson).³

By the Birmingham demonstrations in the spring of 1963, the nation could no longer tolerate segregation and inequality. King and the SCLC joined the local movement led by the Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth in protests against racial discrimination in public accommodations, voting, and employment in the industrial city of the New South, Birmingham. The sit-ins at lunch counters by African Americans demanding basic services as consumers in April 1963 had expanded by May to include protest marches led by school children. Rather than grant these demanded rights in citizenship, authorities in Birmingham turned loose police dogs on nonviolent protesters and turned on fire hoses against black teenagers marching for civil rights. Outrage followed nationally and internationally as calls for reform reached the U.S. Congress (Eskew).

Indeed, Birmingham provided the climax of the civil rights movement. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom simply celebrated that fact. Instead of the massive protests in the Capitol as originally envisaged by A. Phillip Randolph, the event became an affirmation of the American Dream. No one sounded that theme better than Martin Luther King who gave the address of his life before an integrated audience of at least a quarter million with millions more watching by television. With rolling cadences, his “I Have A Dream” speech epitomized African American desires for assimilation. Nearly tailor made to fit the demands of the civil rights legislation before the Congress, the oration reasoned the need for reform just like his “Letter From Birmingham Jail” while concluding with a resounding expression of faith in the American system (Lentz).⁴

The youngest speaker at the March on Washington—and the only one still alive today—John Lewis represented SNCC. In his speech he intended to rhetorically ask, “Which side is the federal government on?” but King and the moderate leaders of the movement convinced him to cut the radical language. Instead he ended his speech with the challenge of the youth in SNCC: “We want our freedom and we want it now!” (Lewis).

Years of avoiding race reform came to an end as the Kennedy Administration promoted legislation to open the system to black people and other minorities. Following the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, the Texan President Lyndon B. Johnson pushed through the Congress as a tribute to the martyred Kennedy and over the filibuster of southern Democratic senators legislation that marked a watershed in American race reform. Johnson encouraged passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that ended discrimination in public accommodations and outlined equal employment opportunities thereby opening the American system not only to African Americans but also to other minorities (Eskew).

The next two years expanded these race reforms through calls for voting rights in southwest Georgia, Mississippi, and finally in the riveting protests in Alabama’s Black Belt. King and the SCLC joined Lewis and the black youth in SNCC in Selma, Alabama, in a call for voting rights. The demonstrations evolved into a protest march to Montgomery to demand Alabama Governor George C. Wallace to allow fair voting practices. John Lewis stood at the head of the 600 marchers who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday, March 1965. When the demonstrators reached the foot of the bridge, Alabama state policemen moved in with tear gas, brutally beating John Lewis and leaving him with a fractured skull. The effort of white southern authorities to suppress the black demand for the franchise led to federal support for voting rights. Again President Johnson intervened, appearing on television to quote the anthem of the civil rights movement—We Shall Overcome—and to propose legislation to secure the franchise for minorities. Once enforced, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 led to black political empowerment across America as African Americans in rural areas of the Deep South and urban centers of the Industrial North took charge of local governments. These changes signified integration into the existing political system and a shift in the distribution of resources into communities previously neglected. The result of the growing black electorate and changes in the racial attitudes of many Americans ultimately contributed to the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first African American president.⁵

After the success of Selma, King tried to take the movement into the north in 1966, but as an external force that did not resonate with a local movement, the Chicago campaign fell flat. In the suburbs of Chicago King said he found racism worse than in the South. While advocating fair housing in Cicero, Illinois, white counter protesters pelted him with bricks. After spending several weeks in the ghetto, he abandoned Chicago, but with the knowledge that the problems being faced by African Americans extended beyond racism. Having gained access to the system—being able to sit at that lunch counter and order that hamburger proved of limited value if one could not afford to pay for the food. King came to understand the role of poverty in perpetuating racism. Soon he linked this understanding to the broader issue of anticolonialism. By 1967 King announced his opposition to the war in Vietnam during a speech in New York at the Riverside Church. Thereafter President Johnson turned against King and the civil rights movement (Anderson).⁶

By 1968 King had concluded that the problems of America were not those of race but those of class. Poverty was at the root of the system’s oppression that left so many people excluded from the American Dream. He proposed a Poor People’s Campaign to organize the disposed Americans in a nationwide movement. Thousands of poor people, black, white, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, were to descend on Washington, D.C., and, unlike during the March of 1963, occupy the Capitol building and demand housing, health care, jobs, education. While

assisting a strike by garbage men in Memphis, Tennessee, King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 by James Earl Ray. Only months before King had despaired:

We live in a sick and neurotic nation. . . . Out of the social darkness of America's present evils, morning will surely come. If I didn't believe this, I couldn't make it.

He was 39-years-old. Rioting followed in 50 cities. Just before his death, King authored a book that asked the question, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos Or Community*. In many ways that question has never been answered (King).

Whereas King responded to the crisis of the 1960s by broadening his viewpoint as to the problems in America by proposing an interracial Poor People's Campaign, the black radicals in SNCC turned separatist by viewing the ills of society through the distorted lens of race. Henceforth for advocates of Black Power, the primacy of race became all-consuming. Previously John Lewis—who had participated in the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, Selma Campaign and advocated Dr. King's vision of a multiracial beloved community—had held the position of chairman of SNCC, but separatists forced him out and put in the office Stokely Carmichael who had coined the phrase "Black Power" during the Meredith March of 1966. At first it was a return to a black nationalism that emphasized economic self-help and African American institutions. Responding to decades of white supremacy designed to make people feel inferior, African American intellectuals promoted "Black is Beautiful." Determined to make it on their own, the black members in SNCC kicked the white members out of the organization. They rejected the white dominated system and everything it stood for in America. Carmichael and other black SNCC members were influenced in their thinking by the writings of Malcolm X. They admired the independence of The Lost-Found Nation of Islam or Black Muslims and its message of Black separatism, economic self-help and self-defense against white racists (Carmichael; Lewis).

Inspired by the political activism of rural African Americans in Lowndes County, Alabama, who used the symbol of a black panther to represent their separate political party, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton organized the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in 1966, around the principle of self-defense against racial oppression. Feeling trapped in the ghetto with no chance of escape, the Black Panthers tried to combat the devastating poverty of the urban core. Their rhetoric suggested the government had coordinated a plan of genocide against African Americans. They realized that many black people had been shut out of the system. With no access to the education and training necessary for work in the post-industrial world, many black people had missed the boat on the modern, consumer economy. As images of the desperate black poor caught up in New Orleans thirty-five years later when the levees broke after Katrina make clear, the diagnosis of a trapped black underclass shut out of the system as articulated by the Black Panthers was not entirely incorrect (Seale).⁷

Other African Americans experienced access to the system and prospered as the Sixties gave way to the Seventies. Many middle class black people achieved integration with better paying jobs, admission to the better formerly all white schools, improvements in housing and steady increases in a general standard of living. Black political empowerment came to symbolize their success. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, federal registrars oversaw southern elections and guaranteed political equality. With the growing black electorate—rising from 43 percent in 1964 to 62 percent in 1968—many black candidates for political office, now receiving a fair shake in the campaign and in many cases appealing to a majority black electorate, won positions of power that enabled them to shift resources back to the black community. Furthermore interpretation by the federal courts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with affirmative action decisions increased African American contractors gaining lucrative government contracts. Consequently the black middle class grew as its influence expanded. In Atlanta a plaster worker named Herman Russell became a general contractor and a millionaire. The gains made by many African Americans underscores the possibilities of success through access to the system (Graham; Lewis).⁸

John Lewis' personal story reflected the potential of the racial changes. Forced out of SNCC in 1966, he continued working for the civil rights struggle by leading the Voter Education Project financed by the Ford Foundation. This effort promoted voter registration of African Americans across the South in compliance with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Living in Atlanta, Lewis also headed the National Consumer Co-op Bank. Through these two initiatives he promoted black political and economic access to the system. In 1977 he made an

unsuccessful run for the U.S. Congress after which President Jimmy Carter appointed him to manage the VISTA Program and other federal projects. In 1981 Lewis won election to the Atlanta City Council. Then in a hotly contested race against his old friend and fellow civil rights activist Julian Bond—who today heads the NAACP—John Lewis won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in Atlanta’s majority black 5th Congressional District in 1986. He has been reelected 10 times, winning up to 70 percent of the vote (Lewis).

As a congressman, Lewis has worked to memorialize the civil rights movement as a way of promoting voting rights and proselytizing the beloved community. His tenure in office coincides with a groundswell of support by cities and states for monuments to the civil rights movement best characterized by the exhibitory one often finds on display: that of life-size monochromatic mannequins marching to freedom, riding on the bus, or sitting-in at the lunch counter. As ubiquitous to these institutions as the civil war soldier on the courthouse square, these civil rights figures mark a commemoration that symbolizes America’s new ideology of toleration that celebrates diversity. Whether in Atlanta, Birmingham, Selma, or Memphis, an evolving collective memory of triumphant toleration rises above a localized narrative often framed within the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Born out of the post-World War II racial strife that identified these cities as part of a larger civil rights struggle, forty years later the once contested memories have helped ease racial tensions. Now encapsulated in these memorials, civil rights memories are embraced by urban leaders. Expressed through architecture, art, and museum artifact, the once distinct memories have become increasingly the same, all announcing an inevitable victory over oppression. The pilgrims who visit these celebrated sites are greeted by local, state, and federal employees of the heritage tourism industry who have standardized a racially progressive message that has knocked off center the once popular urban observances of white supremacy symbolized by wreath-laying ceremonies at civil war monuments. Every year U.S. Representative John Lewis leads a group of men and women from Congress across the South to see the sites of the civil rights struggle. Freshman Senator Barack Obama attended one of these pilgrimages.⁹

The efforts to memorialize the movement—while spontaneous and independent—have resulted in similar outcomes. City and state governments and state and local planners assisted movement veterans and scholars in developing the memorials. In some instances, national museum consultants and the federal government participated in the planning. The goal of heritage tourism became a driving force as chambers of commerce advertised the racist past for tourist dollars. Indeed black political empowerment made possible significant public monies for the various enterprises. The commercial appeal of these memorials marks a significant departure from earlier expressions of a southern collective memory of white supremacy described by William Fitzhugh Brundage in *The Southern Past*. The relationship between civil war monuments and white supremacy described by Kirk Savage in *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, is reversed as civil rights memorials emphasize America’s multiracial and pluralistic society. While Kenneth E. Foote has described the commemoration of atrocities in *Shadowed Ground*, and Derek Alderman has explored the politics behind the renaming of streets after Martin Luther King, Jr., the contested past is less an issue in the construction of these memorials to the civil rights movement than the ideological purpose of promoting diversity and human rights. Indeed, all of the museums put local spins on a standardized Montgomery to Memphis refrain that underscores the triumph of toleration (Brundage).¹⁰

Two months after King’s death in 1968, his heirs joined the City of Atlanta in proposing a “living, permanent” memorial and historical district that consisted of the King Birth Home, Ebenezer Baptist Church, a library containing King’s personal papers, and a permanent “entombment” for King’s remains all located in a “King shrine area” along Auburn Avenue in the heart of the old black business district. Coretta Scott King created the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., to memorialize the man. She contacted the Johnson and Nixon Administrations for assistance but received no public help until 1975 when the City of Atlanta constructed the Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Center across the street from the location of the proposed King Memorial. By then she had raised \$6 million dollars in private funds to pay for the Inter-Faith Peace Chapel, reflection pool, and marble sarcophagus containing King’s body. Yet the construction of Freedom Hall and the gift shop had to wait until President Jimmy Carter convinced the federal government, the Ford Foundation, and the United Auto Workers to contribute the nearly \$8 million dollars necessary to complete the Bond-Ryder-James designed King Center Complex, which was dedicated in 1982. With donations, souvenir sales, and gate receipts, the King heirs operated the memorial; but expenses out paced revenues, again forcing Coretta Scott

King to request the intervention of the federal government.¹¹

By creating the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site and Preservation District in October 1980, Congress initiated direct federal intervention over the “King shrine area” that has evolved into almost complete control of the King memorial. The legislation authorized the National Park Service to develop historic preservation plans, address resource management, and purchase property to preserve the district’s appearance, but it specifically forbade the government from building “a major visitor center in the national historic site.”¹² Despite thousands of tourists, more than 50 employees, and a \$2 million dollar budget, the King Center could not control expenses, meanwhile an understaffed National Park Service confronted a historical site with no bathrooms, inadequate parking, and poor interpretation. The September 1990 announcement that Atlanta would host the 1996 Olympics, provided the government with an excuse to propose an \$11 million dollar visitor center with restrooms and interactive exhibits, restored buildings in the neighborhood, off-street parking, and a new landscape. Arguing that only such a facility could accommodate the estimated 5 million tourists sure to visit King’s tomb during the Summer Games, the park service quickly won the support of the Atlanta City Council, Mayor Maynard Jackson, U.S. Representative John Lewis, and other elected black officials. The city donated the King Community Center lot and the Clinton Administration arranged necessary funding. The National Park Service resolved a bitter and very public squabble with the King Family and opened its King National Historic Site Visitor Center in June 1996. As per agreement, the heirs control the bookstore with its profitable sales while park rangers interpret the site. The exhibitory features six pods that recount segregation in the South, the King family and “Sweet Auburn,” Martin Luther King’s early leadership in Montgomery, his civil rights triumphs, his broad vision for reform, and his assassination in Memphis. Dividing the pods in half is “Freedom Road” on which monochromatic life-cast mannequins representing minorities walk up an incline to a picture window showing in the distance King’s crypt. With Congressman Lewis playing a key role, local and federal money constructed the Atlanta visitor center with its message of triumphant toleration similar to civil rights memorials elsewhere.¹³

Similarly Lewis spearheaded the federal support to turn the Selma to Montgomery March route into a National Historical Trail. Selma’s municipal leaders memorialized the movement for reasons of heritage tourism although for grassroots activists, the issue of political reform lay beneath the surface. The limited success of black political empowerment in rural Alabama’s cotton belt with its overwhelming majority of African American voters and the shrewd ability of Selma’s white Mayor Joe Smitherman to remain in office despite a majority black electorate irritated many civil rights veterans who questioned the gains of the Voting Rights Act. As mayor in 1965, Smitherman had assisted in the suppression of civil rights demonstrations although he was not responsible for the beating of John Lewis and others at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday. Seven years later a federal court order forced white politicians to allow Lewis and fellow civil rights activists to stage a re-enactment of the famous march. Other observances followed that 1972 protest culminating in the 25th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March in 1990. By this point the city of Selma, which had developed heritage tourism around Greek Revival mansions in response to the economic decline that had followed the collapse of cotton recognized a good thing and began touting the package, “From Civil War to Civil Rights,” with juxtaposed images of Sturdivant Hall and Brown Chapel AME Church. Smitherman dedicated a marker and park at the foot of Edmund Pettus Bridge before black dignitaries Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, Ben Chavis, and Dick Gregory retraced the steps of the original marchers across the Alabama River. A racially mixed crowd of 4,000 participated in the 1990 event that galvanized efforts to memorialize the movement. After the re-enactment Representative John Lewis returned to Washington and convinced Congress to adopt the Selma to Montgomery National Trail Study Act that authorized the National Park Service to explore the 54 miles between the two cities a National Historic Trail. After receiving a positive report from park rangers, Congress approved the designation in 1995 and earmarked millions of dollars in federal aid for the project.¹⁴

Already in Selma, a grassroots effort had organized the National Voting Rights Museum. Bankrolled by a local black attorney and endorsed by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the museum opened in 1992 in a historic building on Water Avenue that had once housed the headquarters of the White Citizens Council. In contrast to the well-financed museums in Atlanta and Birmingham, Selma’s memorial consists of a hodgepodge of artifacts donated by local civil rights activists, the official state photographs of Bloody Sunday taken by state troopers, and homemade plaster casts of the feet of movement veterans. In place of the monochromatic life-cast mannequin one finds a klansman in full regalia. The unpolished nature of the exhibitory recalls earlier shrines to

movement martyrs. The founders explained they established the National Voting Rights Museum

to offer America and the world the opportunity to learn the lessons of the past to assure we will not make the same mistakes in the 21st century and beyond. The museum's board of directors believes it to be a look back, but also a vision and reminder of what America can and will be.

Thus the message is the same as Selma celebrates the promise of pluralism. To underscore toleration, Congressman Lewis joined Mayor Smitherman on "Oprah" and other TV talk shows to boost Selma. During the Summer Olympics, Lewis and Smitherman jointly carried the torch across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. By 1996 the city generated \$5 million dollars through heritage tourism. When President Bill Clinton joined thousands of people in the bridge-crossing re-enactment in 2000, Smitherman exclaimed, "It is a great honor to have the president of the United States visit our historic city. . . . This will open doors for enormous tourism in our city."¹⁵ For Congressman Lewis, it symbolized African American access to the system through the ballot box and the promise of the beloved community.

While tourism provides an excellent vehicle for the transmission of a new ideology of toleration, civil rights memorials have struggled with a bifurcated goal of commemorating the past but also advocating present change. Coretta Scott King established the King Center in Atlanta to memorialize the man through the built environment but also to memorialize an ongoing movement through the celebration of a national holiday established in his honor in 1986. Problems persist, but the commemoration itself reflects the success of change.¹⁶ Rather than a national stage, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has latched onto the atomized individual in a world of bigotry as the target of its ideology of toleration. Building on the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights, the Institute encourages visitors to take "The Birmingham Pledge" which amounts to a promise of toleration to make the world a better place.¹⁷

Likewise people leave the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma convinced in the power of the ballot. There the staff takes the abstract promise literally, actively working to promote black political empowerment throughout rural Alabama. Similar to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members who forty years before had provoked local political reform through grassroots organizing, volunteers assisted by the staff of the National Voting Rights Museum conduct voter registration campaigns that advocate awareness for black candidates. The museum played a key role in helping to elect an African American mayor of Selma in the summer of 2000, thus bringing to an end the nine-term rule of Joe Smitherman. While overt political activism has heightened racial tensions in the Alabama Black Belt, the museum's annual "Bridge Crossing Jubilee" has become Selma's major tourism event. Not only does it attract regional participants to its beauty pageant, parade, and hip hop competition, but it also draws national participants eager to retrace the footsteps of King and partake in what has become a political sacrament.¹⁸

Congressman John Lewis represented the living embodiment of that political sacrifice. He hoped to see the fulfillment of Dr. King's vision of a beloved community. Lewis became a strong supporter of the Clinton Administration, serving as senior chief deputy whip in the Democratic caucus and regularly meeting with the president's cabinet. With the election of Republican George W. Bush under questionable circumstances in 2000, Lewis emerged one of the harshest critics of the new administration. Congressman Lewis became the first member of the U.S. House of Representatives to suggest impeaching George W. Bush for "deliberately, systematically violating the law." Lewis said of Bush, "He is not King, he is president." When Hillary Clinton announced her bid for president, Lewis endorsed her candidacy. Once the winter 2008 primaries began, however, Lewis responded to the surprise success of Barack Obama and moved his support to the black Senator from Illinois. As Lewis noted on February 12, 2008, "Something is happening in America and people are prepared and ready to make that great leap" (Lewis).

For Congressman Lewis, the Obama candidacy symbolized the success of his years of advocating voting rights and black political empowerment. Indeed Obama represented the possibilities of access to the system won through equal treatment of the law and affirmative action. As a post-Jim Crow youth, he had attended public and private schools, worked with social agencies and corporate law firms, held both state and federal political offices. When Obama won the Democratic Primary John Lewis said, "If someone had told me this would be happening

now, I would have told them they were crazy, out of their minds. They didn't know what they were talking about." Then recognizing the civil rights legacies that had led up to the Obama nomination, Lewis said, "I just wish the others were around to see this day. To the people who were beaten, put in jail, were asked questions they could never answer to register to vote, it's amazing."¹⁹

Throughout the Fall 2008 Presidential Campaign, Senator Barack Obama stuck to a message of positive change that avoided racial implications and promised reforms to Bush Administration abuses. His opponent, the reactionary Republican John McCain ran a negative race designed to appeal to white voters and to discredit Obama as an old-school liberal. Among conservative voters in the Deep South and West, McCain received support but in the nation's urban areas, on the West Coast and the North East, Obama carried the day. In the end President Obama won 28 states and 52 percent of the popular vote while McCane won 22 states and 46 percent of the popular vote. People across America greeted the election day with vigils at civil rights sites and the new temples of toleration built as memorials to the movement. With the announcement of Obama's victory, the crowded audience at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church and the nearby gravesites of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King, advocates of change burst into tears as spontaneous celebrations broke out across America.
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Congressman John Lewis cast a large shadow across President Barack Obama's inauguration. On the eve of the event in an effort to recall that earlier moment in 1963, President-Elect Obama held an event at the Lincoln Memorial where forty-five years before, a young John Lewis had stood and spoken to the thousands watching the March on Washington. Now Obama addressed the millions of viewers as he called up the memories of that earlier struggle. Two days later at the inaugural, Congressman John Lewis sat with the former presidents, presidential family and honored guests beside the president-elect. During his address, President Obama acknowledged the sacrifices of civil rights activists, singling out John Lewis for praise. At the conclusion he turned to Congressman Lewis, leaned over to shake his hand and said, "Because of you, John."²¹ Indeed the sacrifices of this poor black boy from rural Alabama—John Lewis—who stood up for the civil and human rights of all as symbolized by the vote, has enabled America to enter a new era capable of electing a mixed-race descendant of recent immigrants with an unusual name—Barack Obama—as President of the United States.

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Notes

- 1 Robert F. Kennedy's quote and United States racial population statistics for 2042 cited in *Time Magazine* 17 Nov. 2008. The author would like to thank Professors Alfred Hornung and Oliver Scheiding of Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, for their assistance with this essay.² For the best monograph on the postwar changes in the U.S. South, see Bartley. For firsthand accounts of the civil rights struggle see Raines King, 1958.
- 3 See also Arsenault, Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, Sharp.
- 4 And for a text see Washington 217–20.
- 5 The standard works on the voting rights campaigns remain Payne, Dittmer, K'Meyer, Tuck, Lau, Fairclough, and Garrow. See also Lewis with D'Orso. On black political empowerment see also Lawson, Parker, and Youngblood Ashmore.
- 6 On King's intellectual growth, see Chappell and Fairclough.
- 7 See also Strain.
- 8 The forthcoming work of the Stanford University economist Gavin Wright will shed further light on the integration of African Americans into the American system.
- 9 The similarities between memorializing the movement and the Lost Cause cannot be overlooked. For analyses of the earlier ideology see Wilson and Foster. For an informed exploration of the relationships among monuments, heritage, and ideology see Gillis.
- 10 See also Confino, Savage, Foote, Alderman, "New Geography". See also Alderman, "New Memorial" and Dwyer. While similar in subject, Dwyer concludes that civil rights memorials ignore contemporary racial issues, an argument that is different than the argument made here which, building on ideas from Antonio Gramsci suggests a kind of cultural hegemony around the civic religion of toleration. For a theoretical analysis of cultural hegemony see Forgacs.
- 11 *Atlanta Journal* 4 June, 10 June, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution* 15 Jan., 28 Sept. 1969, 20 May 1973; for background material on King's widow see Scott King. and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 17 Jan. 1993; *Atlanta Constitution* 16 Jan. 1975, 17 Sept. 1975, 27, 28, 29 1976, 4 Apr. 1977, 4 Oct. 1978; by 1976 the King Center had moved into temporary headquarters on the corner of Auburn Avenue and Boulevard, but left the papers at the Interdenominational Theological Center, see Durett. A federal grant of \$660,000 supported the running of the King Community Center, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 8 Jan. 1984; see also *Atlanta Constitution* 9 Dec. 1977, 14 Jan. 1979, 17, 18 Oct. 1979; some \$4 million of the \$10 million construction cost for the King Center Complex came from federal grants.
- 12 Public Law 96–428 adopted by the 96th Congress on Oct. 10, 1980; National Park Service, *General Management Plan & Development Concept Plan*. 21 Feb. 1986.
- 13 *Ibid.*; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 9 Jan. 1983, 8, 14 Jan. 1984, 7 Jan. 1985, Nov. 17 1985, 17 Jan. 1986, 11 Aug. 1994, 11 Jan. 1995; National Park Service, *Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site Land Protection Plan*. 1994 Update; National Park Service, *A Grand Endeavor For A Man With A Dream: The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site and Preservation District* [1996]; on the conflict with the King family see *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. 11, 16 Aug. 1994, 1, 10, 14, 15, 21 Jan. 1995, 21 May, 16 June, and 20 Nov. 1996, and on the Park Service facility fulfilling the needs of visitors see 16 Jan. 1999.
- 14 *Selma Showcase* (Selma, AL: Crossroads Visitor Information Center, 1998) 3, 10–11; "History Lives In Selma." "Selma: A Legacy of Black Heritage." and "Martin Luther King, Jr., Street Historic Walking Tour." All brochures published by the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce. The closing of Craig Field by the military in the 1970s devastated the local economy; see Holmes. *Selma Showcase: A Magazine About Selma and Dallas County*. 1:2 (1990), also 1998–1999 edition; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. 25 Feb. 1990, 29 June 1996, 21 Dec. 1995; *Selma Times-Journal* 2, 3 Aug. 1983, 28 Feb. 1990, 4, 5, 8, 11 Mar. 1990, 26 Feb. 1995, 22–25 Apr. 1999; *Montgomery Advertiser* 11 Mar. 1990, 27 Apr. 1998; National Park Service, *Selma to*

Montgomery Historic Trail Study. n.p. n.d. [1992?].

15 *Bridge Crossing Jubilee* 5 Mar. 1993, a tabloid published by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for the National Voting Rights Museum. It lists co-chairs Joseph Lowery and John Lewis, honorary chairs, Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King, James Orange, and Ben Chavis, national coordinators C. T. Vivian and his wife Octavia Vivian, and state chairs Alabama State Senator Hank Sanders, and local veterans of the 1965 march Marie Foster and Albert Turner; *Selma Times-Journal* 9 Mar. 1992; *Bridge Festival Edition*, a tabloid published 9 Apr. 1992 by the

Selma Times-Journal 17 Feb. 2000; *Montgomery Advertiser* 1 Mar. 2000; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 6 Mar. 2000.

16 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 18 Jan. 2003; like Emancipation Day and Independence Day Celebrations, King Day became another commemoration. On black collective memory see Fabre “African–American Commemorative”

17 Copy of the “Birmingham Pledge.”

18 *Atlanta Constitution* 22 Dec. 2000.

19 *Time Magazine* 17 Nov. 2008.

20 *Time Magazine* 17 Nov. 2008.

21 *Time Magazine* 29 Dec. 2008 – 5 Jan. 2009, 26 Jan. 2009, 2 Feb. 2009.

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