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UnCivil War – Memory and Identity in the Reconstruction of the Civil Rights Movement

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Joanne Sarah Barclay
May 2005

Dr. Stephen Fritz, Chair
Dr. Dale Schmitt
Dr. Andrew Slap

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Commemoration, Civil Rights Movement

ABSTRACT

UnCivil War – Memory and Identity in the Reconstruction of the Civil Rights Movement
by

Joanne Sarah Barclay

Memory is constructed to solidify a certain version of the past in the collective identity. History and memory occupy a controversial role in the New South, with battles over the legacy of the Civil War and the reassertion of Confederate symbols in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement's challenge to the status quo.

Memory of the Civil Rights Movement is entering public consciousness through cultural mediums such as films and museums, as well as through politically contentious debates over the continued display of the Confederate battle flag and the creation of a federal holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The process is still taking place to construct the Civil Rights Movement within the American collective memory. What aspects of this history are commemorated, and which aspects are neglected, will have impact in American society well into the twenty-first century.

DEDICATION

To Mum and Dad for their love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Much appreciation goes to Dr. Stephen Fritz for his continued guidance.

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORY AND MEMORY

“Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us.”¹ What David Lowenthal suggests in this statement, and through his work on how the past is approached and dealt with in historical discourse, is that there is a distinct difference between memory and history, though the two share a strong relationship when trying to understand the past. ‘History’, ‘memory’, and ‘identity’ are all terms that, in their dictionary definition and everyday uses, we all feel confident that we understand. Memory and identity studies, however, seek to explore the theoretical and practical connotations of these terms, and examine their value when constructing a view of the past. The examination of memory by philosophers, historians, and social scientists has been a relatively recent phenomenon, and the field is continuing to explore different periods of history. The results of these discussions, more often, is to raise further questions about the concepts of memory and its application, rather than provide answers to pre-existing concerns.

There is a growing historiography concerning memory and identity and their application to certain historical events. The American Civil War and the First World War, for example, are two areas from which much understanding has been gleaned about how different societies chose to remember and commemorate, both in the immediate aftermath and through to contemporary society. It is only within the past decade that the American Civil Rights Movement has been examined in this context. This thesis seeks to explain the theories and uses of memory and identify and apply these concepts to examine the commemoration and constructed legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Although these events took place within only two generations, the questions of how to commemorate the period, and the ultimate impact this may have on the American national identity, have already begun to be raised. What is clear, however, is that how the memory of this event is shaped in the understanding of the American collective past will have great influence over the status of the individuals, as well as social and ethnic groups, involved within the construction of a national identity.

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 210.

When dealing with a complex construct such as memory, it is important to break it down into the simplest forms. As previously noted, though far from being different terms for the same concept, history and memory share a distinct relationship which goes back to the foundation upon which our contemporary understanding of the past originated. In Greek mythology Mnemosyne was the goddess of memory, and the goddess of wisdom. It is from this that the science of recollection, mnemonics, is derived.² While memory and knowledge were therefore bound together in Mnemosyne, this does not define a clear relationship to an understanding of the past. That step comes with the union of Zeus and Mnemosyne, resulting in her becoming the mother of the Muses. Clio, the muse of history, was therefore one of her children. Memory and history have thus become closely associated terms upon which the development of a method through which to explore the past was shaped. Memory is not, however, a perfect recollection of the past. While it can be argued that history is not either, memory is influenced by internal and external factors that can distort the understanding of past events. On an individual level, personal fallibility means that what we remember may have never happened. We are told things by family and friends to the point that we adopt them into our own memories and can no longer distinguish between events that we actually experienced and those that we remember. When reading back over a diary or other document written in our youth, many of the events described we have long forgotten, as we have not deemed them important enough to remember, though at the time we valued them sufficiently to write them down. Perhaps we remember the events documented differently from what we realize actually happened, as memory is shaped and distorted over time as we have need to remember things in such a way to lend value or legitimacy to present conditions, or we have recalled events with the benefit of hindsight, knowing how they will eventually develop. All of these examples relate to individual memory and personal experience, but the concepts behind them can easily be expanded to include communal, regional, or even national memories.

Historian David Thelen develops this notion of the construction and manipulation of memory. He contends that memory, whether private and individual, or collective and cultural, is not merely reproduced from one person or group to the next, one generation to the next, but rather is, whether consciously or not, a constructed form. This process of the construction of memory,

² Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), vii

Thelen argues, does not occur in isolation. It is shaped through conversations with others that take place within the context of community, broader politics, and social dynamics.³

The distinction between memory and history lies not only in how knowledge of the past is acquired and validated but also in the way it is transmitted, preserved, and altered.⁴ Until recent exercises to record and catalogue oral histories, memory was passed from one person to another or one group to another by methods of storytelling, folklore, or some documented texts. Within the course of a day we experience at least one person sharing memories with us, whether it is a childhood anecdote or what happened at work the previous week. We make the judgement of whether to trust these memories presented to us. We use what we know of the informer, whether they are usually trustworthy or prone to fanciful tales, and other information that we have previously learnt of the event, either from personal experience or another source, to assess the reliability of this information. Memory is accepted, therefore, as being a premise to knowledge; required in order to understand but not the sole basis of that understanding. History, on the other hand, is enforced from evidence that often includes other people's memories, among other external sources, a technical, but crucial, distinction.⁵

Memory is manipulated and developed by the social and historical conditions around us. What we select to remember, and often as important, what we choose to forget, is influenced by various external factors, some of which will have a greater impact on an individual or social group memory than others. In his study on the relationship between memory and identity, John R. Gillis contends that all constructs of memory are "embedded in complex class, gender and power relations" that determine what is remembered, who does the remembering, and to what end this memory may be used.⁶ David Thelen concurs that people depend on others to help them decide which experiences to remember and what interpretation to place on those experiences.⁷ Memories, therefore, are an important social construct, and can be manipulated to fit an identified social or national need. Collective memory is more vulnerable and susceptible to these social factors than personal memories may be. Collective memory can be used to forge a collective identity, an understanding to legitimate a shared experience or place value on the defined

³ David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989) : 1119.

⁴ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 212.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶ John R. Gillis, ed. *Commemorations; The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)

⁷ 3.

⁷ Thelen, "Memory and American History," 1112.

contemporary status quo. Images of the past, therefore, commonly legitimate a present social order.⁸ This makes the construction of a collective, or national, memory of great importance in creating a cohesive nation and social group, and while legitimating the present conditions, serves to legitimate the position of the present ruling class.

It is from that basis that philosopher-historian Jacques Le Goff, who laid much of the foundation of memory studies, approaches collective memory. Almost in terms of distorted Social Darwinism, Le Goff contends that collective memory is “one of the great stakes of developed and developing societies, of dominated and dominating classes, all of them struggling for power or for life, for survival and for advancement.”⁹ This indicates that the manipulation and distortion of collective memory is a method through which power is achieved and maintained in most societies. Le Goff, then, asserts that the collective memory, comprised of an amalgamation of personal memories, is subject to external control and by implication to abuse by the ruling elite.

While in keeping with the general theory behind this premise, John Bodnar modifies it to argue that by the latter part of the twentieth-century memory was not under the big-brother control of the state but was at the center of a debate that still rages. Public memory remains, he argues, a product of elite manipulation, symbolic interaction, and contested discourse. This does not, however, leave society in such a dire position as it may first appear. It is simply part of an ongoing process in which, Bodnar contends, “leaders continue to use the past to foster patriotism and civic duty and ordinary people continue to accept, reformulate, and ignore such messages.”¹⁰ Collective memory, then, is a dynamic rather than a static creation, a process rather than a result, and thus open to various influences. It is the latter part of this statement to which we will return when discussing the efforts of the American government to establish a collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement through the inception of making Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a public holiday.

Memory is an important construct in defining who we are. What we remember of our past experiences and interactions helps to create our own sense of identity. The term ‘identity’ itself has been disputed as to its value when assessing our recollection of the past. Identity, Richard

⁸ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 97-8.

¹⁰ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

Handler contends, should be used with much caution. This concept is peculiar to the modern Western world, he argues, so it is difficult to apply it to other places and times.¹¹ Other cultures do not have such a distinct notion of identity and do not view themselves in the same individual or collective way as contemporary Americans. While taking this into account, for the purposes of this study, identity can be viewed as a useful component in the memory/history discussions. As Handler claims that the term is a modern Western construct, it may still be applied to this contemporary social movement, although approached with a certain degree of caution.

Other scholars usefully employ the notion of identity, both in personal and collective terms, in relation to the use of historical discourse. In her work comparing the development of national identities in the United States and Australia, Lyn Spillman discusses how rituals and festivals became important during the nineteenth century in the creation of national identities. She focuses on the respective centennials and bicentennials in each country as important representations and affirmations of collective identity.¹² Remembering the past provides self-continuity. The ability to recall past experiences offers us a link to our earlier selves, however much we now differ from that persona. We are confident in our own identity as we can recall where we have been, understand where we are now, and explore where the future may take us. As regional, ethnic, or national collective groups, we cling to this recollection of the past as it allows us to understand present conditions. The prime function of memory, then, becomes not to perfectly preserve the past but to adapt the past in order to be able to enrich and manipulate the present.¹³

One of the foremost scholarly works to examine the memory of a major twentieth-century event is Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning; The Great War in European Cultural History*, and much can be gained from an assessment of his approach to the subject. A primary concern in Europe after the devastation of the First World War was what to do with the dead. More specifically, it was a matter of who controlled the memorial of the fallen soldiers; whether the families and local communities had the right to commemorate their lost in a personal manner, or whether the state would ultimately dictate the memorial provided for the men killed in action. Though this example relates specifically to inter-war Europe, the discussion over which body

¹¹ Richard Handler, "Is 'Identity a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?'" in *Commemorations; The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 27.

¹² Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration; Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

¹³ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 197, 210.

would dictate the memory of the event and control its passage into the national collective identity can be applied to many times and many places, including the American Civil Rights Movement.

Immediately after World War I, for example, the French government assumed the position of national commemorator and outlawed the practice of returning bodies back to their communities for burial. There had been some popular discontent that the wealthy could afford, first, to pay someone to locate their deceased, then exhume the body and arrange for it to be transported home. The fear was that the wealthy would be able to shape the memory of the war in terms of services and monuments to honor their dead, with the poor not granted such a privilege. Thus the concern was that the wealthy soldier, and most often these were officers, would receive disproportionate commemoration in comparison with the ordinary soldier, who had fought and died on the same battlefield, and that the very nature of the reality of the war for the average soldier would be lost.¹⁴

The debate then became a religious one, dividing the nation still further. Having recently broken with the Roman Catholic Church, the French state-sponsored war cemeteries were civic memorials. Many of the bereaved, particularly in southern France, wanted to bury the dead in parish cemeteries. In 1920 the French government relented and agreed to allow families to claim their dead and transport them home at the state's expense.¹⁵ Winter demonstrates how concern over the commemoration of an event affects individual as well as a collective identity and can split a group which supposedly emerged from the war a victorious, cohesive unit into competing factions. In the struggle to manipulate memory and acquire or maintain power, the French people decided that the state should not dictate how memory of the war passed into collective memory. In the process of negotiating the creation of a collective identity, this example from France shows that the ruling elite is neither the only nor always the most successful force.

Returning to America, the same notion of groups competing to define the identity of the nation appears to exist. Lyn Spillman insists that the creation of an American national identity has historically been difficult, as any such attempt has been weakened by internal conflict and a focus on local and regional identities. Any attempt to create a collective memory, therefore, has to deal with internally divisive factors such as race, gender, class, and geographical location.

¹⁴ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

These conditions will be further discussed when examining the memory and commemoration of the US Civil War.¹⁶

David Lowenthal has identified what he refers to as the ‘heritage industry’ in America, one that has great implications for collective memory and identity. He contends that we have an inescapable dependence on the past, and without memory and tradition we could neither function now nor plan ahead. This focus on heritage has, for many critics, turned history into “escapist nostalgia.”¹⁷ These critics contend that the public’s appetite for a sense of their own past, in order to lend understanding and validity to their present selves, has reduced history as an academic discipline into a commercialized nostalgia that neither informs nor guides but simply offers an escape from our present existence to a simpler and more innocent time. Alex Haley’s novel *Roots*, published in 1976, and its television adaptation the following year spearheaded a growth in the number and range of the so-called historical ‘docu-drama’ shows on television, with the result of making an understanding of the past more commercial and accessible to the general audience.¹⁸ The growth of interest in ancestral origins by black Americans prompted by *Roots* was the “*fons et origo* of the current cult of ethnic heritage.”¹⁹

The ‘heritage industry’ thus demonstrates the public’s desire to create its own personal or national heritage. As highlighted by the *Roots* phenomenon, people have a great interest in genealogy and use it both to connect themselves to their personal and group past, while at the same time solidifying their position in the present. As discussed previously, memory of the past is a method by which to define and validate the present social order. Genealogy, it can be argued, is simply the construction of a memory, though not personally experienced, which exists to help define who we are. The identified growth in the ‘heritage industry’ does pose an interesting dilemma. On the one hand it may signify a desire of the population to know about the past, either on a personal or national level. Alternatively it may simply be a need to reduce the past into symbols and icons that are easily understood and can be universally applied, which at the same time removes any value they may have had in adding to the discourse of the relationship of history and memory. It can also be used to assert a status of victimhood and thus buttress

¹⁶ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 32.

¹⁷ David Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” in *Commemorations; The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 42-3.

¹⁸ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 641.

¹⁹ Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” 44.

demands for some type of compensation, whether material or symbolic, for some wrong done in the past.

Returning to the notion of nostalgia, though in a more positive sense, Michael Kammen contends that there is a distinct increase in nostalgia in times of transition, in periods of cultural anxiety, or when a society feels a strong sense of discontinuity with its past.²⁰ The Civil Rights Movement appears to fit all of these criteria, indicating that there would be an increased demand for a stronger sense of identity and connection with the past in its aftermath. These factors come into play when we examine the preservation and manipulation of Civil Rights memory through the popular culture mediums of film and museums. National identity then requires being conscious of the nation's heritage and thinking it unique. Heritage is what differentiates us from every one else, and we tend to treasure most what sets us apart.²¹ The continued focus on the American West, the concept of the frontier, in popular literature and film highlights this point. The expansion of the frontier is one of the things that distinguishes America from other nations. America is unique in the manner of being settled through a constantly changing frontier. Going all the way back to Frederick Jackson Turner, the idea of the frontier has been utilized to define the heritage of America. It is not the frontier in and of itself that stands out, but rather it is what makes America unique. The popularity of Western genre films over a century after the real frontier was officially closed also demonstrates the appeal of a collective sense of the past, and one that is distinctively American. Despite this popularity, no Englishman or Frenchman can claim association with the frontier heritage through exposure to its recollection in celluloid. This is ultimately what distinguishes heritage from history. In order for it to serve as a collective symbol, heritage must be "widely accepted by insiders yet inaccessible to outsiders."²²

The notion of preserving aspects of the past and commemorating that past in public monuments and rituals can be traced back beyond the Egyptians' mummification of the Pharaohs and the creation of the Pyramids. Societies clearly understand the importance of preserving certain aspects of the past and assuring that passage into collective memory. The early fairy tales and stories of folklore were a way of orally maintaining the memory of certain events or people. Collective memory then can be passed from one generation to the next and adapted to accommodate the changing times. Interestingly, in Swahili communities people who have died

²⁰ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 618.

²¹ Lowenthal, "Identity, Heritage, and History," 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 49.

but still have people who remember them are known as the ‘living-dead.’ A person is only considered truly dead when there is no one alive who remembers them. This tradition of preservation and remembrance demonstrates the acknowledgement of the importance of the past.²³

In modern America, this recognition of the need to preserve the past also exists. The National Trust for Historical Preservation was established by the federal government in the late 1940s in order to preserve aspects of America’s history and make it accessible to the viewing public. The National Trust is today responsible for the upkeep and display of historical homes as well as sites of significant historical interest. They also work with education projects in order to present this version of the American past to the nation, in an attempt to formulate both collective identity and collective memory of a shared past.²⁴

As we have seen, memory is not a stagnant concept. It is an evolving entity, influenced by a range of both internal and external factors, and responds to the changing social and political times. Studies contend that memory is controlled and manipulated in order to preserve and validate the present social order, but as that social order itself changes, so will the collective memory have to adapt to support this change. This is particularly true after the 1960s when America was adjusting to radical challenges in the social order. Although we will focus on the impact and construction of memory with regard to the African American challenge to the existing order, this challenge also occurred at this time from women’s groups, Hispanics, and Native Americans, among others. The 1960s were an era of great social and political change, and it is thus unsurprising that commemorations and constructs of memory will undergo significant evolution to accommodate this change.

While it may still be argued that national memory is shaped by the power elite, more attention has been placed in recent years not only on including minority groups in the collective remembrance process but also on the ways in which these groups have negotiated the construction of a new collective memory. In her study of the American bicentennial celebrations in 1976, Lyn Spillman shows the change that had occurred from the centennial festivities, in terms of both minority group involvement as well as the conscious efforts made to include many previously excluded memories, when trying to project a national identity from what was designed to be a

²³ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 195.

²⁴ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 621.

unifying event. Due to fears from some political and celebration leaders that current political divisions in America would result in a failure for the bicentennial, organizers went to great lengths to try to accommodate the opinions of many social groups. The hope was that the celebration of the founding of the nation would bring all the different ethnic and social groups together, but the political climate made it increasingly important not to ostracize the views and recollections of groups not traditionally represented when recalling the nation's past.

Bicentennial organizers met with youth activists, feminists, and representatives of ethnic and racial minority groups. In particular, ethnic and racial groups were singled out as being groups whose history must be approached with sensitivity and caution when trying to celebrate it as part of the national past. The achievements of these groups had to be recognized while at the same time acknowledging their exploitation and persecution at the hands of the white majority.²⁵

Yet the bicentennial was not to be a venue for America to come to terms with the less than admirable aspects of its past with the whole world watching. In 1975 a large organization entitled the "Bicentennial Ethnic and Racial Conference" was established to liaise between the organizers and minority group leaders in an attempt to find a consensus over the depiction and commemoration of their role in shaping the nation's history.²⁶ Projects initiated to commemorate the bicentennial included a forum on the contributions of black women to American history and society, a booklet on African American political involvement in the US Congress, and the erection of a sculpture of Martin Luther King Jr. in the courthouse in Dallas. The nation was therefore responding, whether sufficiently or appropriately, to the changing social order, with at least some Americans conscious of the need to find a place for the memories of these groups within the collective remembrance of a national celebration.²⁷

In the period surrounding the bicentennial the federal government did respond to an extent to the growing interest and call for recognition of the history of racial minorities and its influence on developing the nation's identity. In 1972 the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act was passed by Congress to provide financial assistance for enhancing educational programs in ethnic studies. As a result of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the number and popularity of African American studies courses and departments had increased in many major US colleges. The Ethnic Heritage Studies Act was designed to support those existing programs and initiate other

²⁵ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

educational efforts to cater to elementary and high school students.²⁸ In keeping with the attempt to focus greater attention on the history of minority groups and its impact on the collective whole, the National Museum of American History in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC created an exhibit entitled “The Right to Vote.” Opened in 1972 the temporary exhibit contained flags, posters, and other materials from the voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama and the subsequent Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Smithsonian chose to display a very recent event in the nation’s past and one that was within the overall collective memory, both black and white. Though responding to them in different ways, most adult Americans could recall seeing images of the events on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which prompted the passage of the act to secure African American voting rights. Though an important event in African American memory, the experience was understood sufficiently by a large proportion of the population to have been absorbed into the national collective memory, and it is to this unified commemoration of the past that the Smithsonian Institute appealed.²⁹

As mentioned, the bicentennial played an important role in highlighting African American history. Several cities used funds from the bicentennial to promote the establishment of African American museums. According to an article in the *Bicentennial Times*, published for the occasion, “The sufferings and contributions of American Blacks were highlighted in new museums, exhibitions... on a scale that reached virtually every interested American.”³⁰ The key phrase in this assessment may be “every interested American,” as such museums and exhibits did not achieve universal popularity or support from the communities in which they were located. What this does demonstrate, however, was that parts of the nation, at least, were responding to the vast social changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement and the need to commemorate these events in order to ease their adoption into the national memory. The importance of museums educating about and commemorating the history of the Civil Rights Movement will be returned to when discussing the representation of the movement in popular culture and the impact of this on collective memory.

It follows logically that since memory is constructed and can be manipulated as a recollection of the past by social and political elites, so memory can be used to foster patriotic

²⁸ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 616.

²⁹ James Oliver Horton and Spencer R. Crew, “Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a Policy of Inclusion,” in *History Museums in the United States; A Critical Assessment*, eds. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 222.

³⁰ Quoted in Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 128.

needs. As we cling to a heritage that distinguishes us as unique, patriotic memory is popular as a method to create a distinct national identity. Much of the commemoration in contemporary America is designed to foster patriotism. The adverse side of this, of course, is how to commemorate events that do not show the nation and its history in the best light. This is a demonstration of the fact that what we are encouraged to forget can often be as, if not more, important than what we are encouraged to remember.

On August 6, 1945, the United States B-29 bomber, the *Enola Gay*, dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. It was the first use of atomic power in combat and was designed to hasten the end of the war in the Pacific. In 1994, in preparation for the 50th Anniversary of the end of the war, the National Air Space Museum, part of the Smithsonian Institute, planned to display the *Enola Gay* within an exhibit on the issue of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It sought to re-evaluate the circumstances surrounding the events, to question whether this was the only way to bring an early end to the conflict in the Pacific and to avoid a large-scale invasion of the Japanese islands which would have cost hundreds of thousands of American, not to mention Japanese, lives. For years prior to the proposal of this exhibit veterans groups had called for the museum to either restore the *Enola Gay* and display it or to loan it to another institution for it to be displayed.³¹ The *Enola Gay* had fallen into disrepair after being stored in a warehouse for twenty years. In beginning the process of exhibiting the *Enola Gay*, the National Air and Space Museum was responding to the demands of veterans for recognition in the national memory.

The proposed exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, however, did not correspond to the way many veterans imagined the display. It placed the aircraft at the heart of a debate on the morality of the decision to drop the bomb, whether it was necessary or justified. The prevailing public view of World War II was that of the “good war”. Perhaps solidified after the ambiguities of Korea and Vietnam, World War II was seen as “a noble struggle against forces that threatened not only Western values but the survival of civilization itself.”³² A challenge to whether US actions at the end of the war were justified thus undermined the perception of America as the liberating power, fighting for justice. When details of the proposed Smithsonian exhibit were released, it met

³¹ Richard Kohn, “History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institutions Enola Gay Exhibition,” *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995) : 1040.

³²Paul Boyer, “Whose History is it Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 118.

outrage from many politicians and veterans groups. They argued that the *Enola Gay* exhibition was disrespectful to all the US troops who lost their lives in the war against Japan and all veterans of the Second World War and subsequent conflicts. Veterans believed that the anniversary should be a celebration of American values and the nation's present position as the leader of the free world. In challenging the decision to drop an atomic bomb, the critics argued, the National Air and Space Museum was doing an unpatriotic disservice to all those who had supported the ideals of the American nation. Those Americans who opposed the display of the *Enola Gay* seemed to believe that the criteria for honest commemoration that they applied to other nations did not apply for its own anniversary celebrations. "The irony that Americans have so harshly criticised other nations - notably Japan - for being unable to confront the complexities and ambiguities of their history was largely lost on those who opposed the Smithsonian and its exhibition."³³

In January 1995 the Smithsonian, after several rewritings of the display script failed to achieve a suitable compromise, decided to cancel the *Enola Gay* exhibit. Michael Heyman, Smithsonian secretary, explained the museum's position. "In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke."³⁴ Heyman also believed that the commemoration of the anniversary of the end of the war was incompatible with an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons.³⁵ The *Enola Gay* was eventually displayed with very little description and without a surrounding exhibit. Certain aspects of American society was clearly not ready to confront the possibility that US actions in the Pacific were not the noble ones that they had been led to believe. Before the decision to drop the atomic bomb was made, in fact, most military leaders in secret deliberations had questioned the wisdom or necessity of its use on Japan's cities, though they eventually supported that use. It was a complex decision at the time, and questions of justifiability were raised. Even after the war, a number of these leaders stated, often publicly, their reservations about the bomb's use. Those politicians and military leaders who did speak out about the decision to drop the bomb after the war did so "without

³³ Edward T. Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," in *History Wars; The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 62.

³⁴ Boyer, "Whose History is it Anyway?", 139.

³⁵ Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars," 1058.

suffering condemnation as traitors to a patriotic cause.”³⁶ Clearly something had changed in the fifty years after the event to demonize any person, or group, who would try to question whether the use of the atomic bomb against Japan was politically or morally justified.

War has traditionally been a time that unites a nation against external foes. In the nationalist fervor that ensues, there is little place for criticism of the nation’s actions. This has been used to construct the national collective memory in simplistic terms. It places good against bad, morality against evil. It appeals on a level that is accessible and understandable by all. As memory can be constructed and manipulated to suit a particular purpose, so memory of the Second World War had been formulated to unify a sense of the national identity. “The United States government, like other national governments in the last two centuries, has used the memory of war to construct the identity and to build the cohesion of the modern nation-state.”³⁷ This official memory, seized upon by politicians and veterans groups alike, controls the perception of the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It has, in a sense, rewritten this history, removing any debate over its necessity and justification. After the controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibition, the proponents of this official memory appear to have won, and “In their new mythology, not only was the decision to use atomic bombs beyond questioning in retrospect, it had not been questioned at the time.”³⁸ The debate over the *Enola Gay* illustrates that there still is a conflict over control of the American past. The focus has always been on the *Enola Gay*, as demonstrated by this controversy, when looking at the end to the war in the Pacific. “The American narrative almost invariable ends with Hiroshima, as the fixation on the *Enola Gay* reveals. (Who remembers the name of the B-29 that dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki?)”³⁹ This may be because arguments of justification for Hiroshima wear a little thin when discussing Nagasaki, as it took place only 3 days later, allowing little time for the Japanese government to realize what had happened and engage in peace negotiations. The contest over the *Enola Gay* raised questions over “who controlled American culture, who valued the American past, who deserved mention within it, and who controlled any federal action that touched on such

³⁶ Michael S. Sherry, “Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline,” in *History Wars; The Enola Gay and Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996) , 101.

³⁷ Kohn, “History and the Culture Wars,” 1061.

³⁸ Sherry, “Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline,” 101.

³⁹ John W. Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” in *History Wars; The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996) , 78.

matters.”⁴⁰ It also, unfortunately, raised questions about the honesty and motivations of the critics, who seemed not to know (or acknowledge) that the Japanese military and government were determined, even after Nagasaki, to fight on and that even after Hirohito had intervened to force a decision to end the war, an army coup designed to overthrow him came very close to succeeding. All of this hardly fits the critic’s picture of a Japan meekly waiting to surrender that was viciously and unjustifiably bombed by the US. Immediately after the cancellation of the Smithsonian exhibit, the newly installed Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, spoke to the nation’s state governors. He declared that the “*Enola Gay* fight was a fight, in effect, over the reassertion by most Americans that they’re sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country.”⁴¹ Like many others, Gingrich believed that in questioning the circumstances of the dropping of the atomic bomb, ordinary Americans were being invited to question their role in the collective national guilt.

Japan has also struggled to deal with this event. As the US has focused on Pearl Harbor to justify the later events of the war, until recently Japanese commemoration has focused on itself as victim. The Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima presented a subjective recollection of the horrors of World War II. There was no mention of the Rape of Nanking, the Bataan Death March, or Pearl Harbor. Japan has struggled to confront the events that provoked action against it, resulting in criticism from the US, which has clearly found it difficult to face its own wartime actions.⁴² America has in some ways been an enabler to Japan in failing to confront its past. American authorities in post-war, occupied Japan, primarily for reasons of political expediency, chose to absolve Emperor Hirohito of any moral or legal responsibility for Japanese wartime actions.⁴³ Japan has thus struggled to locate its national guilt in these events. It experienced a similar incident of cultural censorship that America did with regard to the *Enola Gay* exhibit. In June 1996 the newly opened Atomic Bombing Museum in Nagasaki was forced to remove a photograph of the Nanking massacre of 1937-8, which provoked outrage from Japanese nationalists for insinuating that Japan as not an innocent victim of World War II.⁴⁴ Clearly, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has struggled to be absorbed into the

⁴⁰ Sherry, “Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline,” 107-8.

⁴¹ Kohn, “History and the Culture Wars,” 1056.

⁴² Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁴ Albert Boime, *The Unveiling of the National Icons – A Plea for Patriotic Iconoclasm in a Nationalist Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15.

national collective identities of both the US and Japan, and both nations have exerted controls of cultural censorship in order to manipulate the event into the pre-existing national collective memory.

The public commemoration of the Vietnam War offers a good example of the way that America has sought to construct the collective memory of an event and to adapt it into the national identity. American losses in Vietnam and protests over US involvement in the war pose complex issues of commemoration. Vietnam is remembered for American deaths in a far off land for reasons much of the public could not understand, rather than the noble struggle for civilization that has been documented regarding US involvement in the Second World War. How, then, to create a fitting public memorial to an event that divided much of the nation was a challenge faced by the proponents of a Vietnam War monument on the mall in Washington DC.

The Vietnam War was, until 1982, the only US conflict that had not received some form of official commemoration. No representative of US troops in Vietnam was placed in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as had been done with other wars, to symbolize all those Americans who died who would never be returned to the US for burial. Public monuments to World War II and the Korean War had been erected in the aftermath of those conflicts, yet Vietnam seemed to defy an answer to suitable commemoration. It appeared to be a time that many preferred to forget had happened, rather than confront America's ambiguous actions in a war that took thousands of US lives and proved extremely unpopular with certain segments of the nation. It was a Vietnam veteran, Jan Scruggs, who led the call for there to be a public recognition for the sacrifices made by all those who served in Vietnam. Veterans groups had felt shunned since their arrival home to condemnation and accusations of brutality, rather than a heroes' welcome. The lack of official commemoration compounded this view of being forgotten by the nation for which they believed they had been fighting. In order to create a monument to Vietnam, America would have to reassess the war's position in the construction of national identity.

To locate an appropriate memorial to the Vietnam War a design competition was established in order to attract different ideas and perceptions on how best to commemorate the conflict. The competition was the largest of its kind ever held in the United States, attracting 2,573 registrants and 1,421 final entries. Clearly something about constructing a memorial that would shape the public conception of the war appealed to people's creative forces.⁴⁵ The chosen

⁴⁵ Ibid., 312.

design for the memorial came from Maya Ying Lin, a twenty-one year old under-graduate student at Yale University of Chinese descent. Much was made of Lin's ethnic origin and that being a woman thus excluded her from the masculine world of the veterans, which cast her as an outsider to the interests of the Vietnam war commemoration. Architecture critic Michael Sorkin believes that "Perhaps only an outsider could have designed an environment so successful in answering the need for recognition by a group of people – the Vietnam vets- who are plagued by a sense of 'otherness' forced on them by a country that has spent ten years pretending not to see them."⁴⁶ Though her design was controversial to many, and critics disputed its status as a war memorial at all, on November 11, 1982, seven years after the last American troops had died in Vietnam, the Vietnam Memorial was dedicated in an official ceremony by President Ronald Reagan.⁴⁷

Maya Lin's design comprised two black granite wall placed in a V-shape, set deep into the ground at an angle of 125 degrees, so that they did not enter the skyline between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. On these walls were inscribed the names of the 58,132 US troops who died in Vietnam in chronological order, starting with the earliest at the inner side of one wall and continuing round so that the first and last names meet at the point of the V-shape. Those who died were identified purely by their names, with no ranks given nor any other individualizing markers such as membership in a specific military service, or place of civilian residence. "Much of the social conflict surrounding the Vietnam Memorial... focused on how to commemorate the persons who served and died without validating the political purposes of the war."⁴⁸ In one sense the memorial individualizes and personalizes the conflict by reducing it to a list of names, while at the same time removing any values of status or origin with which American society identifies.⁴⁹ In her discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Maria Sturken argues that "the black walls of the memorial act as screens for innumerable projections of memory and history – of the United States participation in the Vietnam War and of the experience of the Vietnam veterans since the war – while they screen out the narrative of defeat in preparing for wars to come."⁵⁰ The granite on the wall was polished so as to reflect the image of the persons viewing it and in "seeing their own images in the names, they are thus implicated in the

⁴⁶ Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Representations* 35 (Summer 1991) : 124.

⁴⁷ Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (September 1991) : 378.

⁴⁸ James M. Mayo, "War Memorials as Political Memory," *Geographical Review* 78 (January 1988) : 74.

⁴⁹ Wagner-Pacifici, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," 400.

⁵⁰ Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image," 118.

listing of the dead.”⁵¹ Along with the list of names, the monument encouraged personal commemoration, even though it was intended as a public monument. “The need to face the wall and the mingled effect of names and mirrored image help structure a solitary feeling even when experienced within a crowd. This stimulus to *private* reflection makes the memorial unique in its manifestation as *public* monument.”⁵²

The design of the Vietnam Memorial differed from many war monuments that use height as a display of dominance over the landscape, and thus a sign of victory, of conquering everything around it. Maya Lin conceded that her memorial differed from the “world of phallic memorials that rise upward.”⁵³ Traditionally masculinity is linked with heroism and strength, but this tradition was severely weakened by defeat in war. Lin’s memorial was thus not a display of manhood. Some critics have even drawn attention to what they regard as the female sensibility the V-shape of the monument evokes, which to them is not a symbol of pride and victory. According to some assessment there is “a disconcerting subtext in which the memorial implicitly evokes castration. The V of the two black granite walls has also been read as a female V, reminding us that a ‘gash’ is not only a wound but slang for the female genitals.”⁵⁴ This issue was the subject of great contention, as many opponents of the memorial believed that it should focus on the patriotic spirit of all those listed on the monument. To them, it is significant that it is called the Vietnam Memorial, rather than a War Monument, and in the display of names, commemorates the soldier, not the cause for which they fought. Critics argued that this was in essence, an unpatriotic commemoration, undermining the values for which these troops fought and died. Yet Vietnam had provoked such controversy that it could not easily be manipulated into the existing national identity. Rather, it existed outside of it, as a constant reminder of the failings of a nation that dedicated young men could not overcome, in life or in death. “The traditional definition of national identity, in which America always fought fairly and honourably against evil aggression, probably can never be recovered, only replaced. The nature of that replacement is what the struggle over how to remember Vietnam...has been all about.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵² Boime, *The Unveiling of the National Icons*, 312.

⁵³ Wagner –Pacifci, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” 397.

⁵⁴ Sturken, “The Wall, the Screen, and the Image,” 123.

⁵⁵ Marilyn B. Young, “Dangerous History: Vietnam and the “Good War”,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 208.

Leading critics of Lin's memorial were concerned that the way her monument symbolized the Vietnam War would be the way it was absorbed into collective memory. To them the memorial focused on death and individuals and had an air of pointlessness about it. As the memorial failed to make a clear statement about the war, it represented a nation that would always be divided by Vietnam. Arguing that whereas history can be re-evaluated, one leading contemporary opponent of Lin's design contended that "a piece of art remains, as a testimony to a particular moment in history, and we are under a solemn obligation to get that moment down as correctly as possible."⁵⁶ Those who opposed the memorial's unheroism and unpatriotism were ultimately able to influence the construction of this memory through two additions to Lin's original walls. Designed by realist sculptor Frederick Hart a statue of three American servicemen, still in uniform, faces the walls with the men appearing to be looking at the names. Designed to represent the troops who served in Vietnam, the life size figures depict a white soldier, an African American, and a soldier of ambiguous ethnicity. "Their military garb is realistically rendered, with guns slung over their shoulders and ammunition around their waists, and their expressions are somewhat bewildered and puzzled."⁵⁷ A large US flag has also been erected next to the monument, changing it into more of a site of celebration, than one of commemoration. This distortion of the intention of the original memorial met with condemnation from Jan Scruggs, who had served on the committee to select a design and raised funds for its construction. He argued that those who had been critical of the memorial and supportive of these patriotic additions "wanted the Memorial to make Vietnam what it had never been in reality: a good, clean, glorious war seen as necessary and supported by the united country."⁵⁸ Clearly, public memorials symbolize not only how the present society remembers the past, but serve as a battleground for those trying to manipulate commemoration and foster a perception of history that can be consciously constructed into the national collective memory. In his examination of the function of war memorials, James M. Mayo poses the question "Do war memorials provide sanctuaries from the present by idealizing the past through commemoration?"⁵⁹

Public monuments and memorials to history, therefore, play a key role in constructing and reflecting the position of that history within the individual and national conscious. With public

⁵⁶ Wagner-Pacifici, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," 395.

⁵⁷ Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image," 125.

⁵⁸ Wagner-Pacifici, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," 395.

⁵⁹ Mayo, "War Memorials as Political Memory," 70.

commemoration, it often falls to the social and political powers rather than historians to define the events of history and the contemporary response to them. “What is remembered about the past depends on the way it is represented, which has more to do with the present power of groups to fashion its image than with the ability of historians to evoke its memory.”⁶⁰ Whatever memory they try to construct or positions they try to convey, however, the designers and instigators of memorials play an unsurprisingly small role in deciding how that memorial will be adapted into the national identity. Ultimately, it is the people who view these monuments and their response to them, that will shape the public commemoration. Each person who visits the memorial brings their own set of values and experiences through which they will interpret the memorial. Albert Boime, in his study of the construction of national icons, claims “The national monuments function like filters that let through only meanings that belong to our set of ideological predisposition.”⁶¹ The Vietnam memorial is an excellent example of the public construction of national memory. In spite of criticism of the nature of the monument, and that it invites shame rather than celebration, it has proved popular with those who visit it. More than 2.5 million people visit the Vietnam Memorial every year and between 1,100 and 1,500 reunions of various kinds occur there annually. Ultimately the meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is defined by the way people behave in reference to it.⁶² It is testament to the complex nature of public commemoration and its impact on the collective memory that “the least prestigious war in American history, the war fought and remembered with the most controversy, is precisely the one whose monument is most revered and most often visited.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1993), 6.

⁶¹ Boime, *The Unveiling of the National Icons*, 7.

⁶² Wagner-Pacifici, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” 402.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 416.

CHAPTER 2

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE LOST CAUSE

In the years immediately following the end of the Civil War, there was much debate over public commemorations, as well as what the enduring legacy of the conflict should be. The memory of the Civil War underwent various changes from 1865 to the 1880s, with different groups attempting to manipulate public memory in order to advance their concerns. The former slave and outspoken abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, understood the importance of controlling how the war was remembered in the public consciousness. African Americans had recently experienced rapid social change, at a time when the nation was still tending the wounds of this internally divisive conflict. Douglass realized that he must act quickly and vocally if he were to have any influence over the creation of Civil War memory. Douglass sought to maintain the distinction between those who fought for the Union and those who had tried to tear it apart. At a Memorial Day address in 1878 in Madison Square Garden, New York, Douglass asserted that “there was a right side and a wrong side in the late war, which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget.”⁶⁴ Though this appears a rather simplistic statement, already during the era of Reconstruction growing sentiment emphasized remembering the bravery and commitment with which each soldier fought, rather than the issues for which they fought. Douglass campaigned to make the issues and values that provoked the war a central part of its public remembrance, and though he lost this struggle his rhetoric was a significant aspect of the late nineteenth century debate over the legacy of the Civil War.⁶⁵

Civil War veterans’ reunions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century seemed to adhere to this emerging non-ideological interpretation of the conflict that commemorated the sacrifices of the soldiers who fought. Gaines M. Foster points out that reunions organized by the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) did not bring together specific units or regiments but were open to all who had worn the gray and wished to attend. The bringing together of men who were essentially strangers, therefore, meant that “their sense of community rested less on personal

⁶⁴ Thomas Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration; A Brief History With Documents*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 42.

⁶⁵ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield – Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 96, 100.

familiarity and shared experiences and more on a common memory of the war.”⁶⁶ This highlighted the importance of forging a collective identity out of the war by establishing a particular version of the Civil War legacy in the collective memory of the south, and ultimately the nation as a whole. Confederate veterans’ reunions served important social functions in the context of the emerging New South. They helped to heal the wounds of defeat and come to terms with the changes that defeat wrought, as well as providing a social model of an ordered, deferential, conservative society.⁶⁷

In trying to deal with the changing social values in the New South, many veterans and politicians waxed nostalgic about the Old South. Calm, sedate plantation life with little social upheaval or conflict formed the basis of this romanticized view, later popularized by Margaret Mitchell in her novel *Gone with the Wind*. “To the extent that our memory of the Civil War is shaped by literary and cinematic fiction, the war is still understood as a moral victory for “Old South” values and principles.”⁶⁸ The great success of Mitchell’s book along with the lasting popularity of the film adaptation highlights both the continuing public identification with this romanticized view and the “apparently impossible task of rooting out comfortable myths without profound social upheaval.”⁶⁹ This idealized view of the South superseded the concepts that people such as Frederick Douglass had tried to make part of the Civil War legacy.

After the end of the Civil War, Confederate Memorial Day, also referred to as Decoration Day, came to be celebrated throughout the South. Memorial Day celebrations became widespread in the North as well, as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) began sponsoring the day in 1868. On May 5 of that year GAR Commander-in-Chief General John Logan issued a general order that designated May 30 as a national Memorial Day, for the purpose of placing flowers on the graves of the fallen soldiers. Within a year thirty-one states had mandated the holiday, though celebrations remained distinct between North and South.⁷⁰ In the North, Memorial Day was led by men, whereas women led the celebrations in the South. During the Reconstruction period in the defeated South it was perhaps less threatening to have women engaged in the commemoration

⁶⁶ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy – Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) , 133.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁸ Richard Slotkin, ““What Shall Men Remember?” Recent Work on the Civil War,” *American Literary History* 3 (Spring 1991) : 132-3.

⁶⁹ Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed – A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (Montgomery, Alabama: New South Books, 2002) , 231.

⁷⁰ Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days; An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) , 221.

efforts rather than have them become masculine rituals as they did in the North. In the 1890s southern women organized themselves into chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) to oversee rites of remembrance.⁷¹ The date of the Confederate Memorial Day initially varied, but by 1916 ten southern states had designated June 3, the date of Jefferson Davis's birthday, as their day of celebration and remembrance.⁷²

Most Southern towns organized a memorial to the sacrifice of the Confederate troops. In the early post-war years these were rather sombre affairs. Townspeople gathered to lay wreaths on the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers and to honor those veterans still living. By the early 1880s Confederate Memorial Day had become a more joyful occasion. The day became a celebration of the cause for which the Confederacy fought and of the traditional southern way of life and its social values. In keeping with the growing myth of the Lost Cause, events celebrated the war and mourned for Confederate dead.⁷³

By the turn-of-the-century the major theme of Memorial Day addresses was one of national conciliation, as "Memorial Day celebrations – formalized community happenings, often culminating in town parades and speeches at local Civil War cemeteries – produced potentially powerful and even spiritually elevated moments in which Americans drew distinct meaning from the past."⁷⁴ In the mid-1870s, under the auspices of reconciliation, joint Decoration Day ceremonies emerged, with Federal troops in the South joining in commemorations to honor the southern dead, and southern women placing flowers on Union as well as Confederate graves.⁷⁵ Furthering this renewed relationship during the 1890s Arlington National Cemetery, in Washington DC, created a special Confederate burial area and over the next decade the federal government became committed to the care of Confederate graves in the North.⁷⁶

The evolution of the commemoration of Confederate Memorial Day can also be evidenced in the style of monuments built after 1886. As the number of memorials increased, over sixty percent of these new monuments featured a Confederate soldier rather than a traditional funeral design.⁷⁷ This trend continued until the 1920s, with the statue of the "soldier at rest" accounting

⁷¹ Ibid., 224.

⁷² Ibid., 223.

⁷³ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 128.

⁷⁴ John Pettegrew, "The Soldier's Faith": Turn-of-the-Century Memory of the Civil War and the Emergence of Modern American Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (January 1996) : 50.

⁷⁵ Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 225.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁷⁷ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 129.

for over eighty percent of all known single-figure monuments.⁷⁸ Confederate celebrations underwent further change with the advent of the twentieth-century. By this time, commercial concerns had begun to feature in the celebrations. Floats in the annual Confederates Day parades garnered the sponsorship of local businesses and were no longer solely dependent on the United Daughters of the Confederacy or other veterans' organizations. Monument companies had become more aggressive and influential and financially rewarded towns that could supply them with the name of another town or organization that was considering commissioning a public monument. Confederate memory had suddenly become big business.⁷⁹

Despite the weight of rhetoric and commemoration to the contrary, Frederick Douglass persisted in his effort to have the war remembered in terms of issues and the termination of immoral practices in American society. It was only in that way, he argued, that the evil conditions of slavery would remain linked to the war in the national memory. Losing sight of the issues of the war, he feared, would mean the loss of a place in the American collective identity for newly-freed African Americans, many of whom had fought for the freedom of their race in the African American regiments of the Union forces. After Reconstruction ended in the South, Douglass had lost the battle to define Civil War memory, and he abhorred the prevailing commemoration that cast all sides as winners and focused on the displays of masculine power and determination exhibited by both sides.⁸⁰

By the early twentieth century, however, this non-ideological view seemed firmly embedded in the national consciousness. The fiftieth commemoration of the Battle of Gettysburg, held in 1913, brought together thousands of Union and Confederate veterans from across the nation. Any veteran who wished to attend had their transportation covered, either by their state or from federal funds allocated for the reunion. The veterans were housed in huge tent cities, where former Union and Confederate soldiers mixed freely and reminisced about the role they had played in the battle. President Wilson, the first Southern President since Reconstruction, though initially reluctant to attend, gave his Gettysburg address as Abraham Lincoln had done half a century earlier. He commented favorably on seeing a mix of blue and gray in the crowd and contended that the anniversary celebrations were a demonstration of how far the nation had come

⁷⁸ Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration*, 35.

⁷⁹ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 167.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

in reuniting in fifty years.⁸¹ Wilson expressed to the assembled crowd the key idea that “We have found one another again as brothers and comrades in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten – except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other’s eyes.”⁸² Little was made of the issues of the war: secession and states’ rights, or slavery and emancipation. Black regiments were not deployed at Gettysburg and as a result few black veterans attended. In discussing the overall legacy of the war, moreover, little mention was made about the role that African Americans played in the conflict. This was an aspect of the war that all sides seemed content to write out of Civil War memory. The celebrations of the Gettysburg semi-centennial followed a trend of reunions that had begun in the 1880s and continued into the early twentieth century. This type of memorial celebrated courage and valour on both sides and gave mutual respect between Union and Confederate soldiers a place in national memory.”⁸³

Along with the celebration of soldierly valor, another strand in the post war reshaping of the collective southern identity must also be mentioned. The notion of the Lost Cause began to be popularized in the South even before the last soldier had left the battlefield. The promulgation of this myth enabled the South to deal with its defeat, as well as find solace in a traditional way of life. By participating in the Lost Cause rituals southerners tried to show that the Confederate sacrifices had not been in vain.⁸⁴ Significantly, the Lost Cause also rejected the location of Federal troops in the South and the policy of Reconstruction with its attempts to secure racial equality in the so-called ‘New South.’ The appeal of the Lost Cause increased during the 1880s and reached the level of a “highly ritualized civil religion.”⁸⁵ Southern preachers who had been soldiers or chaplains in the Confederate army became the key celebrants of the Lost Cause religion after the war.⁸⁶ The Lost Cause allowed ex-Confederates to memorialize the sacrifices of the war and ignore the political issues that surrounded secession. The construction of an alternative version of history in the Lost Cause “allowed white southerners in the post-

⁸¹ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 139.

⁸² Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration*, 21.

⁸³ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 103.

⁸⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920,” *Journal of Southern History* 46 (May 1980) : 228.

⁸⁵ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood – The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) , 100.

⁸⁶ Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause”, 220.

Reconstruction era to form a collective identity as victims and survivors.”⁸⁷ It aided the creation of a public memory and regional identity that made the South unique.

In his examination of the Lost Cause, Charles Reagan Wilson discusses its function as a part of the religious tradition in the South and the creation of Confederate memory.⁸⁸ The Lost Cause tradition was crucial in sustaining southern identity as well as providing for a return to conventional social and racial values in the New South. As the Lost Cause became an accepted part of southern collective identity, the Ku Klux Klan emerged as the guardians of this memory. The KKK of the 1860s was a popular but short-lived phenomenon; however, it re-emerged in 1915 as a reaction to changing immigration patterns and expanded across the South and the Midwest. The Klan received support anywhere the white population felt threatened from perceived outside influences. With their white hooded robes and night time rides through black communities, the Klan provoked fear in blacks and helped maintain an orderly, conservative society. With their secret meetings and undisclosed rituals, the Klan represented the “mystical wing” of the Lost Cause.⁸⁹ The contention was that blacks did not know how to deal with the responsibility of freedom and needed someone to look after them, much as the alleged benevolent slave-master had done with the slave in the antebellum era. Wilson asserts that the Lost Cause did, in fact, become ingrained in southern religion. Traditionally, “Southern Protestant churches have been sparse in iconography, but the southern civil religion was rich in images.” Ministers portrayed Confederate leaders such as Robert E. Lee, “Stonewall” Jackson, and Jefferson Davis as religious saints and martyrs.⁹⁰ St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, which had been the wartime place of worship for many of the Confederate leaders, created a memorial window to Robert E. Lee which used an Egyptian scene to connect the Confederacy with the redemptive stories of the Old Testament.⁹¹

Along with the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, the Lost Cause celebrated the alleged superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks. The Lost Cause focused on the supposed loyalty of slaves before and during the Civil War as evidence of the positive nature of slavery. In keeping with the paternalist notion of protecting freed blacks from their overindulgence of freedom and liberty, focusing on the loyalty of slaves allowed for both the control of blacks in the present and

⁸⁷ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 155.

⁸⁸ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁰ Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause”, 223.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

the propagation of the romanticized image of the harmonious nature of the antebellum South. The concept of loyal slaves maintained the positive image of slavery, of benevolent plantation-owners and happy, singing field slaves. It confirmed to many subscribers to the Lost Cause religion that the South was, and remained, virtuous in its treatment of blacks, both free and slave, and thus was innocent of the outlandish claims made by northern abolitionists, as well as being a victim of unwarranted northern hostility and aggression. At the turn of the century this sentiment had matured to the point that some Confederate groups even began to debate the question of building a monument to the slave's loyalty during the war.⁹²

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), and to a lesser extent the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), played a crucial role in preserving the Confederate tradition in southern memory and thus supporting the civil religion of the Lost Cause. These groups were often more committed to the idea of Civil War commemoration than the veterans themselves. The UDC did much of the organizing of the veterans' reunions in the South and worked to retain Confederate history as part of the collective public identity. The UDC supported the romanticized image of the plantation Old South, and alongside the SCV worked to create the faithful-slave myth in Southern collective memory. The UDC also pledged \$1000 for the erection of a monument to the loyal slave.⁹³ With contributions from the SCV and other veterans groups, a memorial to the faithful slave was erected at Harpers Ferry in 1931. Known as the Heyward Shepard Memorial, it commemorated a black slave who, while working as a night watchman at Harpers Ferry, refused to join John Brown's raid on the town. It was intended to represent all the slaves who had taken care of the plantations while their masters had been away, as well as those who had travelled with their masters while they fought for the Confederate cause.⁹⁴ The inscription on the monument celebrated the thousands of black slaves who conducted themselves faithfully and with great character against temptation and years of wars, so that "no stain was left upon a record which is the peculiar heritage of the American people and an everlasting tribute to the best in both races."⁹⁵

The erection of monuments and memorials to the Civil War has been a prominent feature of both Union and Confederate commemoration rituals. In the South more towns dedicated

⁹² Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 105.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁴ Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White – Race, Commemoration, and the Post Bellum Landscape* (New York, Oxford: Alta Mira Press, 2003), 178.

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 106.

monuments to Civil War memory between 1886 and 1889 than had been done in the first twenty years after the war.⁹⁶ Led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the next generation became more committed to preserving this constructed legacy of the Civil War, and making it a prominent aspect of southern collective identity, than many who had fought in the war itself. Fitzhugh Brundage examines the enduring popularity of memorials in terms of solidifying the particular event in the collective memory. He argues that memories are transitory. They evolve over time, placing emphasis first on one aspect of an event and later on another. What is important to one generation may have no relevance to the next. As a response to this constantly evolving collective memory, people yearn to make their particular memories permanent by rendering them in physical form. By preserving their memories in stone, people attempt to ensure that they become entrenched in the collective identity. Brundage contends that by erecting monuments or marking sacred places, “groups anchor their memories in space and time.”⁹⁷

The primary Union monument to the Civil War in the late nineteenth century was the Freedman’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln. Located in Washington DC, the monument had been commissioned and paid for almost entirely by African Americans. It was designed to celebrate an important landmark in the history of blacks in America: their liberation from slavery. Supported by Frederick Douglass, this memorial can be seen as an attempt to preserve the issues of the war in the nation’s collective memory. In his speech at the unveiling of the Freedman’s Memorial on April 14, 1876, Frederick Douglass contended that the monument was not only to Lincoln but to “the *fact* of emancipation.”⁹⁸ Although he publicly supported it at the time of its unveiling, Douglass later admitted that he was not in favor of the monument as it depicted the slave on his knees before the upright Lincoln.⁹⁹ Despite the controversies and the differing interpretations of the symbolism of the monument, the main significance of the Freedman’s Memorial can be found in its attempt to “forge a mythic place for blacks in the national memory, to assert their citizenship and nationhood.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 129.

⁹⁷ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 8.

⁹⁸ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 101,

⁹⁹ Blight., 101. See also Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 101.

The conflicts over defining the legacy of the Civil War are still continuing in the attempt to create a collective identity in the South. The memory of the Civil War has evolved over time, with a continuation of the debate and contention over this memory due to the racial tensions highlighted by the Civil Rights Movement. As the Second Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement provoked conflict over the racial legacy of the South, as well as tensions over the issue of which South to memorialize publicly, the Old or the New. Defining the legacy of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s has been as contentious an issue as Civil War memory. Though the movement is still part of the individual memory of much of the American population, how it is commemorated and memorialized will establish how it will be interpreted as part of the nation's collective identity. With debates still raging over the use of Confederate symbols and charges of endemic racism in the South, who controls the memory of the Civil Rights Movement will have great influence over the perception of race relations in public memory. The way that these events are commemorated will be significant in determining both the place and the meaning of the movement in the American national identity.

Until recently, few events of the Civil Rights Movement have helped shape collective memory of the period. Certain events of the period do stand out: the Montgomery bus boycotts of 1955-6; the Little Rock school integration crisis in 1957; the March on Washington in 1963 led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These are the flash-point campaigns, the ones that received national media coverage. The images of federal troops escorting nine black children into high school in Little Rock and Martin Luther King delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial have been absorbed into the national memory. The context of these events, however, is less widely known. The American public appears satisfied to reduce an entire freedom struggle to a few public images. The three events previously mentioned all share a common theme. They all provide for an easy interpretation between right and wrong, good and evil. Seeing federal troops having to protect young black children allows us to hate the mob of white segregationists trying to harm the children in order to prevent the integration of Little Rock Central High School, without ourselves thinking too deeply on the larger context or implications of the event. Who was it, after all, who explicitly or implicitly accepted the system of segregation for all those years? Who were the willing or unwilling collaborators in an iniquitous system? And who were the people willing to risk bodily harm to end it?

Many aspects of the Civil Rights Movement, by their nature, were not conducive to national media coverage and have been slower to receive recognition and be placed within the memory of the era. The tedious, grassroots organizing in rural southern communities which was performed by volunteers working for organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) has received less attention than the flashpoint campaigns and marches. Those workers involved in this type of organizing have only belatedly started to garner attention to their efforts through the publication of their memoirs and involvement in television documentaries portraying the movement. The fact that these people have been denied public recognition does not diminish their involvement, but it does diminish national understanding of the exact nature of the movement. The Civil Rights Movement did not overthrow Jim Crow with a few televised campaigns; it took years of work in towns and villages across the South to achieve lasting change. That this fact has not been fully absorbed into the collective memory of the movement raises questions about how representative the legacy of the movement is of the actual events of the civil rights era, and of our larger understanding of just how these events served to effect democratic change. Historians have begun to focus on the more local achievements, and slowly the grassroots organizers are being recognized for their contributions. By placing focus on these people, it takes the memory of the Civil Rights Movement into one of public history and the contribution of ordinary, everyday people. Perhaps a shift in focus onto community involvement and individual contributions will move attention away from the flashpoint campaigns and the prominent leaders. This may be a sign that the American public has a thirst to know more about the movement and to rediscover for themselves the personal sacrifices of civil rights organizing.

Rosa Parks has become one of the most recognizable names associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Her refusal to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, set in motion a bus boycott that lasted for over a year and received support from across the black community, as well as from some white citizens. Parks was not the first to take such action on a city bus, but her respectable character as a church-goer and NAACP member provided an ideal case with which to challenge the discriminatory practices of the Montgomery transit authority. Her involvement in this campaign was crucial and Parks has become one of the very few prominent female figures of the movement. Though it is significant that her contributions have been recognized, this appears to have been done to the detriment of other women who made

invaluable contributions to the campaign for civil rights. Parks is one of the few female names that have been accepted into the Civil Rights canon. This trend may be changing with the recognition of other contributions, which will include the achievements of other women in the movement. Parks' notoriety was utilized by the male leaders of the movement, but she was prevented from making further contributions in any real sense. Though one of the few women to stand on the stage at the March on Washington, she did not speak. She was there as a symbol of the struggle, not as someone with opinions to share and insights to offer the assembled crowd.

In a 1999 survey of readers of the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* on the topic of African Americans who made the greatest contribution to American society in the twentieth-century, Rosa Parks polled fifth, and was the only woman in the top ten and one of only four women in the top twenty. Martin Luther King Jr. was named as the greatest contributor by over half of the respondents.¹⁰¹ Regarded by many as the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” there is still contention over Rosa Park's legacy. In the spring of 1999 the United States Senate passed a resolution by a vote of 86-0 to award the Congressional Gold Medal to Rosa Parks. The award recognized services to the nation and highlighted Parks' enduring position as a symbol of the movement and status as part of the national identity. In the House, only Congressman Ron Paul (Republican, Texas) voted against the resolution, claiming that he objected to spending \$30,000 of taxpayers' money to pay for the medal. Reading statements that Paul made regarding Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, another outspoken black woman, may make his motives for such a vote more understandable. He referred to Jordan in his district newsletter as “the archetypical half-educated victimologist, yet her race and sex protect her from criticism.”¹⁰² The resolution passed despite his objections, but it did not signal the end to the contentious role that Rosa Parks continues to occupy in respect to the commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement.

Nor does this controversy come only from conservative white Americans. The rap group Outkast has used Parks' name in one of its song titles. Parks' legal representatives filed a lawsuit against the group on her behalf, which was dismissed in 1999 by a federal judge in Detroit, who ruled that Outkast's use of her name was protected under the First Amendment. The case was revived in May 2003 when the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, while upholding the freedom of

¹⁰¹ “JBHE Readers Select the Most Important African Americans of the Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 25 (Autumn 1999) : 101.

¹⁰² “The Congressman Who Voted Against a Congressional Medal for Rosa Parks,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 24 (Summer 1999) : 38.

speech defense by Outkast, also ruled that Parks had a legitimate contention that the use of her name could suggest that she was connected to the group.¹⁰³ While understanding why Parks' representatives responded in this way, Michael Eric Dyson expressed sadness at the lost opportunity to educate a new generation about Parks' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He believes that Outkast is one of the most progressive and culturally sensitive groups currently recording and one of the few groups "that perhaps knows or even cares who Rosa Parks is or what she accomplished." Dyson finds it "heart-breaking" that "Outkast's homage to Parks had the great potential to awaken a new generation to her achievements, or to the movement that she inspired with her act of singular courage," but has been lost in the battle to define the memory and commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement and its participants.¹⁰⁴

While it is important that Rosa Parks has retained a prominent position in the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement, the exclusive focus on her has served to obscure other deserving female participants. Recent scholarship has begun addressing the disparity of women's recognition in the public perception of the movement. Women such as Ella Baker, Daisy Bates, and Fannie Lou Hamer are now more familiar names to students of the period but have yet to enter public recognition in the same way as Parks. The roles that they played were as important, if not more so, as Park's involvement in the bus boycott, and yet they have received only a fraction of the attention given to Parks. Perhaps there is only room for one female symbol of the Civil Rights Movement in the public memory. Just as the public is content in perceiving Martin Luther King Jr. as a movement unto himself, so they find it easier to have Rosa Parks be symbolic of all the female participants in the struggle. It is surprising, especially against the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, that more focus has not been given to these women. In order for the American public to gain a full understanding of the history of the Civil Rights Movement and to be able to analyze the ways in which it continues to be commemorated in the national memory, focus will have to be given to people who until now have been marginalized in the memory of the period. Focusing greater understanding on those civil rights workers who have been heretofore been overlooked will necessarily garner more attention for the women who worked in the movement.

¹⁰³ *New York Times*, 13 May 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You; The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York, London: The Free Press, 2000), 308.

There are other reasons why women, particularly black women, have traditionally been left out of Civil Rights history. Black women played a vital role in the movement, often providing a bridge to the local community for civil rights workers from outside the area. In the South black women were the backbone of the movement. Civil Rights' historian Charles Payne contends that black women engaged in more political canvassing than men, attended mass meetings and demonstrations more often than men, and frequently attempted to register to vote.¹⁰⁵ If black women were such an important contingent in the movement, then their neglect in Civil Rights history needs to be explained. Historian Teresa Nance contends that though they carried out important functions, the activities that black women engaged in "did not generate the kind of rhetorical artifacts (policy statements, speeches, etc.) that would catapult their names or words into print."¹⁰⁶ If they were not featured in local or national news media at the time, therefore, then it is logical that they are not given recognition today. These women's contributions were not being acknowledged at the time that they were made, so scholars have much to overcome in order to write them back into the history of the movement. Perhaps a contemporary focus on the importance of oral history will remedy these absences, and allow for the idea that much can be achieved by many people working together to be engaged in the national memory and commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement.

Ella Baker was the impetus behind two of the key civil rights organizations, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and yet her name is little known outside of movement scholars. Baker brought together many of the student participants of the lunch counter sit-ins that had broken out across the South in the early 1960s and helped in the creation of SNCC. At this time she was the acting director of the SCLC, an organization most closely associated with Martin Luther King Jr. Baker was appointed against the protests of Dr. King, but the other ministers involved in the organization did agree that her position would be temporary as they felt that a male director would be more suitable.¹⁰⁷ Ella Baker was a great proponent of involving local people in organizing their communities and building indigenous leadership. Perhaps this accounts for why many women

¹⁰⁵ Charles Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in Crawford, Vicki L. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁰⁶ Teresa A. Nance, "Hearing the Missing Voice," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (May, 1996) : 548.

¹⁰⁷ Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters – The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970* (New York: Scribner, 2001) : 139.

such as Baker do not feature in the memory of the movement. Their work involved creating leaders rather than being one themselves, and creating leaders on the local rather than national level. Baker herself asserted, “My theory is strong people don’t need strong leaders.”¹⁰⁸ By not pushing themselves into prominent roles, and because the roles they did have were not of the type to provide lasting documentation, black women have suffered from a lamentable lack of attention in civil rights public memory.

Although the balance has started to be redressed, white women’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement has entered into the memory of the period to a greater extent than that of black women. Images of white northern college students being beaten by southern police were transmitted by television to homes across America. The images provoked public outrage and focused national attention on the conflict breaking out in the South. They also ensured that white women would receive greater recognition for their sacrifices, and encapsulated them in the collective memory of the movement. White female participants have also documented their experiences in greater volume than black women who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. Historians and others who are involved in defining the discourse of Civil Rights memory clearly have easier access to accounts from white participants than those of black volunteers. Although this discrepancy still exists, it has at least been recognized, and historians may begin the process of finding other sources of evidence in order to include the contributions of the black community in the Civil Rights memory. This may allow for the movement to be reclaimed by the very people who were campaigning for their own liberation, but who in historical memory have been relegated to a place of dependence on the assistance of whites in order to achieve equality. This says much about how Americans choose to remember. Even a movement for and by blacks is commemorated for the benevolent whites who volunteered their time for little reward to help elevate the blacks who could not do it for themselves. It resonates well with the image of the Freedman’s Memorial, of the thankful slave kneeling before the father-like Lincoln.

Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 and further voter registration projects the following year brought over six hundred northern white women to the South. These women came from predominantly middle class, affluent backgrounds. SNCC recruited these volunteers, who were expected to forgo summer jobs, pay for their own transportation, and provide their own bond money in the event of their arrest. These financial demands resulted in affluent students

¹⁰⁸ Nance, “Hearing the Missing Voice,” 552.

predominating.¹⁰⁹ While participating in Freedom Summer many of these women felt marginalized in the movement. They fulfilled administrative roles in the project offices but this was tempered by the fact that virtually all the typing and clerical work was assigned to women.¹¹⁰ Women were continually placed in the background, doing vital work but not attracting public recognition. Many felt frustration at not being allowed to work on the field projects and being confined to teaching or to office work. As one female volunteer complained, “We didn’t come down here to work as a maid this summer, we came down to work in the field of civil rights.”¹¹¹

There has been some documentation by white women of tensions between themselves and black female movement workers.¹¹² This primarily took the form of resentment at sexual relations between black men and white women. Accounts of these strained relations have featured in many white women’s descriptions of their experiences. Sexual tensions were seized upon by historians as a way of explaining the role and position of women in the Civil Rights Movement. This aspect has come to overshadow many of the positive contributions to the movement. Historian Belinda Robnett contends that this has affected the status of black men in American society and negatively affected the creation of the public memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Presenting black men as sexually aggressive “reinforces the racist view that Black males are sexually driven beasts, a theme that has resonated in America for centuries.”¹¹³ The focus on sexual predators and sexual victims has served to fuel the notion of black men as being a threat to the virtue of white womanhood, a stereotype that goes back to the antebellum era. Much of the rhetoric of Civil War memory and the concerns that blacks would abuse their newly found freedom have resurfaced in the commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement. This is perhaps a method through which the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement can be brought back within the framework of white paternalistic notions that are familiar in the history of US race relations.

Women also came to recognize their own oppression in society through their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Many usurped the collective identity of the movement for their

¹⁰⁹ Claybourne Carson, *In Struggle – SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 112.

¹¹⁰ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics – The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 76.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹² Casey Hayden and Mary King, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo,” in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds. *“Takin’ it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49.

¹¹³ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.

own ends. They utilized the public memory of the struggle to publicize their own concerns. “For a while ‘woman as nigger’ was one of the most popular short ways of describing how women’s position in society was perceived.”¹¹⁴ This demonstrates how the memory of an event can be manipulated to represent the concerns of many parties.

Civil Rights history and Civil War memory are both contested subjects in modern America. The issue of Confederate symbols has become more controversial in the wake of the Second Reconstruction. The battle over the Confederate flag has become an enduring concern in contemporary America. In 1987 the NAACP passed a resolution calling for the removal of the Confederate flag from statehouses and state flags. In 2000 the NAACP reaffirmed its “condemnation...of the Confederate Battle Flag or the Confederate Battle Emblem being flown over, displayed in or on any public site or space, building, or any emblem, flag standard or as part of any public communication.”¹¹⁵ In response, the former President of the Confederate Society of America argued that the South was a unique place with a unique history that should be preserved. He rejected what he perceived as northerners trying to impose “sameness” throughout the nation and argued that these reasons were why a protection of the Confederate symbols was needed.¹¹⁶ On July 22, 1994, the US Senate voted against renewing the patent on the insignia of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the central element of which was the Confederate Flag. The debate centered between Democrat Carol Mosely Brown (Illinois), the only African American member of the Senate, and two right-wing Republicans, Jesse Helms from North Carolina and Strom Thurmond from South Carolina.¹¹⁷ Significantly, however, Alabama Senator Howell Heflin, perhaps conscious of the need to appeal to the black electorate, reversed his support for the renewal of the insignia, despite acknowledging that his family was steeped in Confederate history. In response to criticism of his decision he contended that “The issue came down to one of symbols and whether Congress should *especially endorse* symbols which are obviously so painful to a large segment of our population. In my judgement, it should not.”¹¹⁸

The Confederacy has retained a position of fascination in American memory, and its romantic images of rebellion, fallen heroes, and the battle flag continues as a source of “regional

¹¹⁴ Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation – A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay Inc., 1975), 28.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration*, 52-3.

¹¹⁶ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Gerald R. Webster and Roberta H. Webster, “The Power of an Icon,” *Geographical Review* 84 (April 1994) : 131.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

identity and radical icon.”¹¹⁹ The result of this is that the champions of the Confederate flag are “continuing to claim the cultural authority to define the public memory.”¹²⁰ The issues of how to remember racially contentious events seems to revive repeatedly in connection to changes in American race relations. Changes do seem to be occurring, however. In commenting on her role in the creation of Alabama’s first black heritage guide, Frances Smiley asserts that many tourists wish to do Civil War and Civil Rights memorials in the same vacation and she claims that she “never imagined that happening.”¹²¹

The South is a region of commemoration and forgetting. The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement have been the most influential events in the history of the South. Both events have entered into the national identity, yet both are also open to evolution and distortions of public memory. Each event has created sacred memorial sites to commemorate the people, occurrences, and symbols important to the period as a way of installing them into the public remembrance. What is clear is that who is in charge of the memory of historical events influences what gets remembered, as well as the status of the affected groups in the national collective identity.

¹¹⁹ *Brundage.*, 349.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²¹ *New York Times*, 10 August 2004.

CHAPTER 3

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND POPULAR CULTURE

Commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement has permeated many aspects of American culture. Motion picture films play an important role in representing the black experience in the national culture, as well as serving to influence the perception and understanding of that experience. Movies are one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America. They attract people on a mass scale and therefore have the power to shape and construct images and interpretations of the past. “The mass media is perhaps the single most critical source of popular historical imagination. For many, because cinematic modes of perception seem so real, moviepast *is* the past.”¹²² There is a conflict in the making of movies that deal with historical events between staying true to the details of the story and making the film entertaining to watch and successful at the box office. The ultimate goal of the vast majority of American movies is to make money, so they have to attempt to strike a balance between an interest in the bottom-line and a responsibility to display certain events and figures in an accurate and truthful manner. As audience members we accept that film makers use a certain degree of artistic license with historical films, but we also expect them to present things in a manner in keeping with our pre-existing perceptions of the period.

Two recent Hollywood productions that have dealt with the Civil Rights Movement are *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996). Both films claim to depict historical events and both have had to negotiate remaining faithful to those events while at the same time create a film that is entertaining and financially successful. Each movie was criticized for the way in which it chose to present the history of the Civil Rights Movement. As with virtually all historical films, these movies are more a reflection of the society in which they are created and viewed rather than the society that they seek to depict. Despite attempts to grapple with the issues of the period and construct a film that educates and informs, “Whether situated in the past, present, or future, commercial motion pictures invariably resonate with the value crises of the times in which they appear.”¹²³

¹²² Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 111.

¹²³ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages; Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 164.

There is also the question whether it is the responsibility of movie makers to educate their audiences or construct an accurate portrayal of the past which can be absorbed into collective memory. Perhaps a filmmaker's sole responsibility is to give audiences what they want, however distorted that vision of the past may be. "Despite readily available historical information that would permit the telling of an authentic story, the movie version is the one that enters the public consciousness."¹²⁴ This may say more about the contemporary audience, that they want an affirmation of their perceptions through a popular culture medium, rather than having those values challenged in the movie theaters. Historical movies "ask us as viewers to consider our desire for historical truths, our complicity in constructing historical narratives, our investment in the historical present, and so they call into question subjectivity and historical agency."¹²⁵ Both *Mississippi Burning* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* will be analyzed in order to discuss the contemporary portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement on celluloid and to address the impact of these films on the passage of the movement into national memory.

In her study of movies and television during the Civil Rights Movement, Allison Graham identifies a theme in movies dealing with the period, beginning in the late 1980s, of a focus on a white protagonist through which the audience views the action. She contends that after undergoing a cosmetic overhauling in the 1980s as compared to his earlier appearances in film and television, "the cracker became the civil rights film's dramatic centerpiece, its narrative reason d'être."¹²⁶ The 'cracker' she contends, exists besides his alter-ego in these films, the redeemed southern white man. This reformed character, representing the many southern whites who did not overtly support segregation in the South but who also did little or nothing to stop it, was a figure whites could identify with, so becomes the strongest anti-racist figure. He, and it invariably is a "he", has seen the error of his ways and decides to do the honorable thing. As the saying goes, there is no greater zealot than a convert to a cause and by the movie's end he is the only character capable of "driving a stake through the heart of a Delta racist."¹²⁷ This relates especially to *Ghosts of Mississippi*, which relies on the determination of a young, white assistant

¹²⁴ Wilton Corkern, "Heritage Tourism: Where Public and History Don't Always Meet," *American Studies International* 42 (June-October 2004) : 11.

¹²⁵ Paula Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon Wreckage; History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory," *History and Theory* 32 (may 1993) : 137.

¹²⁶ Allison Graham, *Framing the South; Hollywood, Television, and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 148.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

District Attorney to bring belated justice in the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers by southern racist Byron de la Beckwith in Jackson, Mississippi.

Bobby DeLaughter, assistant district attorney in Hines County, Mississippi is played in *Ghosts of Mississippi* by Alec Baldwin. The story of the attempt to secure a conviction of Beckwith for the assassination of Evers in 1963 after two mistrials and twenty-seven years had passed is shown through the figure of DeLaughter. He is a crusading public servant, struggling to raise three young children, who has his life consumed by the retrial of Byron de la Beckwith. At the beginning of the film, DeLaughter is portrayed as being closely associated with the same white power structure that treated Beckwith like a hero in 1963. His wife, named Dixie, and very much the embodiment of the values and concerns of the old south, is the daughter of Judge Russell Moore, one of the most racist judges in the history of the state of Mississippi. Early in the film he is dining with his parents and discussing reopening the Evers case, when his father warns against it, saying to him, “You want to be a judge someday, you persecute a seventy-year old man, guilty or not, over some nigger, you’ll have everybody in the state of Mississippi lined up against you.”¹²⁸ This is said with a black waiter right behind him, who he then greets like an old friend, with no acknowledgement that what he had just said might have offended this man. This is the background from which our future hero comes. This is a key scene for the structure of the film, for it serves to make his conversion all the more remarkable. Symbolically, at the beginning of the film he sings “Dixie” to his young daughter to make the ghost in her room go away, as it is “the song that every ghost from Mississippi loves.”¹²⁹ By the film’s end, predictably enough, he is questioning whether the troubled past of that state can be dismissed so easily, whether it is possible to legislate people’s minds, and whether he is up to the task of doing so.

On several occasions DeLaughter relates himself to Medgar Evers. At the start of the retrial investigation he was thirty-seven, the same age as Evers when he was shot. He had three young children, just as Evers did. *Ghosts of Mississippi* thus becomes more a story about the dedication of one white man in convicting another white man for the murder of a black man most people had forgotten than a history lesson on Medgar Evers and his contributions to American society. It is a lost opportunity to discuss the dedication and success of Evers and his wife Myrlie. Played by Whoopi Goldberg, Ever’s widow features little in comparison to DeLaughter.

¹²⁸ *Ghosts of Mississippi*, directed by Rob Reiner, Castle Rock Entertainment and Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1996.

¹²⁹ *Ghosts of Mississippi*, Rob Reiner, 1996.

Though it is she who has kept Evers memory alive all of those years, it becomes not her story to tell. Instead, the character of DeLaughter is a surrogate figure, and the film chooses to stress not the person of Medgar Evers but the process by which justice, however long delayed, is finally achieved. Myrlie Evers herself was on the set of *Ghosts of Mississippi* and in one interview she admitted that the only way director Rob Reiner could get into the story was “through the eyes of Bobby DeLaughter.”¹³⁰ It is perhaps easier to have the evils of our past presented to us by a man who looks like us and thinks like us, rather than be challenged by a woman who held her bleeding husband in her arms on the driveway of her home and to whom society has continually denied justice. Thus *Ghosts of Mississippi* is not a film about the Civil Rights Movement or about Medgar Evers, or Myrlie Evers. Instead the film “represents one white man’s civil rights struggle, one white man who awakens to his own self-protective, unearned privilege.”¹³¹

On its release *Ghosts of Mississippi* was met by much criticism by movie critics for presenting the story of Medgar Evers through a white assistant district attorney nearly thirty years later. This makes the story safe. It becomes a tale of redemption, finally achieving justice, and perhaps closure, for the crimes of the past, rather than dealing head-on with those crimes and the society that perpetrated them. The film’s producer, Fred Zollo, agreed that this is not a film “about the civil rights movement. This is a story about the pursuit of justice of the murderer of an American hero.”¹³² Though clearly a bigoted murderer, sending Beckwith, played chillingly by James Wood, to jail does not atone for the sins of the past. Though Beckwith may have pulled the trigger that killed Medgar Evers, the people who perjured themselves for him, refused to convict him, and attended the parade thrown for him after the second mistrial, are as guilty as he is for letting such events happen and then go unpunished. This is not a long distant past but one in which our parents and grandparents are bound in a collective guilt. This is an aspect of the Civil Rights Movement that much of America does not seem ready to face. Therefore, until we confront that guilt head-on, all the movies about this period will avoid the key issues. As a

¹³⁰ Billings, “Achieving Authenticity,” 86.

¹³¹ Jamie Barlowe, “The “Not-Free” and “Not-Me”: Constructions of Whiteness in *Rosewood* and *Ghosts of Mississippi*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 28 (1998) : 35.

¹³² Andrew Billings, “Achieving Authenticity in the Film *Ghosts of Mississippi*: Identity and Authorship in Historical Narratives,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 24 (2000) : 80.

review of *Ghosts of Mississippi* put it succinctly in *The Hollywood Reporter*, focusing the film on DeLaughter to the marginalization of Evers “resonates a been-there, done-that familiarity.”¹³³

The impact of these movies will not change the collective American memory until the message about the crimes of the past changes. Godfrey Chesire, film critic for *Variety*, sees a danger in the continuation of this type of portrayal. “When future generations turn to this era’s movies for an account of the struggles for racial justice in America, they’ll learn the surprising lesson that such battles were fought and won by square-jawed white guys.”¹³⁴ This distortion of the past demonstrates an inability of contemporary American society to come to terms with the violent racism of the past and deal with its consequences openly and honestly. Until that time, it seems we will continue to see the Civil Rights Movement depicted through the eyes of people who look, sound, and think like us, rather than those who were the key figures in this crucial social and political movement.

Ghosts of Mississippi met with criticism from black film director Spike Lee. He believed that Rob Reiner was not the right choice to direct the film, rather, he claimed that the story of Medgar Evers needed to be told by an African American director. Lee contended that “no white director could ever know how to tell a story concerning the disintegration of black identity through the murder of Evers.”¹³⁵ This assertion raises the question of authorship in films that deal with past events. Does a director exert that much influence and control over a film that it can only present a story the way that they see it? In his study on identity in historical narratives, Andrew Billings discusses this issue. He examines the expressed doubts of whether Steven Spielberg, one of the most prominent directors of recent years, could accurately direct *The Color Purple* because he was not black. Many critics felt the film would have benefited from an African American director. Conversely, Billings admits, Spielberg was seen as the best choice to direct *Schindler’s List* because he was Jewish, although not a Holocaust survivor. Billings questions whether the race or the religion of the director should be the overriding factor, and whether there is room for talent in Hollywood anymore. The issue of black directors being best able to direct films dealing with black characters or events can be demonstrated well through the making of the movie *Malcolm X*. Originally, white director Norman Jewison was set to direct the

¹³³ Willie Morris, *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers; A Tale of Race, Murder, Mississippi and Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1998), 243.

¹³⁴ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks; An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 336.

¹³⁵ Billings, “Achieving Authenticity,” 80.

film but came under criticism from Spike Lee who believed Jewison could not present the story properly. In the end, Lee himself directed the film, lending weight to his argument that black directors were inherently more suitable to direct black films.¹³⁶

In the same vein, *Mississippi Burning*, which was released in 1988, depicts the search for three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney who disappeared in the summer of 1964 while on a voter registration project in rural Mississippi. The film is not about these men, however, who only appear for the first few minutes of the movie. It gives no context of what brought them there, what work they were doing, and what problems they faced. It merely shows them being chased in a car and then shot. The film deals instead with the two FBI agents sent to Mississippi to conduct a missing person's investigation. Agent Ward, played by Willem Dafoe, is the younger of the two and in charge of the investigation. He has experience in dealing with civil rights situations, having been with James Meredith at Ole Miss. Clean-cut, very Robert Kennedy looking, he wants to do everything by the book and conduct a thorough investigation. His partner, Agent Anderson, played by Gene Hackman, is originally from Mississippi. Anderson tries simultaneously to dissuade Ward from conducting a full investigation and to appeal to the locals as one of them. It is on these two men that the search for justice in Mississippi rests. The actual hard, dangerous work of the Civil Rights Movement is not focused on, but rather the FBI men who have to come in and clean up the mess that implicitly was made by those civil rights workers. It is the responsibility of these two men, rather than the local black community, to find justice. Notes one critic sardonically, "It's a White Man's Burden movie, if ever there were one."¹³⁷

As with *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *Mississippi Burning* places whites at the center of the story, with black characters occupying lesser roles in the background. The FBI, in fact, seems to be fighting against the black community as much as the white racists in trying to get justice. Blacks do not want to talk to them. They are shown as unwilling to assist those who are trying to help them. "Rather than even alluding to the pivotal role played by blacks in the struggle for desegregation and enfranchisement [director Alan] Parker presents them as sheep-like – unable to act."¹³⁸ The blacks in the movie can do nothing to help themselves and must rely on white outsiders to alleviate their situation. In response to this criticism, Parker acknowledged that the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 83-4.

¹³⁷ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 303.

¹³⁸ Harvard Sitkoff, "Mississippi Burning," *Journal of American History* 76 (December 1989): 1020.

heroes of the movie are white and admits that “in truth the film would probably never be made if they weren’t.”¹³⁹ In order to be successful, it seems, movies that deal with such a challenging topic as America’s racial past must present it in the least threatening way possible, even if that distorts the history being portrayed.

Ghosts of Mississippi and *Mississippi Burning*, both set in Mississippi, also seem to regard the state as different from the remainder of America. As one of the most racist and heavily segregated states, it does have a past uniquely its own. Trying to separate it, however, from the rest of the nation attempts to vilify the state and exonerate the United States as a whole. In *Mississippi Burning*, for example, when Agent Anderson tries to talk to whites at the barber shop he is told, “The rest of America don’t mean jack shit. You in Mississippi now.”¹⁴⁰ This attempts to sever the state from the nation, to place it as a separate country that operates under its own rules. To a certain degree this is how many white Mississippians saw themselves at this time. They resented outside agitators who had no respect for the way things worked in their state. A similar message is given in *Ghosts of Mississippi* during the first Beckwith trial. While Myrlie Evers is on the witness stand, former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett enters the court and shakes hands with Beckwith in full view of the jury. One outside reporter in the court says that “there’s not a court in America that would stand for that.” A local reporter sitting next to him responds, “What’s America got to do with anything? This is Mississippi.”¹⁴¹

Separating Mississippi from the rest of America in these films has two main effects. It recognises that Mississippi was one of the worst-offending states in terms of racism and segregation, while acknowledging the thinking of activists at the time that if you can defeat racism in Mississippi, you can defeat it anywhere. It also, however, inaccurately focuses all of America’s racial problems on one state, leaving the rest of the nation an innocent bystander. In failing to act, is the rest of America not responsible for what happened in Mississippi? In his discussion of *Mississippi Burning*, Adam Nossiter argues, “It was the simple, demonic picture of Mississippi most Americans had in 1964 reified for the screen a quarter century later.”¹⁴² These films allow the audience to leave with the distorted notion that racial injustice only

¹³⁹ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood; The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁴⁰ *Mississippi Burning*, directed by Alan Parker, Orion Picture Corporation, 1988.

¹⁴¹ *Ghosts of Mississippi*, Rob Reiner, 1996.

¹⁴² Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory; Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 227.

occurred in Mississippi, and as Mississippi is not really America, by implication they are not guilty of anything. They can leave the movie theater condemning the Mississippi racist, without having to question their own role in creating a society that allowed for such things to happen. Until a film is made that examines the racial injustice of America as a whole, audiences can avoid confronting their part in the national collective guilt.

Historical films have to balance being truthful to events while still being entertaining to the audience. *Ghosts of Mississippi* does show a true story. The story of Bobby DeLaughter campaigning to reopen the case and the subsequent trial is as close to historical accuracy as Hollywood is likely to get. It may not be the story that many people wish had been depicted, but it remains generally truthful. The film uses newspaper headlines and historical footage of Evers, as well as John F. Kennedy's landmark civil rights speech, to lend authenticity to its portrayal. The film even begins with the insistent line: "This story is true." Andrew Billings, however, questions whether a film can perfectly re-enact history "because there is no authentic history to re-enact."¹⁴³ As the audience, does this use of historical footage make the depiction any more truthful to us? Do we need to know that it is based on real events? Do we hold these films to a higher level of scrutiny than complete works of fiction? Or would we perhaps prefer a film to be less authentic if it made it more entertaining? Writing about his experiences being involved with *Ghosts of Mississippi* and his reaction to the finished product, Willie Morris contends that "Accuracy and truth are two different things. I would...consider *Ghosts of Mississippi* 100 percent faithful to the spirit of the truth and 80 percent to the spirit of accuracy."¹⁴⁴ *Ghosts of Mississippi* thus successfully skirted round having to make an explicit civil rights movie yet stayed close to historical accuracy by depicting a legal drama that just happened to involve the Civil Rights Movement.

Mississippi Burning came in for much stronger criticism about its level of accuracy. The major contention of critics concerned the portrayal of blacks in the film, that they were passive bystanders waiting for the white man to come and save them. Even small details were altered to suit this agenda. The portrayal of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in the car at the beginning of the film places Schwerner in the driver's seat, with Chaney, the only black activist, in the rear seat. Witnesses who recall seeing the boys driving through the town, however, placed Chaney in

¹⁴³ Billings, "Achieving Authenticity," 87.

¹⁴⁴ Morris, *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers*, 232.

the driver's seat. This distortion is symbolic of the position of blacks throughout the entire picture. This met with confusion and criticism on the film's release. "For black moviegoers, the question was simple: How could Hollywood make a film about the Civil Rights Movement without having any major black characters?"¹⁴⁵

Another concern about historical distortion in *Mississippi Burning* dealt with the portrayal of the FBI agents as crusaders for justice. They are shown coming to Mississippi in scores to protect the civil rights activists, when in reality the FBI was criticized at the time for not doing enough to investigate crimes against civil rights workers. As a prominent critic noted, "*Mississippi Burning* gives too much credit to the FBI for defeating the Klan and too little credit to the black and white civil rights workers whose actions provoked the Klan to commit atrocities in the first place."¹⁴⁶ It also ignored the efforts of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to infiltrate the Civil Rights Movement and sabotage both Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights effort. In the movie no blacks will talk to the agents, as they are depicted as too scared to aide their own cause. The agents have to do all of the investigating themselves, eventually resorting, ironically enough, to threats and intimidation of their own in order to achieve convictions. Though the film does show what sentences some of those involved received, it does not focus on the fact that none of them were actually convicted of murder. *Mississippi Burning* represents a lost opportunity to educate the American people about an injustice in their past. "Rather than helping lessen this nation's woeful ignorance of its racial past, this film does such injustice to the events with which it deals that its ultimate lynching is of history itself."¹⁴⁷ Although perhaps deserving of some praise for even dealing, however inadequately, with the theme of civil rights, these films illustrate that a full understanding of the Civil Rights Movement has still not entered the American collective memory.

In addition to films, museums are an important cultural space in which to preserve and analyze aspects of the past. The past decade has seen a growth in the number and scope of museums dedicated to the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Museums, like films, place history in the realm of popular culture and cannot escape politically-charged constructs. Museums project a message about the artifacts they contain. They are not merely "collections of

¹⁴⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mullatoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 302.

¹⁴⁶ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Sitkoff, *Mississippi Burning*, 1019.

universal culture, repositories of uncontested value.”¹⁴⁸ What curators choose to place in exhibits and how they choose to display these pieces affects how the audiences respond to them. Museums influence the passage of events into the collective memory through the manner in which they are represented. History museums engage in the construction of identity and commemoration. “History, and history museums are inescapably political, and always have been.”¹⁴⁹ The Travel Industry Association of America reports that about one-fourth of American adults, more than 50 million people, travel to historic sites, including museums, each year, not including the millions of school children who visit these places on field trips. In his discussion of the growth of heritage tourism, Wilton Corkern argues that considering the fact that only about a fifth of all Americans ever take a single history course after high school, then “the importance of heritage sites as sources for historical information comes sharply into focus.”¹⁵⁰

In discussing the important role that museums can play, especially in the African American community, museum curator John Fleming contends that they can provide a “sense of history that allows us to call upon our own experiences to interpret the past and to use that knowledge to shape and influence the future.”¹⁵¹ An unanticipated consequence of the growth of automobile tourism over the past fifty years has been to fuel interest in the heritage industry. Celebrations of southern history have therefore become commercially oriented. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that this has resulted in historical memory in the South coming to reflect the “ubiquitous influence of tourism.”¹⁵² Despite this, the commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement has been slow to lay down permanent markers to the movement. It took until 1993, for example, to erect a sign marking the bus stop in Montgomery where Rosa Parks was arrested. There does, however, seem to be a recent boom in civil rights commemoration. The National Civil Rights Museum opened in Memphis, Tennessee in 1991 and was followed by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama and the King Center in Atlanta. The Woolworth Store in Greensboro, North Carolina that witnessed the first student sit-ins in 1960 is scheduled to open as a museum in 2005. With many historical sites being used to facilitate the public

¹⁴⁸ James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Representing the Nation: A Reader – Histories, Heritage and Museums*, ed. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 451.

¹⁴⁹ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 122.

¹⁵⁰ Wilton Corkern, “Heritage Tourism: Where Public and History Don’t Always Meet,” *American Studies International* 42 (June-October 2004) : 13.

¹⁵¹ John E. Fleming, “African-American Museums, History and the American Ideal,” *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1994) : 1026.

¹⁵² Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 10.

commemoration of the movement, a discussion is needed of what aspects of Civil Rights history these sites are preserving in the collective memory.

The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis is one of the most prominent museums dedicated to the history of the civil rights struggle. Located around the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4th 1968, the museum serves the function of educator as well as commemorative shrine. How the National Civil Rights Museum came into being demonstrates the politics and interests behind finding an adequate commemoration to the Civil Rights Movement. King was in Memphis supporting a local sanitation strike and often stayed at the Lorraine as one of the few motels in the city open to blacks. After desegregation of the city, more motels were available to blacks in the area around the Lorraine, and the motel itself fell into decline. The Lorraine Motel then became a place of monthly residences rather than a traditional hotel.¹⁵³ Tours of the room in which Martin Luther King Jr. had stayed were conducted by one of the residents. The room and the balcony had been preserved as they were when King was murdered.¹⁵⁴ The owner at that time, Walter Bailey, was being investigated for failure to pay taxes and was facing bankruptcy. He believed that the motel should be saved as a commemorative site. With the publicity generated by a local radio station, WDIA, a non-profit organization called The Martin Luther King Memphis Memorial Foundation was established in 1979 to attempt to procure the building. The foundation comprised predominately local black business people and activists who managed to raise \$65,000 in grass-roots fund-raising to buy the motel. At least \$85,000 was needed, however, just to satisfy the outstanding mortgages on the building. The motel then went up for public auction, before which the Memphis chapter of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, whose sanitation strike in 1968 had brought King to the city, provided a check for \$25,000 to the Memorial Foundation. With the additional funds, the Foundation was able to buy the motel in 1982 for \$144,000. Additional money was gained over time from local and state governments and local businesses to renovate the building from a dilapidated motel to a commemorative center.¹⁵⁵

The campaign to save and purchase the Lorraine Motel for the purposes of turning it into a civil rights museum brought a variety of people and groups together. Not everyone was happy,

¹⁵³ Michael Honey, "Public History and the Freedom Struggle; Doing Public History at the National Civil Rights Museum: A Conversation with Juanita Moore," *Public Historian* 17 (Winter 1995), 76.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵⁵ Douglas B. Chambers, "This Dreamer Cometh: The National Civil Rights Museum," *American Visions* 14 (October 1999) : 40.

however, with the plan to erect a tourist attraction on the site where Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. Initially, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, wanted the Lorraine Motel torn down. She was perhaps worried that the site would be used as some morbid curiosity point for passing tourists and not a fitting tribute to the life of her husband or to the circumstances in which he died.¹⁵⁶ One of the former residents of the Lorraine Motel has also been vocal about her opposition to the museum. Jacqueline Smith has conducted a street protest against the museum since it opened in 1991. The other residents were re-housed, but she refused to be moved.¹⁵⁷ Smith argued that "These people are playing with history in order to make a buck. It should have been converted into housing for the poor, the homeless, or the elderly. That's what we need in this neighbourhood."¹⁵⁸ Local white residents were not in favour of the museum either. They viewed it as an attempt to rake through the city's less than admirable past and stir up social and racial tensions all over again. The Director of the National Civil Rights Museum, Juanita Moore, discussed the opposition they faced from some in the white community. "White Memphians felt that you just tear it down and put a marker up and that would be it – and not try to keep dredging up the past – they wanted to let it die."¹⁵⁹ Yet this is a period of history, and King is a figure, that perhaps will never die. The question is how to commemorate it in a productive way, avoiding polarization and finger-pointing, blame allocation.

Locating a commemorative site to the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr. in the building in which he was assassinated adds to the already charged atmosphere of the center. It confronts history head on and takes visitors out of their comfort zone. Much like the exhibit to John F. Kennedy and his assassination located on the sixth floor of the Dallas book depository in Texas, the National Civil Rights Movement is a place where history and memory collide.¹⁶⁰ In her review of the National Civil Rights Museums, Amy Wilson identifies it as a complex place, calling it "a landmark, a historical panorama, and a political statement."¹⁶¹ Dealing with all of these complicated themes is a challenge for the museum. The museum attempts to include as much as it can into the displays, leaving the viewer overwhelmed by the information. As the

¹⁵⁶ Alice Faye Duncan, *The National Civil Rights Museum Celebrates Everyday People* (New York: Troll Medallion, 1995), 9.

¹⁵⁷ Honey, "Public History and the Freedom Struggle," 78.

¹⁵⁸ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 250.

¹⁵⁹ Honey, "Public History and the Freedom Struggle," 77.

¹⁶⁰ See Cynthia A. Brandimarte, "The Sixth Floor: John F. Kennedy and the Memory of a Nation," *Journal of American History* 78 (June 1991).

¹⁶¹ Amy Wilson, "National Civil Rights Museum," *Journal of American History* 83 (December 1996) : 971.

museum presents relatively recent history, there is a large supply of exhibits available, including photographs, newspapers, clothing, and protest signs. While it is important that all this is preserved and made available to the public, trying to condense all this history into a few exhibits does not do it justice. Though Wilson agrees that the level of information the museum is trying to present is impressive, the consequence of this for the visitor is “sensory overload” and “bedlam.”¹⁶²

Despite the effort to include as much information about the Civil Rights Movement as possible, there are some glaring oversights. The Voting Rights Act, passed in 1965 as the final nail in the coffin of legal southern segregation, is afforded only a single panel on the wall. Though this legislation did not generate the media coverage, or artifacts, and therefore memory, as the Birmingham and Selma campaigns did, it was the result of all of those years of marches and protest. Focusing on the means, not the end, undermines the achievements of all the activists in the struggle. Wilson contends that “This low-key display is the most disappointing in the museum.”¹⁶³ Other key points are also marginalized. Malcolm X played a huge role in influencing the Civil Rights Movement. He especially affected the campaign for black liberation in northern cities, and his Black Nationalist rhetoric had a profound impact on the militancy of SNCC and the Black Panther Party and their position in shaping the Black Power movement. It is perhaps unsurprising that Malcolm X is overlooked in a museum built on the site of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. The National Civil Rights Museum clearly wants to project the history of the movement as the non-violent one before 1966. Tellingly, it also fails to grapple with changes in King’s message, such as his rhetoric against the war in Vietnam and his focus on poverty as the source of the nation’s problems. Juanita Moore claims that the National Civil Rights Museum is not a memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. She says it focuses on everyone who participated in the movement, not just the figures that everyone knows about.¹⁶⁴ Answering concerns that its very location makes the museum a commemoration of King, Moore argues that “it is the site of the assassination of King, but it is not a memorial to King. It is a civil rights museum. It is a memorial to all of the participants in the movement.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Ibid., 972.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 974.

¹⁶⁴ Honey, “Public History and the Freedom Struggle,” 73.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 80.

Although the National Civil Rights Movement has now been open over a decade, not all agree that it lives up to this high standard that Moore claims. D'Army Bailey, a Memphis judge who led the campaign to purchase the Lorraine Motel, resigned from the museum board a year after it opened, claiming that the museum had not carried out its mission of putting King's vision to work.¹⁶⁶ There are still discussions, following the logic of Jacqueline Smith, as to whether a museum was the most suitable tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. or the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. On a visit to Memphis, the grandson of Mohandas Gandhi, whose philosophy of non-violent direct action influenced King's tactics in these campaigns, was critical of the National Civil Rights Movement. He claimed "I think my grandfather and Martin Luther King had the same dream. And they didn't want people to erect statues and museums in their memory. It's a waste of money."¹⁶⁷

This issue of money is certainly another focal point of criticism of the museum. Though a commemoration to a man who focused on the plight of the poor in his last few years, the National Civil Rights Museum charges a fee to enter the building. Other civil rights museums are free to the public. Perhaps it is because a private foundation was the impetus behind the project, but as it used a large amount of public money to create the museum there is criticism that it should be available to everyone who wants to go.¹⁶⁸ The National Civil Rights Museum is still causing controversy fourteen years after it was officially opened and nearly forty years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on its present site. In trying to commemorate such an important movement and secure its passage into the national collective memory, there remains the question of "whether there is an inherent conflict in creating a tourist attraction, no matter how dignified, out of this memorial site."¹⁶⁹ In trying to develop adequate commemoration of both the man and the movement, this may be a question that never goes away.

¹⁶⁶ Chambers, "This Dreamer Cometh," 41.

¹⁶⁷ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 250.

¹⁶⁸ Wilson, "National Civil Rights Museum," 975.

¹⁶⁹ Chambers, "This Dreamer Cometh," 43.

CHAPTER 4
MYTH MAKING AND THE MEMORY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Martin Luther King Jr. has come to symbolize the Civil Rights Movement in the American memory. In the thirty-seven years after his assassination, King's memory has become a contested point, manipulated by all sides and at the center of the effort to integrate the Civil Rights Movement into the American collective identity. Much of what is commonly known about King has been filtered through the news media, the rhetoric of politicians, and the attempts of the King family to control his legacy. King has become so sanitized an American hero, that perhaps his true message has been lost in the fight to memorialize his image. What the public has been persuaded to forget about King is equally important as what they have been encouraged to remember, and highlights the apparent need in present society for a consensus memorial to a once controversial figure.

The event that elevated Martin Luther King Jr. on to the national stage began in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 with the now famous bus boycott. The familiar story of Rosa Parks being arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, and King leading the subsequent boycott of the city's buses helps to create the notion of King as a natural, some argue divine, leader sent to bring freedom to blacks in the Jim Crow South. We see King as born for this role, with many regarding him as vital to the success of the boycott and the ensuing Civil Rights Movement. Establishing King as the sole leader of this social movement and as the only one who could achieve such changes does a disservice to the thousands of others who risked their lives to campaign for racial equality in the South, as well as King himself. Ignoring the contributions of ordinary people, both black and white, to the end of segregation, and making the movement all about King, ignores the fact that this was a grassroots movement. The Civil Rights Movement took its strength from people in small communities across the South working to make their lives, and those of their families, better. The memory of the Civil Rights Movement has more value and legitimacy when viewed as a mass outpouring of sentiment. Absorbing the movement into the national identity only works when we recognize the sheer size of that movement. Focusing on one person undermines the very movement that individual has come to represent.

Viewing Dr. King as a man somehow predestined to lead this movement also does his memory a disservice. King's achievements are undervalued if he is viewed as super-human, as one who did all these things because he was above us mortals. Looking at King as a mere man, who still managed to achieve all that he did, makes his accomplishments all the more remarkable. Creating King as an icon, above everyone else, was an attempt to explain his life and works without having to investigate them too deeply. It does not deal with the radical, controversial side of King, the man who attacked poverty and opposed the Vietnam War. It sanitizes him into a figure who simply had a dream of black and white children holding hands. On the issue of dealing with King's legacy, political and social commentator Michael Eric Dyson proposes that "we do not have to make him a saint to appreciate his greatness. Neither should we deny his imperfections as we struggle to remember and reactivate his legacy."¹⁷⁰ That the image of King has become distorted and the memory of him has been so controlled is undeniable. Both, however, signify something important about the values of present-day American society.

With regard to the events in Montgomery that first placed King on the national stage, only he and Rosa Parks have received any recognition for the occurrences there. As previously discussed, Parks has entered the collective memory but merely as a non-threatening black woman who refused to stand up on a bus. Although she prompted the boycott, the role of actually leading it was assigned to someone else. King had only recently arrived in Montgomery as the new pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. His position as a clergyman, financially independent of the white power structure, as well as his separation from the internal politics of the local black community, made King the ideal choice to head the newly established Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and lead the campaign for fairer treatment of blacks on the cities buses. Although King is remembered as a vocal advocate for the end of racial segregation, the initial demands of the MIA were quite modest: respect towards blacks from the bus drivers; black bus drivers on predominantly black routes; and seating on a first-come-first-served basis, with blacks still filling up from the back and the whites from the front of the bus. These requests certainly do not square with the image of the staunch anti-segregationist that has been captured in the national memory. Even though the year before the US Supreme Court had made its landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that "separate is inherently unequal" in public

¹⁷⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You; The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 5.

education, and even though this decision implicitly could be applied to all public accommodations, it still took some months for the MIA to set its sights on the desegregation of the Montgomery bus system.

Following the notion of King as some kind of divine leader one could assume that he was a willing leader of the boycott. King, however, admitted that he was at first a reluctant spokesman for the cause. When he was initially nominated as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association, King said that it happened so quickly that he did not have time to consider it fully. On reflection, he said, had he had time to think it through “It is probable...I would have declined the nomination.”¹⁷¹ This does not fit well with the general perception of a dedicated leader, never wavering in his commitment to civil rights. So does this mean that King was a weak leader who rather than making history had history thrust upon him? Or does it demonstrate the strength of the man that he could go from this initial doubt and hesitation to lead a nationally mobilized movement? Perhaps as well it provides a glimpse of a man who was concerned about his family and his parishioners and, while not seeking this role, was more than willing to take it on once it had fallen to him. The Montgomery situation outlines King as a person who suffered, like any other man, from doubts and uncertainties but who also happened to be in the right place and proved to be the right man for the job. Yet this is not how he has come to be remembered.

There appears to be a need in present day America to remember Martin Luther King Jr. as a heroic icon, the facts about whom are lost in the rush to commemorate his greatness. The King that is remembered is the King up until 1966. This is the ‘I Have a Dream’ King, who represents all that was good about the American dream and overcoming an oppression that we all can now agree was wrong. This aspect of King’s life is easy to transition into the collective memory. It affirms all that is positive in the national identity. Through hard work and multiracial cooperation any evil can be overcome. He is the American hero, juxtaposed against the villains of the piece: Alabama Governor George Wallace, Birmingham police chief Eugene “Bull” Connor, and Ross Barnett, the Governor of Mississippi, to name but a few. There is a clear distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. Had King been assassinated in 1966, this picture would have passed uncontested into American memory.

¹⁷¹ Claybourne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 56.

But what do we make of the years 1966-68? How do they add to, detract from, or simply complicate the creation of the memory of Dr. King? As Michael Eric Dyson argues, “King has been made into a metaphor of our hunger for heroes who cheer us up more than they challenge or change us.”¹⁷² This desire for a positive, universal hero may explain why little focus has been afforded in public commemorations to the radical King who questioned the morality of military campaigns ostensibly fought in the name of freedom from external oppression. After 1966, once *de jure* segregation in the South had been defeated with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and black voting rights had been secured with the Voting Rights Act of the following year, King’s attention, and that of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which he headed, shifted to the North. Though King’s campaigns had meant great gains for blacks in the South, those living in the North already had the right to vote and were not constrained by legal segregation. In 1967 King left his native South and moved to Chicago, taking his family with him, to live in a poor slum area to experience what blacks in the city faced. King’s focus moved to improving the conditions of the nation’s poor, of all races. The Poor People’s Campaign involved taking thousands of impoverished Americans to the national mall in Washington DC to live in a tent city until the federal government instigated measures to combat issues of un- and under-employment, lack of adequate health care, and *de facto* housing segregation in many of the northern cities. King had moved from trying to overthrow a regionalized, unjust system, to questioning the very foundations upon which the concept of the American Dream was based.

Also in 1967, Dr. King began to speak out openly in opposition to the American war in Vietnam, arguing that “The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.”¹⁷³ He argued that the billions of dollars that were being poured into the defense industry could be better spent alleviating the conditions of the nation’s poor. In his “Beyond Vietnam” address at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, King explained why he had decided to speak out against the war in Vietnam. “I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as

¹⁷² Dyson, *I May Not get There With You*, 3.

¹⁷³ Michael O’Brien, “Old Myths/ New Heights: History and Dr. King,” *The History Teacher* 22 (November 1988) : 60.

such.”¹⁷⁴ As part of his Great Society initiative, President Lyndon Johnson declared a War on Poverty in 1964. King supported the President in this goal but saw the war in Vietnam as drawing away vital resources from anti-poverty measures, leaving the Great Society as empty rhetoric. In early 1967 King gave his first complete statement in which he outlined his opposition to the war, labelling the conflict “One of history’s most cruel and senseless wars” and attacking American foreign policy as “a new form of colonialism.”¹⁷⁵ Although having previously enjoyed a good relationship with Johnson, King’s open opposition to American involvement in Vietnam signalled a parting of the ways between him and the President. It was around this time that the FBI began increasing its surveillance of King for suspected Communist Party associations. The details of these investigations have been speculated on endlessly, but the full truth will not be known until the FBI files are unsealed after fifty years have passed.

Dr. King also asserted that the armed forces, through the draft, were dispatching disproportionate numbers of blacks, as well as other minority groups, to fight in Vietnam. As these men were conscripts and not officers, they were more often placed in frontline units and thus suffered a disproportionately high death ratio. King appears accurate in his assessment that blacks were being disproportionately drafted into the military. In 1964, 18.8% of eligible whites were drafted compared to 30.2% of eligible blacks. By 1967 the gap had widened so that only 31% of eligible whites were conscripted compared to 67% of eligible blacks.¹⁷⁶ Before the government moved to a draft lottery in 1970, men could defer being drafted by pursuing post-secondary education. Young men from wealthier families could afford to stay in college to avoid the draft. More often these families were white. If large numbers of white men avoided being called up then this created a greater demand for those who could not avoid the draft. King found young black men disproportionately falling into this group and, moreover, were being sent to fight a war abroad that was taking funding and attention away from the very conditions at home that were negatively affecting these same soldiers. King contended that compounding the problems of poverty for black men was the fact they were “being sent to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that were not available to them in the United States.”¹⁷⁷ In suggesting that Vietnam was, in fact, a racist war, King was becoming a controversial and complex figure. His

¹⁷⁴ Henry E. Darby and Margaret N. Rowley, “King on Vietnam and Beyond,” *Phylon* 47 (1st Quarter 1986) : 43.

¹⁷⁵ Harry A. Reed, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: History and Memory, Reflections on Dreams and Silences,” *Journal of Negro History* 84 (Spring 1999) : 158.

¹⁷⁶ Darby and Rowley, “King on Vietnam and Beyond,” 44.

¹⁷⁷ Reed, “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” 161.

opinions were evolving about race, about class and about poverty, as he matured into the “powerful, disturbing figure he was to become.”¹⁷⁸

His focus on the northern urban poor and opposition to the Vietnam War after 1967 does not fit well with the comfortable notion of King that has been created. He was the man who had talked so movingly of the potential of the American Dream, but now he seemed to be challenging whether that dream could exist at all. King’s position in American society was shifting, as were many people’s perceptions of him. In a 1967 Gallup Poll to discover the ten most admired Americans, Dr. King’s name did not appear. This was the first time in a decade that he had been left off this list, showing that many Americans did not respond favourably to the change in the focus and rhetoric of King as his campaigns moved out of the South.¹⁷⁹ By this stage, however, there was growing resentment to the Vietnam War expressed by a portion of the American people. The 1965 Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) anti-war March on Washington, the public burning of draft cards, and the reaction to the harrowing images of war and talk of kill ratios brought into American homes on the evening news shows that King was not alone in what he felt about the war. Coupled with his attacks on the condition of urban blacks, however, King’s Vietnam rhetoric was seen as wanting to highlight what was wrong with America and define the war in racial rather than moral terms.

After the 1966 Meredith March Against Fear, where the Black Power slogan was popularized by Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), King and the SCLC started to lose ground to other, more militant, black political groups. The elections of Stokely Carmichael and Floyd McKissack as the leaders of SNCC and CORE respectively in 1965 moved these groups into a more radical stance of black nationalism more akin to Malcolm X than Martin Luther King Jr. These groups, along with the National Urban League and the Black Panther Party in California, were growing in support amongst young blacks, especially in the northern inner cities. King’s slogan of ‘Freedom Now’ had been replaced by ‘Black Power’ in a rejection of assimilation into the dominant white culture.¹⁸⁰ The Black Panther Party, particularly advocated armed self-defence against the oppression of white society. This offered an alternative rhetoric to blacks in the North who were

¹⁷⁸ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 303.

¹⁷⁹ Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days; An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 259.

¹⁸⁰ Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 196.

frustrated by King's non-violent, love your enemies approach. In addition, King's campaigns in the North had not met the same success as in the South. There was no overt, legal segregation to challenge, no "Bull" Connor setting police dogs and fire hoses on black school children to garner popular sympathy for their cause. The problems blacks faced in the North were endemic in many ways, and could not be easily fixed with a few protest marches. To many urban blacks, King's message was irrelevant to their situation. They had not benefited from the southern campaigns and were attracted to leaders who seemed better able to deal with their problems. King was thus losing support from much of the black community as well as the white. By the time he was assassinated King was at best a controversial, at worst irrelevant, figure in American society.¹⁸¹

The last two to three years of King's life, therefore, pose a real problem in creating a legacy for him that fits within the American collective identity. As a way to deal with this issue, the non-threatening, integrationist King has been absorbed in the national memory to the neglect of the controversial, radicalized Martin Luther King Jr. Adam Fairclough, in his examination of the legacy of Dr. King, argues that "The bullet fired by James Earl Ray clothed King in martyrdom: Critics fell silent; even enemies hid their venom. Revered by blacks, saluted even by erstwhile white opponents, King has become a national icon, the symbol of a momentous and ultimately triumphant struggle."¹⁸² Various groups in American society have an interest in shaping the public memory of King to their own ends. Both those on the left and the right of the political spectrum have tried to associate themselves and their position with King's growing legacy. It is not just those who are still campaigning for African American rights and the rights of the poor who use King's memory. Those who hold opinions that appear in some respects contrary to King's goals still try to construct his memory to help validate their position. "Martin Luther King, Jr. suffers the fate of every human being – when you are dead you belong to the ages. People can distort your positions and use them for their own purposes."¹⁸³

For example, the memory of Dr. King has been utilized by some conservatives to attack affirmative action policies. These controversial policies were instigated in the early 1970s as a way of achieving greater minority representation in particular professions and educational institutions. From their inception these statutes provoked outrage from many quarters of the black

¹⁸¹ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 303.

¹⁸² Adam Fairclough, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam," *Phylon* 45 (1st Quarter, 1984) : 20.

¹⁸³ Mary Frances Berry, "Vindicating Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Road to a Color-Blind Society," *Journal of Negro History* 81 (Winter-Autumn, 1996) : 143.

and white communities, a sentiment that has not died away over the years. In California, for example, Ward Connerly, a black conservative businessman, led a campaign in the 1990s to end affirmative action in state higher education admission policies. A University of California regent, Connerly has gained national attention for the success of Proposition 209 to end affirmative action in the state. Connerly utilized the memory of Dr. King, opening his National Campaign Against Affirmative Action on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1997. Connerly contended that the aim of his campaign was to “fight to get the nation back on the journey that Dr. King laid out.”¹⁸⁴ He argued that King’s memory had been subverted by liberals who wanted to patronize the black community by implying that they could not achieve anything without white help. Dr. King envisioned a color-blind society, which Connerly argued would not come from any type of affirmative action campaigns. Indeed, even those who believe that King would have supported affirmative action, do not all allege that he would have done so at any cost. Some critics contend that the anti-affirmative action lobby has tried to simplify and distort King’s rhetoric by arguing that it will eventually undermine the position of minorities in society by appointing them to positions for which they are not ready and in which they cannot succeed. Affirmative action left unchecked may do that, and as King contended in seeming support of Connerly’s position, “in asking for something special, the Negro is not seeking charity...He does not want to be given a job he cannot handle...Giving a pair of shoes to a man who has not learned to walk is a cruel jest.”¹⁸⁵

Self-styled ‘color-blind conservatives’ have alleged that they are the ones continuing the legacy that Martin Luther King Jr. left behind. Their main argument that they have championed the true aims of the Civil Rights Movement is drawn from King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech in which he asserted, “I have a dream 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.”¹⁸⁶ Affirmative action, so the logic goes, works contrary to those principles. Opponents contend that King would be outraged that his memory has been used to support such a system. Right-wing political commentator Rush Limbaugh argued that all those who identify themselves as color-

¹⁸⁴ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 25.

¹⁸⁵ C. Raymond Barrow, “Martin Luther King and Affirmative Action,” *Proteus* 15 (1998) : 39.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

blind conservatives believe that King's dream had been "perverted by modern liberalism."¹⁸⁷

Historian Mary Frances Berry takes issue with this usurpation and misrepresentation of King's words and claims that in selecting this one sentence out of the vast collection of Dr. King's rhetoric "they abuse him, freeze him in time, define him as a one dimensional man, distance him from his other statements and the context of his times."¹⁸⁸

King's later speeches have been neglected, particularly when assessing his position on the issue of affirmative action, in favour of the 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. Harry Reed contends that this early speech was easier for people to accept due in part to "a perception that the speech made the solution of the race problem in America appear easy and simplistic."¹⁸⁹ In the "I Have a Dream" speech King presented his vision of the ideal society that had moved so far beyond racism that color was no longer a issue. As his thinking moved to address issues of urban poverty and an unjust power structure, King acknowledged that America had not become the perfect society he had dreamt of but argued that measures could and should be taken in order to advance the position of African Americans in society. In his book *Why We Can't Wait*, published in 1964, King contended that "It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we did not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on an equal basis?"¹⁹⁰

Some King scholars contend that his speeches and writings do call for compensatory measures, such as affirmative action. C. Raymond Barrow falls into this group but argues that King would have distinguished between affirmative action in principle and affirmative action as practice.¹⁹¹ He further contends, "To the extent that the intent of affirmative action is and always has been to reduce segregation by increasing the representation of minorities in institutions in which they have historically been excluded or underrepresented, then it is clear from King's words that he would have approved of affirmative action in principle."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed; A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (Montgomery, Alabama: New South Books, 2000) , 249.

¹⁸⁸ Berry, "Vindicating Martin Luther King Jr.," 137.

¹⁸⁹ Reed, "Martin Luther King Jr.," 151.

¹⁹⁰ Berry, "Vindicating Martin Luther King, Jr.," 140.

¹⁹¹ Barrow, "Martin Luther King and Affirmative Action," 37.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

An example of King's words that call for preferential treatment for minority groups comes from *Why We Can't Wait*, in which he asserts that "it is obvious that if a man is entering the starting line of a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner."¹⁹³ Norman Lockman believes that King's writings in 1967 demonstrate that not only was he a supporter of what we now call affirmative action, but he was a proponent of outright quotas. He illustrates this with King's assertion that "The insistence on educational certificates and credentials for skilled and semiskilled jobs is keeping Negroes out of both the private business sector and government employment. Negro exclusion is not the purpose of the insistence upon credentials, but it is the inevitable consequence today. The orientation of personnel offices should be 'Jobs First, Training Later'."¹⁹⁴

The family of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has fought to maintain control over his legacy. This desire to control the memory of King concerns both his written and oratorical statements, as well as image. The family is protective of this legacy and seeks to be the ones that construct King's memory within the collective identity. This may be a futile effort, as memory is influenced by a complex variation of factors, and with a high profile and politically useful figure such as King, there are many factions looking to have influence over his public commemoration. The King Estate, led by his wife Coretta Scott King and later by his son Dexter, has been active in creating public commemorations to Dr. King. They established the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in his home town of Atlanta and seek to educate visitors to the city about Dr. King and his legacy. Critics argue that the Center is more about indoctrinating visitors in the memory of King that the family wants to foster rather than encouraging serious scholarly research into King's life and works. Restricting access to Dr. King's works, the family seeks to construct a collective memory of King that is created in the best possible light.

In the 1990s there was a lengthy dispute between the King family and Boston University about the housing of a portion of King's papers. After his home in Montgomery had been bombed and attacks made on his life, King began to acknowledge that his manuscripts and other papers might not be secure in his home. King considered placing the papers at Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he gained his undergraduate degree. Due to his strong friendships with

¹⁹³ Norman A. Lockman, "Martin Luther King Jr.: A Sturdy Advocate of Affirmative Action," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 24 (Summer 1999) : 130.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

several faculty members and administrators at Boston University, however, King decided to send his papers north for safe-keeping. Whether King intended for the papers to remain there only temporarily until it was safe for them to be returned was a matter of dispute between the university and Coretta Scott King. Boston University claimed that as King had given them the papers, and it was his alma mater, the papers should remain in Boston. Coretta King contended that the papers were part of King's Estate and therefore the property of the King family to do with as they desired. Coretta King also appealed to regional affinity, arguing that King's papers belonged back in the South. In December 1987 Coretta Scott King sued Boston University for the possession of King's papers. The University offered to send photocopies south, but when the King Center demanded the originals the school countersued, requesting that the Center hand over its documents dating after 1964. In May 1993 a Boston jury eventually ruled that King's papers should remain where they were, with half in Boston and half in Atlanta. When the dispute started the scholarly community almost unanimously supported Coretta Scott King, if only to have all the papers housed together in one place. At the time the issue of relocating all of King's documents to the National Archives in Washington DC had not been not yet been raised. By 1993, however, many King scholars favored Boston University as the most suitable place to house the papers, noting that the King Center's last professional archivist had left in 1988.¹⁹⁵ Civil Rights activist and Georgia Congressman Julian Bond argues that the ideal place for the King papers would be "some place where proper care, stewardship and availability are prominent, and none of these things is true at the King Center."¹⁹⁶

The majority of the American public may not be aware, or even care, where King's papers are housed. The public reaction to the King family's attempt to construct his memory stems largely from the family's demands for payments for the use of his words and image. The family contends that these documents belong to them, and they should be financially compensated for their usage. Coretta King argues that as Martin Luther King Jr. did not take a wage from his work in the movement and any money that he did make was put back into the campaigns, he left them with no financial security. As all he left them were his words and image, they have a right to use those for profit as it is what Dr. King would have wanted. This has met with hostility from many sources, including the general public, as they believe that King's image and his words belong to

¹⁹⁵ Gary Daynes, "Fighting for an Authentic Past; The Commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. in Atlanta, Georgia," *Atlanta History* 41 (1997) : 21.

¹⁹⁶ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 258.

history and a value should not be placed upon them. Dr. King “can’t be a symbol for the ages and a symbol for profit at the same time, the reasoning goes.”¹⁹⁷

The King family, however, secured the right to control the commercial exploitation of King’s image in a 1982 lawsuit. The King Estate successfully litigated a case against an Ohio-based company called American Heritage Products Inc. which was selling a plastic bust of Dr. King for \$29.95. The court ruled that the copyright of King’s image belonged to his estate.¹⁹⁸ The family claimed that such products did a disservice to King’s memory, and that the family should have control of his image to ensure the integrity of its use. In 1996 the King family agreed to start licensing merchandise containing King’s image and words, with the profits to go back into the King Center in Atlanta.¹⁹⁹ The King family is thus committed to the control of the commemoration of Dr. King and its members have been active participants in the construction and manipulation of King’s image in the national collective memory.

The attempt by the King family to control his memory has angered some of King’s closest advisors and friends. Rev. Ralph Abernathy was with King from the early bus boycott days through to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where he was assassinated. He served as confidant to King, and the two men worked together to achieve considerable success for the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas King’s name and image have been enveloped in the national memory, Abernathy is known only to scholars of the movement. Neither man was involved in the desegregation campaigns for the fame that it would bring, but Abernathy’s family believes that some acknowledgment and recognition should go to him for his dedication and sacrifice to the cause. The names of the thousands of people who sat-in, marched, and went to jail across the South to achieve the end of Jim Crow are largely lost to history. Individual efforts have been deemed less important than the achievements of the collective whole, except when it comes to Dr. King, who has been singled out for recognition both in his lifetime and through to the present day. Ralph Abernathy’s son, Ralph David Abernathy III, who grew up calling Dr. King ‘uncle’ and spending much time in close contact with the King family, now blames the Kings for the lack of recognition given to his father. He argues that through their determined efforts to construct a memory for King and elevate him to martyrdom, they have lost sight of the values with which

¹⁹⁷ John Blake, *Children of the Movement: the Sons and Daughters of Martin Luther King Jr. and Others Real how the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Transformed Their Families* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2004) , 105.

¹⁹⁸ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 260.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

King should be associated. The younger Abernathy believes that this has financial motivation. The King family, he argues, is so preoccupied with cashing in on the King legacy that they actively try to block any attempt to focus on other leaders of the movement. “They’re making millions of dollars off of Martin. They don’t want to share that limelight.”²⁰⁰

Because of his criticism, Abernathy admits that he does not associate with the King family now. The King family has also severed ties with many other members of Dr. King’s former inner circle. Abernathy may be simply upset that his own father has failed to reach the level of national esteem accorded Dr. King, but it is evident that many scholars and former activists are not happy with the way that the King family has attempted to maintain control over his legacy and consciously construct the public memory of King according to their own agenda. Civil Rights activist, Hosea Williams, a close advisor of King, questions the establishment of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta as the best way to continue King’s works. “If there was just a certain amount of money to use, I think he [King] would have spent it feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and redeeming the soul of the nation. Secondary would have been the preservation of history. We kind of have our priorities mixed up.”²⁰¹

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis on April 4, 1968 by a shooter later identified as James Earl Ray, though some conspiracy theorists still dispute this. Within four days of the murder Congressman John Conyers Jr. introduced a bill into the US House of Representatives seeking to make Dr. King’s birthday a federal holiday. The bill was quickly defeated but the issue would not go away. Over the next two decades the concept of commemorating Dr. King by a federal holiday continued to be lobbied by African American groups and their white allies. Whether a day off work was the most appropriate way to honor Dr. King was still being debated years after Congress passed the federal holiday resolution in 1983. Clearly, King did not pass easily into the role of universally accepted hero, and even some of those who value King as a man and an activist, question if this is the best way to construct his memory as a part of the collective identity.²⁰²

Despite Representative Conyers’ bill being defeated, memorial events celebrating January 15, King’s birthday, began to emerge spontaneously across the nation. They had no official

²⁰⁰ Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 55.

²⁰¹ Daynes, “Fighting for a Authentic Past,” 5.

²⁰² Matthew Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days; An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 258.

sanction, but many people observed the day marching in his honor or remembering the campaigns in which he was involved. This was a popular outpouring that demonstrated the need of many to commemorate this man in some way. In predominantly black areas some black employees took the day off, and many black-owned businesses closed for the day as a mark of respect. This sentiment had grown so strong so quickly that on January 15, 1969, less than a year after his death, many schools with a large black enrollment closed or only stayed in session for half of the day.²⁰³ In 1971 the SCLC took a petition to Congress with 3 million signatures on it calling for a federal holiday to mark Dr. King's birthday. Although this represented only a small percentage of the American population, it did signify a commitment of many to continue campaigning for national recognition for Dr. King.

Many individual states responded to this call for commemoration of Dr. King's birthday and enacted legislation of their own. Politicians, confronted with a rare instance where justice and self interest converged, were beginning to realise the importance of appealing to the black electorate and representing their needs and interest. Illinois became the first state in 1973, followed by Massachusetts and Connecticut (both in 1974) and then New Jersey in 1975, to sanctify January 15 as a public holiday. President Carter acknowledged this movement to commemorate King and lobbied Congress in 1979 to create a holiday for Dr. King, but the legislation met defeat in the House later that year. While a growing number of states were acknowledging King's achievements and seeking to solidify his legacy, the federal government was still resisting elevating King to the status of Washington, Columbus, and Lincoln, the only other individuals at that time to have federal holidays in their honor.²⁰⁴

Opposition to a King holiday came from many quarters and took three major forms. Firstly, it was objected to on the basis of economics. This opposition accepted that Dr. King was worthy of national commemoration but argued that the economic impact of another paid holiday would be too costly to absorb. With ten federal holidays already in existence, the economic argument went, the US economy could not afford another day of paying workers for no productivity. In the economic argument, King himself was almost a side issue. The opponents did not have to enter the debate about whether King deserved this level of recognition but simply appealed to the government's interest in the bottom line. Whoever the holiday was for, so the

²⁰³ Ibid., 261,

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 262.

logic went, the nation could not afford to provide another paid vacation day.²⁰⁵ In response to this line of argument, Senator Birch Bayh (D. Illinois) responded “The cost? What are the costs of a national holiday? Perhaps more rightly, what are the costs of not having a holiday? What are the costs of second-class citizenship?”²⁰⁶

The second argument credited Dr. King for his contributions to American society and did not dispute that he was a very influential figure. They argued, however, that there were scores of other equally deserving people who would not be similarly honored by a federal holiday. They acknowledged that King had made a great impact but contended that he failed to merit his own official day above and beyond many others who had made similar contributions. This argument utilized the divisions already becoming apparent within the Civil Rights Movement itself insisting that King was just one of the many leaders of the movement and to elevate him in such a public way did a disservice to the memory of all those without whom King’s achievements would not have been possible. This type of objection did not disagree that Dr. King was special and should be remembered for his good works but simply contended that he was not special enough to warrant recognition on a national stage.²⁰⁷

The third type of opposition was the most controversial and went to the heart of the issue of whether Dr. King could be constructed as a hero in the collective American memory. While acknowledging that Dr. King did make contributions to American society, this objection contended that these contributions were obliterated by his alleged shortcomings. It focused on the accusations that King plagiarized much of his doctoral thesis and that he was a philanderer, continuing to engage in many affairs while married to his wife Coretta. These arguments hit at the moral integrity of the man, and the logic was that even if the rumours and allegations proved to be untrue, the mere fact that they had been raised at all rendered Dr. King an inappropriate idol. A national icon, they argued, should be above reproach, and as much as his family tried to quash these charges, King was not.²⁰⁸

The lobbyists for the commemoration of Dr. King eventually won out, however, and in 1983 Congress voted to establish the third Monday in January as a national holiday, which celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. Ironically, President Ronald Reagan, a man

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 262.

²⁰⁶ William H. Wiggins Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 142.

²⁰⁷ Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 262.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 262.

regarded by many civil rights activists as hostile to their cause, signed the bill into law on November 3 of that year, and it was observed for the first time in 1986. The legislation authorizing King Day expressly provided no federal funds for the celebration.²⁰⁹

The newly-established King holiday did not meet with instant success, however, as many states dragged their feet on giving the holiday full recognition.²¹⁰ The Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, which had been established by Congress in 1984 to promote the commemoration, nearly a decade later investigated the level of recognition of the holiday in terms of employees being given the day off work. The Commission's report found that worker participation in Martin Luther King Jr. Day had increased from 23% in 1991 to 31% in 1993. Although these figures were well behind those for Christmas, New Year, Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Labor Day, which all averaged worker participation around 99%, it compared favourably with Presidents Day and Veterans Day, which were at 45% and 20% respectively in 1985.²¹¹ Still, King Day seemed at risk of becoming just a date on the calendar without any widespread recognition or commemoration. In an attempt to regulate the first official celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the Federal Holiday Commission, which was headed by Coretta Scott King, issued guidelines on proper King commemorations. On the list of inappropriate commemorations were "advocating a single issue, participating in civil disobedience, and levelling personal attacks against individuals, organizations or nations." The Commission did declare that "naming buildings after Dr. King, ringing bells, studying King's life at church, using commercial advertising to teach about King, and signing the 'living the dream' card were all appropriate."²¹²

As it fell to the discretion of private businesses whether to provide their employees with a paid vacation to participate in Martin Luther King Jr. Day, at first it was just the federal government, retail banking operations and the post office which took the day off. In 1993 at least three of the major Hollywood studios, Disney, Universal and Fox, did not recognize the day. A spokesperson for MCA, the parent company of Universal declared that "This Corporation has made the decision that Martin Luther King Day is not a holiday."²¹³ In 1998, however, Jesse

²⁰⁹ Daynes, "Fighting for an Authentic Past," 17.

²¹⁰ "The Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Remains Unobserved at Some Prestigious College Campuses," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 27 (Spring 2000) : 48.

²¹¹ Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 264.

²¹² Daynes, "Fighting for an Authentic Past," 17.

²¹³ Janice Castro, "Thanks for the Memories," *Time* (25 January 1993) : 15.

Jackson, who had been an aide to Dr. King and was with him when he was assassinated, successfully lobbied the major stock and commodities exchanges to close on the holiday for the first time. This was of great significance as many companies could not do profitable business if the markets were not trading. King Day, therefore, began to be recognized by more industries and workers were increasingly given the day off. Yet the contentions and conflicts over Martin Luther King Jr. Day did not end there. In 1998 a survey undertaken by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* found that of the twenty-five top universities in America, nine of them did not close in order to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day. In 2000 the same survey revealed that the figure had fallen to five out of the top twenty-seven schools, with seven having their administrative offices staying open on the federal holiday.²¹⁴ The argument of these schools was that most of the major universities did not cancel classes for other federal holidays such as Columbus Day and Presidents Day, which also fall during the academic year and recognize significant people in the nation's history. Many institutions, both public and private, were clearly unwilling to elevate Dr. King above other contributors to the national identity.²¹⁵

The battle over the recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day as an actual holiday by all the states was also far from over. Though most states had followed the federal example and legislated the holiday in some form, by 1990 Arizona, Montana, New Hampshire, and South Carolina had yet to mandate recognition of the day. New Hampshire decided in 2000 to follow the example set by Utah which had celebrated a Human Rights Day from 1986 until 2000, when the Governor of Utah signed legislation renaming the holiday as Martin Luther King Jr. Day. New Hampshire created a state Civil Rights Day to be celebrated on the third Monday in January, self-consciously avoiding any recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Clearly the New Hampshire legislature believed that the cause, not the man, was worthy of national commemoration, and argued that their holiday could better represent all those people who worked to make the Civil Rights Movement possible.²¹⁶ This action followed the logic of opposition to the holiday that claimed while King achieved good things, he was not above others who failed to be similarly honored. New Hampshire attempted to find a middle ground. They acknowledged the importance of the Civil Rights Movement and the thousands of people who participated in the movement. They also placed emphasis on the ongoing importance of civil rights to American

²¹⁴ n.a., "The Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Remains Unobserved at Some Prestigious College Campuses," 48.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

²¹⁶ Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 262-3.

society, an importance which, they contended, transcended the contributions of one man. This holiday thus sought to commemorate the events that King helped to bring about without elevating him into some kind of martyr figure.

Whereas New Hampshire was able to find a compromise on the issue of observing Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the process was far more complex and contentious in Arizona. The chain of controversy began in 1986, the first year that the new King holiday was to be officially observed nationwide. As had taken place in many other states, the Arizona Governor, Democrat Bruce Babbitt, issued an executive order to create a paid Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Arizona, on the third Monday in January, thus bringing the state into line with the majority of the nation. The following year, however, Babbitt was succeeded as Governor by Republican Evan Mecham. Mecham rescinded the executive order by which Martin Luther King Jr. Day had been established and offered in its place a Civil Rights Day, which would be observed on a Sunday.²¹⁷

Mecham clearly fit two of the opposition types to the holiday previously laid out. Firstly, he wanted to remove King's name from the day. He either believed that King was not worthy of commemoration due to the controversies over his private life, or he believed that King should not be honored above others of similar achievement. The latter position is more likely, as Mecham chose to rename the day in honor of the Civil Rights cause. The movement as a whole deserved commemoration, without just focusing on one man. By proposing that the new Civil Rights Day fall on a Sunday, Mecham opposed the economic drain that another paid holiday would cause. Placing the day on a Sunday left people in the state to observe the day according to their own personal preferences and did not negatively impact the economy of the state. Mecham believed that he was proposing a fair compromise on the issue of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, but his suggestions did not meet with a favourable response from some in the Arizonian electorate.

Governor Mecham's proposals to abolish King Day in favour of an unpaid Civil Rights Day caused state-wide and national controversy. Ten thousand Arizonans who were in support of a holiday honoring Dr. King marched on the Arizona State Capitol, and their campaigns and protests led to the inclusion of two initiatives on the 1990 state-wide ballot. In Arizona African Americans only constituted 3% of the state's population, according to the 1990 consensus.²¹⁸ On the 1990 ballot Proposition 301 proposed to eliminate Columbus Day as a paid state holiday and

²¹⁷ Nicholas O. Alozie, "Political Tolerance Hypotheses and White Opposition to a Martin Luther King Holiday in Arizona," *Social Science Journal* 32 (1995) : 3.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

replace it with Martin Luther King Jr. Day. This would keep the total number of state holidays at ten, so not placing any extra financial burden on the state. Proposition 302 proposed the creation of an eleventh paid state holiday, which would allow for the celebration of both Columbus Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Both of these measures were defeated by the electorate. Clearly Arizonans were reluctant to acknowledge the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.²¹⁹

The result of this ballot had repercussions for the state beyond whether there would be a new paid holiday or not. Before the election, the National Football League (NFL) threatened to disqualify Phoenix as the host city for the 1993 Super Bowl if the voters rejected the Martin Luther King Jr. Day initiatives. After the defeat of both propositions, the NFL made good on its threat and removed the Super Bowl from Phoenix. The city lost an estimated \$200 million in projected revenues from the game.²²⁰ In 1992 the issue of establishing a Martin Luther King Jr. Day was on to the state ballot again. Proposition 300 advocated the consolidation of the celebration of Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays into one Presidents Day and the creation of a separate paid Martin Luther King Jr Day. That would maintain the number of paid holidays at 10, while not losing Columbus Day from the state calendar. This creation of a consolidated Presidents Day in order to establish a Martin Luther King Jr. Day had essentially been the national model, and was viewed as a way to diffuse local tensions. Proposition 300 passed with 61.2% of the vote. Arizona thus became the only state to approve the creation of a holiday to Dr. King by popular affirmation, reaching a compromise on which the majority of the people agreed.²²¹ After Proposition 300 was passed, the NFL decided to award the state the 1996 Super Bowl.²²²

After the resolution of the issue in Arizona, South Carolina was left as the only state without an official celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Employees had the choice of observing the federal Martin Luther King Jr. Day, or one of several Confederate holidays throughout the year, including a commemoration of the first shots of the Civil War and Robert E. Lee's birthday.²²³ Falling on January 19, Robert E. Lee's birthday is still celebrated in South Carolina as well as several other southern states. Often Martin Luther King Jr. Day is celebrated together with Lee's birthday, a combination which defied any kind of logic. Though allowing for

²¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

²²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²²¹ Ibid., 4.

²²² Ibid., 15.

²²³ Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 263.

the recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, South Carolina maintained the controversy with its insistence on flying the Confederate battle flag over the State House in Columbia. Martin Luther King Jr. Day had come to serve as a political battleground over identity and heritage, “a forum to restage symbolically the civil rights struggles of the 1960s; if not the Civil War of the 1860s.”²²⁴ The display of the Confederate flag in Columbia dated back only to 1962, when it had been raised as a sign of defiance to the ongoing events of the Civil Rights Movement. Changing social and political climates can threaten accepted identities and thus heighten the appeal of the past. By challenging the established order the Civil Rights Movement prompted white South Carolinians to reassert and find solace in their past. The hoisting of the Confederate flag was a demonstration of a desire to return to a situation that maintained the traditional political and racial relationships in the state and was a reaction against outside intervention in trying to overcome the segregated conditions.

In the 1990s the flying of the Confederate flag again became a prominent political issue as a reaction against a federally mandated commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement. States Rights advocates contended that it was at the discretion of the people of the individual states to decide which figure they wanted to honor and what events they wanted to process into the collective memory. Seeing this as a stalwart attempt to resist the social changes that had occurred in the last third of the twentieth century and designed to insult the black population of America and South Carolina in particular, starting in January 2000 the NAACP imposed a tourism boycott of the state. It urged blacks, and their supporters, not to visit South Carolina to deprive the state of their tourist dollars. Begun around Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the boycott did succeed in inflicting a detrimental economic impact. That this situation erupted out of proposals for a King Day highlighted how certain parts of the nation were not ready to absorb King and the Civil Rights Movement into the collective memory and were certainly not prepared to include it in the American national identity. The issue of Martin Luther King Jr. Day remains not fully resolved. With “its stakes clearer and higher than those of older national holidays, [it] is a work in progress, still being shaped, still being contested, still in the process of becoming ‘traditional’.”²²⁵

Although still a source of some contention, Martin Luther King Jr. Day has now been a federal holiday for nearly twenty years, so some discussion as to its impact and significance may

²²⁴ Ibid., 276.

²²⁵ Ibid., 280.

be appropriate. When the holiday was first initiated, the chief of staff of the King Federal Holiday Commission, Alan Minton, argued that the primary goal of the Commission was to ensure that Martin Luther King Jr. Day became an American, not just African American holiday.²²⁶ To some degree that goal has been achieved. Recognized by all states, the holiday is observed by workers across the nation to a greater degree than some other federal holidays. Commemoration efforts to mark the day receive national press and news media coverage, and children in classrooms across America learn about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. Yet does this general commemoration detract from the main purpose of the day? Will, and should, Martin Luther King Jr. Day remain a holiday more significant to the African American community than the broader American public? Just as celebrations of Emancipation Day and Memorial Day after the Civil War fostered a pride amongst blacks, an occasion to celebrate themselves and their achievements, should King Day serve this purpose in the twentieth century? By America as a whole, through its public commemoration, laying claim to the memory of Dr. King, does this in turn detract from his importance in representing the African American community?

When Martin Luther King Jr. Day was established in 1986, the future Republican Speaker of the House, New Gingrich, declared, “No one can claim Dr. King. He transcends all of us.”²²⁷ If King, therefore, has come to symbolize all things to all people, has he lost the power to represent a period of history so important to the past, and to the future, of blacks in America? For some in African American circles, mainstream endorsement of Martin Luther King Jr. almost by definition undermined his status as a champion of black resistance. They questioned whether white motives were pure for creating public commemorations of Dr. King. “Was King – or rather, the particular King sanctified in public – too convenient a hero?”²²⁸ In creating the holiday was the white elite power structure seeking to construct their own view of King and insert this into the collective memory? This would be another way to control his memory and ensure that the assimilationist, non-violent King was the King who was preserved in the national consciousness. By allowing African Americans to set the terms of King’s commemoration, the result may not have been a non-threatening consensus icon that at the same time can symbolize all

²²⁶ Ibid., 266.

²²⁷ Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993) : 166.

²²⁸ Dennis, *Red , White and Blue Letter Days*, 268.

things to all people, but also nothing to anybody. In his comparison of the public commemorations of President Lincoln and Dr. King, Scott A. Sandage observes that the “heavy hand of official memory is now sculpting King into the kind of consensus hero made of Lincoln in the 1910s.”²²⁹ Following this logic, on the first official observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1986 the *New York Times* acknowledged that there were forces at work sculpting the official memory of Dr. King. It argued that while in 1967 King had failed to make a Gallup Poll list of the ten most popular Americans, by 1986 he had been placed in the “holy trinity of American heroes; Washington, Lincoln and King.”²³⁰

Dr. King has perhaps become such an ingrained part of the national memory that his commemoration therefore becomes meaningless. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, while observed by most schools and businesses, has become simply another day off. It is an excuse for shopping and for stores to hold sales. Though some people still mark the day with marches, this is not the norm. Unlike other holidays such as Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July where there are established traditional rituals whose observance is an integral part of the holiday, King Day does not carry any official traditions other than a day of leisure. Institutionalizing the day on some level diminishes the memory of King as it encourages leisure activities and historical amnesia rather than memory, civil education, reverence, and social action, which may be more fitting tributes to King’s memory.²³¹ It is perhaps easier to carry out these events and in doing so feel that we have adequately remembered Martin Luther King Jr. rather than continue his struggle toward a more perfect union in the United States. Vincent Gordon Harding, in his discussion of the implications of the commemoration of Dr. King, contends that the price for the first national holiday honouring a black man is the development of a “massive case of national amnesia concerning who that black man really was.”²³²

The public commemorations of Martin Luther King Jr. have undergone an immense transformation since his assassination in 1968. Then he was seen by many as a trouble maker, a Communist agitator trying to upset the national status quo. His opposition to the Vietnam War and focus on the problems faced by urban blacks gained him few friends in the white power structure. He was even losing support amongst many African Americans who believed that

²²⁹ Sandage, “A Marble House Divided,” 166.

²³⁰ Quoted in Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 259.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

²³² Vincent Gordon Harding, “Beyond Amnesia: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of America,” *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987) : 469.

King's ideas had reached their limit and that it was time to try a more radical approach. He is now the only person, other than Columbus, to have a federal holiday in his honor. All of this public commemoration has come long after King was killed. The President of the National Urban Coalition argued on the observance of the first Martin Luther King Jr. Day, "Frankly, it's easier for a lot of people to honor Martin when he's safely dead and deal with him as though he were just a visionary, and not a practical and very pragmatic protestor against the status quo."²³³ This sentiment was eloquently articulated by black poet Carl Wendell Hines in the 1970s in a poem about King. Little did he realize how prophetic these words would become.

*Now that he is safely dead
let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes; They
cannot rise
To challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.²³⁴*

²³³ Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 269.

²³⁴ Harding, "Beyond Amnesia," 468.

CONCLUSION

Memory is constructed to solidify a certain version of the past in the collective identity. Whether this takes place on a local, regional, or national basis, what is clear is that memory is a battleground both in terms of how we choose to reconfigure the past and how that reflects the values of contemporary society. At a time when professional historians have been criticized for catering only to the academic elite, memory studies are all the more crucial for understanding shared past experiences and using them to create a cohesive collective identity. Memory is not an unbiased recollection of the past; rather it is open to interpretation and manipulation. These attempts at manipulation of memory have traditionally come from the power elite in society, although other racial and social groups have begun to exert control over the memory of history pertaining specifically to those groups. George Orwell's claim in *1984* that "Those who control the past control the future. Those who control the present control the past," illustrates how crucial the dynamics between history and memory are in defining the power relationships in contemporary society.²³⁵

Society chooses to remember certain events to the exclusion of others, yet when examining the values and needs of a certain society those events that we are encouraged to forget are equally important as those we try to remember. The battles over the memory of WWII through the Smithsonian's *Enola Gay* exhibit and over the Vietnam War through Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial are two important cases that illustrate that a struggle for control over the past is still ongoing and this will have long-term implications for how these events are absorbed into the collective memorial. The major criticism of both of these sites of memory, and to some extent mourning, is that they are unpatriotic displays. Pride in a nation, therefore, can only be fostered, it seems, through a sense of victory and morality, whether these qualities are true representations or not. For many Americans there seems little room in the national identity to accept and to deal with elements of the past that do not neatly fit into this patriotic projection. No nation is perfect, yet ignoring these issues does not make them go away, but simply allows them to fester, ultimately undermining the values upon which the nation places great importance.

²³⁵ Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibition," *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995) : 1037.

History and memory have occupied an increasingly contentious role in the New South. Since its defeat in the Civil War, the South has attempted to develop an alternative identity that runs parallel to the national collective memory. The myth of the Lost Cause and all the rituals that it entailed highlighted the need to manipulate the past to construct a present worth holding on to. In situations of great social and political change, memory becomes all the more contested as some use it to cling to a past that never really existed while others seek to create a society that may be contrary to the will of the majority of the population.

To heal the wounds caused by the Civil War the nation seemed to choose to act as though it had not happened, or, rather that the battles had taken place, but the issues that provoked this conflict did not exist now, if they ever had before. By choosing to remember manly valor and bravery, this affirmed the positive aspects of what the nation wanted to be. America was thus a strong nation, with dedicated young men willing to lay down their lives for what they believed. The issues that may have signified a fundamental flaw in the American model of the nation-state lay forgotten, as they could not easily be adapted into this new unified collective memory the nation so clearly desired. For a conflict that raged for four years it is interesting that to many in both the North and the (New?) South there were no losers, and the only winner was the American nation as a whole.

In the South, memory of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, the Second Reconstruction, are linked in many ways. While some southerners have tried to adapt to the changes in society wrought by the Civil Rights Movement, it has caused others to cling even tighter to the symbols and values of the past. The battle over the display and usage of the Confederate battle flag, featured on many state flags and flown over public buildings, is still continuing in America today. The inclusion of the Confederate emblem on state flags is not a practice of Confederate heritage but rather a reaction to the change brought by the Civil Rights Movement. Many states only began to include the Confederate emblem on their state flags in the 1950s and 1960s as a display of defiance against the demands and values of the Second Reconstruction. The memory of the Civil War has thus been manipulated and rewritten to provide a sanctuary myth against the perceived threat to the existing political and social order that the Civil Rights Movement would bring. That many states still refuse to remove the symbol from their flags demonstrates that the fight is not over to define the history and memory of one of America's most conflicted regions.

Although studies examining memory and identity of various events and nations began in the second half of the twentieth century, it is only recently that these techniques have been used to examine the memory of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement is in an interesting position in that its memory is still being constructed, and conflicts over how to commemorate the period are being influenced by today's society. Along with the Great Depression and the New Deal, and Second World War, the Civil Rights Movement was the most significant event in America in the twentieth century. How we choose to remember that time will not only shape the understanding of the American past but will affect the power and position of African Americans in society. The stakes are high in dealing with the memory of the Civil Rights Movement as it will define how this group is constructed in the national collective identity.

Even though it has only recently begun to be examined, the memory of the Civil Rights Movement has already become a contested subject. It has not become a debate just between blacks and whites, but between conservatives and liberals and between family and regional or national concerns. All of these groups have a vested interest in defining the memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Cultural representations of the Civil Rights Movement have been met with a mixed response from the American people. Hollywood depictions of the history of the Civil Rights Movement have come under fire from critics for distorting the events to suit the perceived notions of the existing social and political order. Two recent film successes, *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), were criticized for presenting the history of a black movement through the eyes of white men. Little attention is given to the murdered civil rights workers or to the local black community in *Mississippi Burning*, and *Ghosts of Mississippi*, a film ostensibly about the murder of Medgar Evers, focuses on a white district attorney's pursuit of justice. These films were denounced for usurpation of black history for the purposes of pacifying a white audience, even as dubious claims were made that stories that dealt with black history and characters should only be filmed by a black director. Other films that dealt with the Civil Rights Movement were made during this period, but were not the commercial successes of *Mississippi Burning* and *Ghosts of Mississippi*. This raises the question of which represents more the values of a society, a film that authentically depicts a historical event but that no one sees, or a film that manipulates the events resulting in a box office success. In answer to many critics who lament the lack of authentic representations of the Civil Rights Movement in film, perhaps more of these films do not exist, not because there is no one capable of making them, but because the majority

of the American public do not want to watch them. These films, therefore, challenge the notion that it is the political and cultural elite that define the memory of the event, as through voting with their feet, or wallet, the American public exert great control over what, and what does not, become part of the Civil Rights Movement's cultural memory.

Museums are a crucial aspect of conveying civil rights history to the public and defining its passage into the collective memory. The majority of people realize that what history they are presented with at the movie theater has had to undergo certain revisions, and may only show one side or aspect of a larger story. When we visit a museum or other historical site, however, many of us fully expect to be presented with the truth and absorb what we see and our told into our perception of that period of history. Museums carry an air of authority, perhaps derived from the visits we all made to them as children when we were prompted to accept everything they told us at face value. Museums, as much as other cultural mediums, undergo a filtering process, choosing what to display, how to organize and present the exhibits, and what text to include so as to inform, but not bore, the visitor.

The battle to control the memory and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. encompasses all of the elements that have been raised with respect to the commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement. King's family has played a crucial role in attempting to control the memory of Dr. King. Led by Dr. King's wife, Coretta Scott King, the family has established the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta in order to educate visitors about King's life and works, with particular emphasis on his non-violent leadership rather than his later, more controversial, statements concerning the position of the poor in America and the country's involvement in the war in Vietnam. The focus in public commemorations, not just those orchestrated by the King family, was on King before 1966. It is after this time that King's thinking altered, as he began to address the endemic problems faced by poor blacks in urban areas. King also started to speak out against the Vietnam War, causing a split between President Johnson and himself, arguing that it drew attention and funding away from the situation that blacks were facing in America.

The ultimate demonstration of absorbing Dr. King, and by implication the Civil Rights Movement, into the national memory came with the creation of a federal Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. The debate that ensued over the establishment of a King Day highlights that there was still controversy in attempting to place King as one of the nation's icons. The conflict that

occurred in several southern states over the adoption of the day prompted a reassertion of Confederate symbols and an apparent need to reconnect to the values of the past. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, however, seems to have become so accepted into the national consciousness it may have lost its true meaning, becoming just another day off work, just another date on the calendar.

The process is still taking place to construct the Civil Rights Movement in the American memory. What aspects of this history are remembered and commemorated, and which aspects are neglected and forgotten, will have an impact well into the twenty-first century, over the power relationship in American society between racial and social minority groups and the traditional power elite. Advances have already been made to project the memory of the Civil Rights Movement in museums and in celluloid. Contentions still rage over the most appropriate way to celebrate and memorialize the Civil Rights Movement, and increasing focus on Martin Luther King Jr. and his words and images juxtaposed against the renewed battle over the Confederate flag, indicates that this debate will not be resolved in the near future.

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