The modern black freedom struggle transformed my life, as it did the lives of many other young people. I became aware that young black students such as myself might transform America and assume new, previously unimaginable social roles. This awareness inspired my own political activism and altered my sense of racial identity and destiny. It also transformed my understanding of the black struggle as I absorbed its emergent values and began to understand its place within an previously-obscured African-American past.

I am now sometimes asked whether my previous participation in the struggle interferes with my ability to write about it. The question is meaningless because the struggle revealed the kind of history I wanted to write about. The experiences that brought me to the Capitol Historical Society's conference on Martin Luther King, Jr. can be traced to another day more than two decades earlier when I participated in my initial civil rights demonstrations and saw King for the first time.

In 1963, after completing my freshman year in college, I joined the multitudes at the March on Washington. It was a wonderful introduction to the struggle, culminating in a major historical event, King's "I Have a Dream" speech, but also punctuated with those unrecorded occurrences that forever separate history as lived from history as reconstructed by historians. The impact of the march was heightened by my initial encounters, a few days earlier, with the brash young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Participating in the march was the most politically unconventional thing I had ever done, but the meaning I attached to my involvement was shaped when Stokely Carmichael gratuitously informed me that the event was only a sanitized, middle-class version of the real black movement, which was occurring in places such as Albany, Georgia; Cambridge, Maryland; Danville, Virginia; and the Mississippi Delta. Having just emerged from the racial isolation of New Mexico, I was not yet ready to venture into the deep South battlefields where Carmichael and other SNCC workers confronted racist authorities.
For me the Washington "picnic" was an epiphany. During that one day I saw more black people than I had seen in my life. Exposed to the constantly widening range of views among activists, I saw black politics differently than before. I will never forget King's oration, but my enthusiasm was tempered by the militancy of SNCC workers, represented at the march in John Lewis's caustic speech, given shortly before King's. The very fact that SNCC existed showed me that King was only one aspect of a multi-faceted social movement.

Today, after years of political activism and ivory-tower reflection, I have now come full circle, returning to the capital to take part in another occasion dominated by King. After spending the first years of my professional life studying SNCC, I have now -- as editor of King's papers -- turned my scholarly attention to the person who was often seen as the anti-thesis of SNCC's notion of leadership from the bottom up. Having once sympathized with the young SNCC militants who were my age when they challenged King, who was then fifteen years my senior, I currently find my sympathies have shifted somewhat as I study King, who, when he died, was younger than I am now.

During the last half of the 1960s, my own youthful impatience and a measure of arrogance led me to agree with some of SNCC's criticisms of King's moderation and his firm commitment to integration and nonviolence as a way of life. In subsequent years, acknowledgment that the black power movement failed to achieve much power, or even much racial unity, has fostered a greater degree of humility in my assessment of King's alternative course. For me and for many of his youthful critics, King became wiser as we grew older. My changing views of him have been affected not only by my personal experiences, but also by the unique opportunity I have had to study the strengths and limitations of the black movement's foremost leader and its little-known shock troops.

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King's status as the main symbol of the modern African-American freedom struggle has now been sanctioned by the creation a federal holiday honoring his birth. Given this formal recognition of his historical importance, it becomes more difficult, yet also more necessary, for those of us who study and carry on King's work to counteract innocuous, carefully-cultivated image that is honored in annual
observances. The historical King was far too interesting to be encased in simplistic, didactic legends designed to offend no one -- a black counterpart to the static, heroic myths that have embalmed George Washington as the Father of His Country and Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. King was an exceptionally gifted, fascinating, and courageous individual who challenged authority and took controversial stands, such as opposing American intervention in Vietnam and mobilizing the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. He was also a leader best understood in the context of African-American history and as the product of the social movements that he has come to symbolize.

Serious students of King and of the black struggle have recognized their responsibility to understand both the nature and sources King's ideas and the historical significance and social impact of those ideas. Contemporary biographers, theologians, political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, social psychologists, and historians, many of whom are participants in this symposium, are in the process of constructing a comprehensive assessment of King that takes into account his unique qualities and experiences as well as his representative ones. The recent Pulitzer-prize-winning work of David J. Garrow and Taylor Branch have illustrated benefits of studies that combine biographical investigation combined with efforts to understand larger issues of social and historical context.1 These and other contemporary writers may benefit from and stimulate the popular interest in King spurred by the national holiday, but their probing research and critical analyses serve as a necessary corrective against myth making. This symposium provides an opportunity to acknowledge and assess this outpouring of reflective and critical works about King and to place these works within the broader literature of African-American freedom struggles throughout history.

Continued interest in King's life is justified by his exceptional abilities and his undeniable historical importance, but even biographical studies have displayed increasing sophistication regarding the relationship between the exceptional personal qualities King brought to his leadership role and the social context in which he developed and displayed his leadership abilities. The initial King

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1 David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*:

November 3, 2009
biographies were, for the most part, laudatory accounts written by King associates. Although they benefited from the authors' first-hand knowledge of King, these early accounts were not based on extensive research in primary documents. More recent biographies have taken on the task of critically assessing leadership and intellectual qualities. August Meier's 1965 essay on King and David Lewis's *King: A Critical Biography*, published in 1970, broke new ground in their acknowledgment of King's limitations as well as achievements as a civil rights leader. Both scholars saw King as part of a broader social movement that included important factions that forcefully challenged his leadership.

Neither Meier nor Lewis placed much emphasis on King's intellectual orientation -- the latter explicitly derided King's intellectual credentials -- but this deficiency has been more than rectified by numerous studies focusing on King's religious and political ideas. One line of research has focused on his contribution to Christian thought. Although King received his doctorate in systematic theology, he produced no significant writing in that field, and most scholars recognize that his main intellectual contribution was in the area of Christian social practice. King's graduate school writings and his later religious writings have been closely examined in the pioneering work of Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, published in 1974, and in subsequent efforts by Harold L. DeWolf (King's advisor at Boston) and John Ansbro. More recent studies of King's thought have stressed the interplay between his ideas and his social context. Even scholars who primarily

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seek to explicate King's ideas have increasingly recognized that his ideas derived not simply from other ideas but from the emergent ideas of social movements. Rather than emphasizing King's graduate school experiences and readings, scholars have begun to acknowledge his indebtedness to Afro-American sources and, in particular, to the tradition of black Christian activism. James P. Hanigan's work, for example, marked an important departure in the literature by discounting King's contributions as a theologian and pointing instead to his utilization of African-American religious resources.5

The symposium papers of Richard H. King and Cornell West and provide interesting contrasting perspectives approaches to the study of King's thought. The former's explication of the meaning of freedom in Martin Luther King's thought is, in some respects, narrow conceived as traditional intellectual biography, locating the sources of King's texts in his earlier readings and elucidating his ideas through references to the writings of other intellectuals. Richard King demonstrates his awareness, however, that King's writings and oratory should also be evaluated in the light of other strategies of struggle, such as SNCC's anti-charismatic model. Cornell West is similarly interested in King's intellectual life, but his emphasis on the African-American church as a source for King's ideas suggests a promising area of research for scholars moving beyond the internalist -- ideas as sources for other ideas -- approach of traditional intellectual biography and history. Other scholars who have explored the relationship between King's Christian ministry and black religious traditions and practices include Lewis V. Baldwin, James Cone, and David J. Garrow.6 Aldon Morris notes in his


November 3, 2009
symposium paper that the charismatic leadership exercised by King and other black ministers developed within the institutional context of the black church, where ministers were perceived as charismatic because they "occupied strategic positions which enabled them to become extremely familiar with the needs and aspirations of blacks."\(^7\)

There is a danger, however, that studies linking King to African-American religious thought may underestimate the extent to which King, as a religious liberal, departed from the mainstream of that tradition. Although, like other black clergymen, King used his well-developed oratorical skills to strengthen his appeal to blacks, he set himself apart from other black preachers through his use of traditional black Christian homiletics to advocate unconventional political ideas and to extend the boundaries of African-American religious thought. King's own autobiographical writings reveal that early in his life he became disillusioned with the unbridled emotionalism associated with his father's religious fundamentalism, and, as a thirteen year old, he questioned the bodily resurrection of Jesus in his Sunday School class.\(^8\) His subsequent search for an intellectually satisfying religious faith conflicted with the emphasis on emotional expressiveness that usually pervades evangelical religion. King's preaching manner was rooted in the traditions of the black church, while his subject matter, which often reflected his wide-ranging philosophical interests, distinguished him from other preachers who relied on rhetorical devices that manipulated the emotions of listeners. A religious liberal and pioneering proponent of what is now called liberation theology, King carried on a long, determined -- though unsuccessful -- struggle against the conservative leadership of the National Baptist Convention. Instead of viewing himself as the embodiment of widely held Afro-American racial values, he willingly risked his popularity among blacks as well as whites through his steadfast advocacy of Christian social activism and of militant nonviolent strategies to achieve radical social change.


\(^8\) King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," n. d. [ca. 1949], Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University. In this paper written for a college class, King commented: "I guess I accepted Biblical studies uncritically until I was about twelve years old. But this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being."
Recent scholarship of King's leadership has displayed a growing understanding of the interplay between King's exceptional oratorical abilities and the expectations and understandings of his various audiences. The King myth emphasizes his supposedly charismatic qualities as an explanation for his unique role in the struggle. Although the term "charisma" has traditionally referred to the godlike, magical qualities possessed by a certain "ideal type" of leader, in our more secular age it has lost many of its religious connotations and now refers to a wide range of leadership styles that involve the capacity to inspire -- usually through oratory -- emotional bonds between leaders and followers. Arguing that King was not a charismatic leader in the broadest sense of the term, becomes somewhat akin to arguing that he was not a Christian, but emphasis on King's charisma obscures other important aspects of his role in the black movement. To be sure, King's oratory was exceptional and many people saw King as a divinely inspired leader, but King did not receive and did not want the kind of unquestioning support that is often associated with charismatic leaders. He was a profound and provocative public speaker as well as an emotionally powerful one. Emphasis on King's charisma conveys the misleading notion of a movement held together by spellbinding speeches and blind faith rather than by a tenuous blend of rational and emotional bonds.

Not only did King's supposed charisma fail to place him above criticism, he was, to the contrary, never able to gain mass support for his notion of nonviolent struggle as a way of life, rather than simply a tactic. Most movement activists saw King not as their unquestioned commander but as the most prominent among many outstanding movement strategists, ideologues, theologians, and institutional leaders. King used charisma as a tool for mobilizing black communities, but he always used it in the context of other forms of intellectual and political leadership reflecting his academic training and suited to a movement containing many strong leaders. King undoubtedly recognized that charisma was one of many leadership qualities at his disposal, but he also recognized that charisma was not a sufficient basis for leadership in a modern political movement enlisting numerous self-reliant leaders. Moreover, he rejected aspects of the charismatic model that conflicted with his sense of his own limitations.
Rather than exhibiting unwavering confidence in his power and wisdom, King was a leader full of self-doubts, keenly aware of his own limitations and human weaknesses. He was at times reluctant to take on the responsibilities suddenly and unexpectedly thrust upon him. Scholars have only begun to understanding the significance of King's evolving religious beliefs as a crucial foundation of his leadership abilities and political attitudes. David Garrow, for example, has stressed the importance of the "kitchen experience" during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, when King was overcome with fear as a result of threats to his life and to the lives of his wife and child. Rather than confident and secure in his leadership role, King was able to carry on only after acquiring an enduring understanding of his dependence on a personal God who promised never to leave him alone.\(^9\) Despite the fact that many King biographies have already been written, a full understanding of King's unique qualities will require further investigation of his deep roots in the black Baptist church and of values he acquired during his formative years in Atlanta's thriving black community.

Although King biographies and King-centered studies of the black struggle continue to appear, serious writers have moved beyond hagiography and have challenged the notion of King as the modern black struggle's initiator and indispensable leader. As in other historical myths, a Great Man is seen as the decisive factor in the process of social change, and the unique qualities of a leader are used to explain major historical events. The King myth departs from historical reality because it attributes too much to King's exceptional leadership qualities as a leader and too little to the impersonal, large-scale social forces that made it possible for King to display his singular abilities on a national stage. Because the myth emphasizes King rather than his social context, it exaggerates King's considerable contribution to the black advancement without acknowledging his indebtedness to other organizers and activists who set the stage for his appearance in a leading role. Scholars should avoid the extremes of, on the one hand, debunking efforts that unfairly diminish King's achievements, and, on the other hand, King-centered accounts that attribute more to him that is warranted. Robert

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Moses's apt metaphor, offered in his commentary, of the movement as "an ocean of consciousness" provides a framework for understanding the unique and considerable wave that was King's leadership.

Scholars who examine King primarily as a civil rights leader must determine not only the nature of his ideas but also their social impact. Scholars analyzing King's political ideas, especially his contributions to the Gandhian and African-American traditions of non-violent resistance, have often failed to determine the extent to which activists adopted King's tactics and strategies.10 The importance of James H. Cone's assessment at the symposium of King's impact on Third World liberation movements is enhanced by his decision to describe not only what King's said about those movements but also his effort to determine the impact of King's ideas on Third World activists and leaders. Cone only begins to explore an issue that requires much further research, both abroad and at home: to what extent did King's ideas actually guide the mass struggles he sought to influence? Implicitly assuming that King's role in the movement was indispensable or at least crucial to its success, King-centered scholarship has unfortunately contributed to the popular but misleading notion that most movement activists were committed to King's philosophy of nonviolence. Such scholarship has reinforced the tendency of many Americans to see King as not only the exemplar of modern black leaders, at least in the pre-Jesse-Jackson era, but as a charismatic figure who single-handedly directed the course of the civil rights movement.

Even the most perceptive King-centered studies will have limited value, unless they acknowledge that the black struggle was a locally-based mass movement rather than simply a reform movement led by national civil rights leaders.11 King was certainly not the only significant leader of the civil rights

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10 See, for example, Hanes Walton, Jr., The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971).

11 This new orientation is most clearly evident in studies of local movements, such as William H. Chafe, Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Equality (New York, 1980); David R. Colburn, Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980 (New York, 1985); Charles Fager, Selma 1965 (New York, 1974); Robert J. Norrell, Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil rights Movement in Tuskegee (New York, 1985); John R. Salter, Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and
movement, for sustained protest movements arose in many southern communities in which King had little or no direct involvement. In Montgomery, for example, local black leaders such as E. D. Nixon, Rosa Parks, and Jo Ann Robinson started the bus boycott before King became the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Thus, although King inspired blacks in Montgomery and black residents recognized that they were fortunate to have such a spokesperson, talented local leaders other than King played decisive roles in initiating and sustaining the boycott movement. Similarly, the black students who initiated the 1960 lunch counter sit-in's admired King, but they did not wait for him to act before launching their own movement. The sit-in leaders who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became increasingly critical of King's leadership style, linking it to the feelings of dependency that often characterize the followers of charismatic leaders. The essence of SNCC's approach to community organizing was to instill in local residents the confidence that they could lead their own struggles. A SNCC organizer failed if local residents became dependent on his or her presence; as the organizers put it, their job was to work themselves out of a job. Though King influenced the struggles that took place in the Black Belt regions of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, those movements were also guided by self-reliant local leaders who occasionally called on King's oratorical skills to galvanize black protesters at mass meetings while refusing to depend on his presence.

If King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did. The Montgomery bus boycott would have occurred, because King did not initiate it. Black students probably would have

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Schism (Hicksville, N. Y., 1979). A movement from King-centered biographies to more broadly conceived studies is also evident in the best works on King and the SCLC: Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens, Georgia, 1987); David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York, 1986); David L. Lewis, King: A Biography 2nd ed. (Champaign, Illinois, 1978); and Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, 1982).

rebelled -- even without King as a role model -- for they had sources of tactical and ideological inspiration besides King. Mass activism in southern cities and voting rights efforts in the deep South were outgrowths of large-scale social and political forces, rather than simply consequences of the actions of a single leader. Though perhaps not as quickly and certainly not as peacefully or with as universal a significance, the black movement would probably have achieved its major legislative victories without King's leadership, for the southern Jim Crow system was a regional anachronism, and the forces that undermined it were inexorable.

To what extent, then, did King's presence affect the movement? Answering that question requires us to look beyond the usually portrayal of the black struggle. Rather than seeing an amorphous mass of discontented blacks acting out strategies determined by a small group of leaders, we would recognize King as a major example of the local black leadership that emerged as black communities mobilized for sustained struggles. If not as dominant a figure as sometimes portrayed, the historical King was nevertheless a remarkable leader who acquired the respect and support of self-confident, grass-roots leaders, some of whom possessed charismatic qualities of their own. Directing attention to the other leaders who initiated and emerged from those struggles should not detract from our conception of King's historical significance; such movement-oriented research reveals King as a leader who stood out in a forest of tall trees.

King's major public speeches--particularly the "I Have a Dream" speech--have received much attention, but his exemplary qualities were also displayed in countless strategy sessions with other activists and in meetings with government officials. King's success as a leader was based respect for his intellectual and moral cogency and his skill as a conciliator among movement activists who refused to be simply King's "followers" or "lieutenants."

The success of the black movement required the mobilization of black communities as well as the transformation of attitudes in the surrounding society, and King's wide range of skills and attributes prepared him to meet the internal as well as the external demands of the movement. King understood the black world from a privileged position, having grown up in a stable family within a major black urban community; yet he also learned how to speak persuasively to the surrounding white world. Alone among the major civil rights leaders of his time,
King could not only articulate black concerns to white audiences, but could also mobilize blacks through his day-to-day involvement in black community institutions and through his access to the regional institutional network of the black church. His advocacy of nonviolent activism gave the black movement invaluable positive press coverage, but his effectiveness as a protest leader derived mainly from his ability to mobilize black community resources.

Analyses of the southern movement that emphasize its nonrational aspects and expressive functions over its political character explain the black struggle as an emotional outburst by discontented blacks, rather than recognizing that the movement's strength and durability came from its mobilization of black community institutions, financial resources, and grass-roots leaders. The values of southern blacks were profoundly and permanently transformed not only by King, but also by involvement in sustained protest activity and community-organizing efforts as well as through thousands of mass meetings, workshops, citizenship classes, freedom schools, and informal discussions. Rather than merely accepting guidance from above, southern blacks were resocialized as a result of their movement experiences.

Although the literature of the black struggle has traditionally paid little attention to the intellectual content of black politics, movement activists of the 1960s made a profound, though often ignored, contribution to political thinking. King may have been born with rare potential, but his most significant leadership attributes were related to his immersion in, and contribution to, the intellectual ferment that has always been an essential part of Afro-American freedom struggles. Those who have written about King have too often assumed that his most important ideas were derived from outside the black struggle—from his academic training, his philosophical readings, or his acquaintance with Gandhian ideas. Scholars are only beginning to recognize the extent to which his attitudes and those of many other activists, white and black, were transformed through their

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involvement in a movement in which ideas disseminated from the bottom up was well as from the top down.

Although such a movement-center perspective of King's role in the black struggles of his time reduces him to human scale, it also increases the possibility that others may recognize his qualities in themselves. Idolizing King lessens one's ability to exhibit some of his best attributes or, worse, encourages one to become a debunker, emphasizing King's flaws in order to lessen the inclination to exhibit his virtues. King himself undoubtedly feared that some who admired him would place too much faith in his ability to offer guidance and overcome resistance, for he often publicly acknowledged his own limitations and mortality. Near the end of his life, King expressed his certainty that black people would reach the Promised Land whether or not he was with them. His faith was based on an awareness of the qualities that he knew he shared with all people. When he suggested his own epitaph, he asked not to be remembered for his exceptional achievements-- his Nobel Prize and other awards, his academic accomplishments; instead, he wanted to be remembered for giving his life to serve others, for trying to be right on the war question, for trying to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, for trying to love and serve humanity. "I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."¹⁴ Those aspects of King's life did not require charisma or other superhuman abilities.

If King were alive today, he would doubtless encourage those who celebrate his life to recognize their responsibility to struggle as he did for a more just and peaceful world. He would prefer that the black movement be remembered not only as the scene of his own achievements, but also as a setting that brought out extraordinary qualities in many people. If he were to return, his oratory would be unsettling and intellectually challenging rather than remembered diction and cadences. He would probably be the unpopular social critic he was on the eve of the Poor People's campaign rather than the object of national homage he became after his death. His basic message would be the same as it was when he was alive, for he did not bend with the changing political winds. He would talk of ending


November 3, 2009
poverty and war and of building a just social order that would avoid the pitfalls of competitive capitalism and repressive communism. He would give scant comfort to those who condition their activism upon the appearance of another King, for he recognized the extent to which he was a product of the movement that called him to leadership.

The notion that appearances by Great men (or Great Women) are necessary preconditions for the emergence of major movements for social changes reflects not only a poor understanding of history, but also a pessimistic view of the possibilities for future social change. Waiting for the Messiah is a human weakness that is unlikely to be rewarded more than once in a millennium. Studies of the modern black freedom struggle offer support for an alternative optimistic belief that participants in social movements can develop dormant leadership abilities and collectively improve their lives.

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