History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy

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History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy

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Abstract

This article argues that President Ronald Reagan appropriated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words and memory to suggest equal opportunity in the United States had been largely achieved. Individuals—rather than the government—now had to take responsibility for any additional progress. By arguing that the dismantling of
federal civil rights laws and social programs was actually consistent with Dr. King’s words, President Reagan advanced his own agenda for civil rights in direct violation of Dr. King’s intentions, while narrowing the purview of civil rights to eliminate government intervention in employment, education, and other arenas.

All human beings draw upon their understanding of the past in order to make decisions about the future, and political leaders are no different. Not only do political leaders use their conceptions of history to guide their policy making, but they also employ the past in their messages in order to convince citizens to support particular policies and/or to create a value climate in which citizens are likely to do so (Gronbeck 1998, 54-59; Neustadt and May 1986). Evoking public memory, then, is an inherently rhetorical activity, for speakers must choose which stories from the past they desire to tell, how they wish to recount particular people and events, and what words from history they want to share. Sometimes, what politicians offer us in these rhetorical constructions are revisionist histories and messages.

According to William K. Muir, Jr., “More than any other modern president, Ronald Reagan sought to exploit the moral possibilities of the rhetorical presidency. He used his ‘bully pulpit’ to try to convince the public that his values and ideas about personal responsibility and the good society were right. In other words, he sought to change the mores of Americans” (emphasis in original; Muir 2003, 194). We believe the way in which he did so was by evoking collective memory, particularly in regard to civil rights. Indeed, the president was quite intent on changing national values and mores in this arena. In Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years, Haynes Johnson concluded that Reagan was one of the few presidents “who truly altered the condition of the country” through his policies and “affected the way people thought about it” (Johnson 1991, 455). We argue that the president attempted to change Americans’ perspectives on civil rights by invoking the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., in strategic ways. More specifically, the president employed King’s words to argue that equality of opportunity in the United States had already been accomplished, and furthermore, that individuals—rather than the government—now had to take responsibility for any additional progress that was needed. President Reagan maintained that the dismantling of federal civil rights laws and social programs was actually consistent with King’s words, and he narrowed the purview of civil rights to exclude government intervention in the economy, education, and other arenas. Through his rhetoric, Reagan prepared the public mind and heart for new public visions and new public policies. Reagan’s interpretations and reinvigorated rhetoric signified an evolving set of values and precepts that would be the centerpiece of civil rights rhetoric for decades to come.

Attention to the president’s appropriation of King gives us an opportunity to reflect on rhetorical strategies used to develop and extend history and collective memory. In particular, our analysis of Reagan’s rhetoric on civil rights not only sheds light on his presidential persuasion, but also on the kinds of civil rights policies that he ultimately adopted. Past research has examined the civil rights rhetoric of other presidents (e.g., Carcasson and Rice 1999; Goldzwig 2003; Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos 1989, 1994, 1995, 55-89; Medhurst 1994; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2000; Pauley 1999, 2001; Windt 1990, 78-84; Zarefsky 1980, 1983, 1986), but has not studied Ronald Reagan’s words on this subject. Indeed, the only exception is Vanessa Beasley’s You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric, which briefly analyzes Reagan’s discourse about race as part of her larger project examining how presidents talk about immigration, race, and gender in their inaugural addresses and State of the Union speeches. According to Beasley, Reagan’s rhetoric differed from that of his predecessors because he employed inclusive words that denied distinctions among people. She concluded, “Lamentably, however, in this view there was also no one who needed or warranted assistance, a concept that clearly distinguishes Reagan’s rhetoric from his predecessors’ ” (Beasley 2004, 117). Our effort extends work done on presidential civil rights rhetoric and also attempts to explain how Reagan ascribed a new meaning to equal rights in his discourse through his use of Martin Luther King, Jr.

This study may be particularly appropriate now that over four decades have passed since King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and also in view of Ronald Reagan’s recent death. While most news coverage of Reagan’s
passing provided nostalgic tributes to his sense of humor and communication skills and praised him for winning the Cold War, his impact on African Americans went largely unnoted. During his time in office, Reagan mocked “welfare queens” in his public discourse, cut the budget for Housing and Urban Development by more than one third in 1981 alone, fired members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights with whom he disagreed, vetoed congressional sanctions against South Africa (Congress overrode the veto), and slashed other social programs in areas such as energy assistance and training and employment that benefited many African Americans, as well as other low-income citizens (Boyd 2004, 1-2; Davidson 2004, 2-4; Howlett 2004, 1). As Howlett observed, “By 1989, the black poverty rate was triple that for whites. A decade earlier, it had been double that of whites” (2004, 1). Reagan’s appropriation of King to help justify his policies is a part of his legacy that calls for scholarly analysis. The Reagan years were a watershed, for the president’s rhetoric established a legacy that continues to influence civil rights policies, as well as the ways in which many Americans perceive them. In the pages that follow, we first discuss the rhetorical nature of history and collective memory, and the relationship between them, focusing in particular on Martin Luther King, Jr. We then turn our attention to Reagan’s appropriation of King in the president’s public messages on civil rights and, finally, briefly examine Reagan’s rhetorical legacy in setting a new civil rights agenda.

History and Collective Memory as Rhetorical Constructions: The Case of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our understanding of the past is produced symbolically, for as Gronbeck put it, “In history, the past is constructed into narratives and arguments about the significance of those narratives” (1998, 53). While we often like to think of history as universal and enduring, we also know that professional historians may account for the same events in very different ways. Turner (1998, 10-11) observed that doing history is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together, but with no box top picture for guidance and with no guarantee that one is working with a complete set of pieces. Furthermore, the pieces “are not discrete, unchanging units. They are rather more like amoebas, changing shape and significance depending on the context in which they are placed.” Historians themselves are guided by their times and by their own values and perceptions which, in turn, can shape their findings. As a result, Dee Brown provided a very different perspective on the American West in 1970’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee than previous historians had. Moreover, numerous revisionist histories have reinterpreted both foreign and domestic policies and events on such varied topics as the Civil War and the civil rights movement, as well as the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Vietnam War. Professional historians draw from acknowledged narratives of the past to forge new interpretations of the past for present audiences.

History, however, is not the only kind of rhetoric that deals with the past. The rhetoric of collective memory does so, as well. According to Hasian and Frank, “Histories are those punctuations of time that have been accepted by the majority of intellectual communities as an authentic record of past events.” On the other hand, “Collective memories . . . are the public acceptances or ratifications of these histories on the part of broader audiences” (Hasian and Frank 1999, 98). Collective memory includes a selective appropriation of the past by the multiple publics inspired by historical imagination. Collective memory, then, plays a particularly important role in the civic life of a community. This is especially salient when political actors can evoke memories of the past for strategic purposes (Browne 1999, 169-87).

And memory is often infused with myth, as with the perpetual presidential invocation of the American dream, which is premised upon constitutional principles and ideals. Walter Fisher (1973, 160-67) has argued that the American dream is composed of two mythic strands—one moralistic and one materialistic. The moralistic strand of the dream touts liberty, freedom, equality, and equal opportunity. But the American dream also embodies a second strand, that of materialism. The material side of the dream promises wealth, prosperity, a “right” to acquisition of property, goods, and services, our “freedom” of choice as consumers. Amassing material wealth,
however, may not necessarily lead to the enjoyment of equality for all. Not only are the two strands of the dream sometimes in conflict with one another, but also specific means for attaining the dream are, at times, at loggerheads. For example, Americans subscribe to equality for all, but are concerned about the means employed to achieve it, which means affirmative action is a litmus test for liberals as well as conservatives. Both camps endorse equality, but they differ over the methods one should employ to achieve this end. Thus, the American dream is conflicted by arguments over ends and means. The dream is also constrained by the largesse of its promise, which includes individual and communal happiness. Appealing to individual virtues may not be enough to effect needed systemic or structural change necessary to the welfare of the entire society. So in sum, the American dream, at its core, is premised upon the horns of a dilemma. Each invocation of the dream risks contradictions in meaning, especially in the conflicts over ends and means and in the tensions arising from individual and communal goals. Appeals striking these mythic chords of meaning, then, inevitably involve risk.

The means by which politicians can evoke the past for present purposes are also varied. However, rhetorical scholars have identified some key genres of public address that can usefully assist this process. First, deliberative or policy rhetoric may draw upon collective memory to make arguments about the future. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, for instance, recalled the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Emancipation Proclamation to advocate for civil rights (Gronbeck 1998, 55). Similarly, when the Reagan administration continued to involve the U.S. government more deeply in Central America during the 1980s, opponents began to sport buttons that read, “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.” Whether asking for a recommitment to earlier values and times or arguing by analogy, political actors frequently draw upon collective memories to legitimize their arguments about what the shape of future policy should be. The past “is appropriated, made into something useful for today, into a tool to solve some problem or block some proposal” (Gronbeck 1998, 56).

A second way in which collective memory is evoked is through epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric. When political speakers invoke the names of national heroes and events, they not only commemorate them, but also reshape our memories of them. Jasinski, for example, demonstrated how Frederick Douglass's 1852 Fourth of July oration employed ceremonial speaking for “subversive” ends by reconceptualizing the American Revolution as an ongoing process and the Constitution as institutionalizing principles of equality, rather than legitimizing slavery (Jasinski 1997, 71-89). When speakers evoke the past in ceremonial rhetoric, they also reshape it in ways that “make it more useful in the present” (Gronbeck 1998, 56).

The evocation of the American dream in collective memory is at once an epideictic and a deliberative fusion. The appeal to the dream celebrates present values while simultaneously evoking and shaping public memory. This is its epideictic mission. But because a president may package his dream discourse with policy proposals and/or announcements regarding the implementation of policy, the president often seeks a rationale for ongoing government actions (both present and future). In the context of our analysis of Ronald Reagan and Martin Luther King, the president’s discourse attempted to bolster both actions taken and actions contemplated through the invocation of King and his dream. King’s version of the American dream, however, called the country to accountability by asking America to fulfill its promise to all citizens, rather than returning to some a check marked “insufficient funds” (see King 1963b, 345). While all presidents may tend to skew collective memory and the myth of the American dream for political purposes, we argue that the method Reagan used in literally “re-presenting” King and his dream, through various ways of contextualizing and decontextualizing, was particularly egregious. Invoking the dream was at once a product of myth, ritual, and political control (see Bennett 1980).

Whether dealing with history or collective memory, we need to keep in mind their inherently rhetorical character. While narrative accounts of the past can do an excellent job of reconstructing important periods, events, and circumstances that we label “history,” it is also the case that such accounts are likely to have a
particular point of view that can influence audience reception. Megill and McCloskey (1987, 221) pointed out that “tropes, arguments, and other devices of language [are] used to write history and to persuade audiences.” In turn, historians can shape the contours of both history and collective memory. As Carole Blair (1992, 417) made clear, “Historical discourse is not magically exempt from the inherent partisanship of language use. Nor is its practice devoid of choice. Historians make intentional/presentational choices that determine the kinds of histories they compose.” As a result, all historical accounts have a rhetorical vector.

Likewise, political speakers rhetorically construct the past when they summon collective memory in deliberative and/or ceremonial messages. To a degree, of course, the act of evoking collective memory and thereby drawing “lessons from history” is grounded in “processes of oversimplification and analogical extension” (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 1992, 75). Yet, certain choices can skew much of the account. Such descriptions may not simply be wrong, but rather incomplete until or unless other accounts help compensate for their omissions. For example, in the early days after the tragic events of September 11, comparisons were made to Pearl Harbor. The analogy was flawed in many ways, but certainly evocative of the complex feelings many Americans had at the time. In other cases, political actors, in their efforts to employ memory for their present purposes, may shape it strategically to drive home specific lessons (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 1992). This may be particularly true of presidents, whose bully pulpit lends themselves easily to national education efforts, prompting one scholar to describe the president as the nation's “interpreter-in-chief” (Stuckey 1991, 1; also see Kernell 1997; Lowi 1985; Tulis 1987). Depending upon the president, his party, the particular ideology of his administration, and the special needs and requirements of his era, presidential messages will exhibit a particular worldview and set of purposes that may obstruct or even erase the message of those whose memory they invoke. Just as professional historians may vie for acceptance of their narratives by their intellectual community, presidents also vie for public acceptance of the collective memories they employ. At the same time, however, histories may serve to balance faulty constructions of public memory. As Hasian and Frank (1999, 107) cautioned, “Without the glaring gaze of official historians, we run the risk of uncritically celebrating totalizing symbolic constructs that pander to modern needs and sensibilities.” We would add that collective memory may balance official histories, as well. When the collective memories of former slaves were articulated and recorded, for example, they helped to alter the past professional histories of the institution of slavery. The rhetorics of history and cultural memory also may serve to reinforce one another, for they are not completely separate entities, but rather “entangled” (Hasian and Frank 1999, 99).

In Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory, Barry Schwartz sheds further light on this entanglement when he writes, “In democratic societies, where historical interpretations are open to criticism, constructions of the past must be undertaken within the limits of reality—obdurate limits that no one can ignore without cost.” Progressives of the early twentieth century were able to depict Lincoln as an egalitarian who supported labor and opposed corporate abuses, Schwartz argues, because his common roots and rural upbringing allowed them to overlook evidence that he was “a man of genteel pretensions looking upon the masses suspiciously” (2000, 299-300). Collective memory, in other words, draws upon history and does so selectively, often in ways that radically alter our understanding of the past. At the same time, collective memory is still bound to history because recollections that have no connection at all to history are unlikely to be accepted by members of a democratic society.

The case of Martin Luther King, Jr., serves to illustrate. By the time Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, King had been dead for over twelve years. Public messages about the slain civil rights leader focused heavily upon his “I Have a Dream” speech and his role in the successful effort to eradicate Jim Crow in the South. According to Hansen, images of the well-publicized oration continued to be shown after King’s death, and members of Congress frequently quoted the speech during King tributes, as did President Carter when awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to King, posthumously, in 1977 (2003, 212-13). Although “I Have a Dream”
made reference to the plight of black Americans in both the North and the South, King delivered the speech during a period when he had been involved in protests in the South, and much of the oration's imagery emphasized civil rights efforts there. Hansen points out, “After Jim Crow segregation had been dismantled, the speech started to sound more and more like a historical artifact, describing a past of racial injustice that had since been overcome, than a prophetic address about God's future deliverance of America” (2003, 219), thereby setting the stage for Reagan’s appropriation of King.

The focus on “I Have a Dream” in public discourse also made King ripe for appropriation because the emphasis on one speech and one issue served to obscure King's many other speeches and writings, as well as his less successful ventures, such as his effort to desegregate Chicago, his opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Poor People's Campaign (see Hansen 2003, 214; Dyson 2000, 29). As early as 1964, for example, King praised the Indian government’s preferential college admissions policy for untouchables and argued that the United States must also find ways of “atoning for the injustices she has inflicted upon her Negro citizens” (1964, 147-48). The civil rights leader called for “a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged,” parallel with the GI Bill of Rights (King 1964, 151), for a guaranteed annual income (King 1967b, 247), and for “restitution” in the form of “radical changes in the structure of our society” that would provide African Americans with compensation in education, housing, employment, and health care (King 1983, 55-57; also see King 1968c, 271). The public focus on “I Have a Dream,” with its simple poetic beauty, overshadowed the specific proposals that King had recommended in order to achieve his dream, again making it much easier for President Reagan to appropriate King for his own uses.

Reagan was fond of employing historical figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt to serve his political purposes, but what interests us here is how both his deliberative and ceremonial messages evoked the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., in ways that not only attempted to revise public memory but also had great potential to skew history, giving citizens an incomplete and sometimes even harmful view of the past, along with a narrow set of procedures for shaping the future. The symbolic context leading up to the Reagan administration was one in which King’s successful campaign in the South and “I Have a Dream” speech were emphasized to the detriment of his other campaigns and messages, but the president used excerpts from this speech—aalong with a handful of decontextualized quotations from other King messages—such that King’s unfinished civil rights work and radical proposals for remedying poverty and racial discrimination simply appeared not to exist. More specifically, Reagan's rhetoric used King to justify his administration’s reversal of civil rights policies and social programs that had been initiated with the onset of the Johnson administration. Reagan, a master of narrative and effective speakmaking (see, e.g., Lewis 1987; Weiler and Pearce 1992) had an especially strong platform from which to shape and foster not only ideology and policy, but also national interpretations of the larger frames of interpretive influence that we call history and collective memory. As president, he was able to paint his images for a vast audience, while his rhetorical skills allowed him to do so compellingly, especially for non-black citizens. In a real sense, history is an argument to be won or lost. In the hands of a talented and powerful political speaker like Ronald Reagan, we have the opportunity to examine the narrative vision and set of persuasive strategies that the president used literally to “re-member” Dr. King. In so doing, Reagan set the compass for civil rights standards and policies in a new direction that continues to guide the beliefs, values, and behaviors of many Americans even today.

Reagan’s Rhetorical Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although Reagan had opposed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on constitutional grounds (Cannon 2000, 458), the president nevertheless routinely paid tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., just as many of his predecessors had done. On the anniversary of King's birth in 1982, for example, Reagan stated of King, “To America, he symbolized courage, sacrifice, and the tireless pursuit of justice too long denied” (1982a, 31). A year later, the president
further underscored King's accomplishments and reinforced the idea that King's importance was not limited just to black Americans when he said, “Martin Luther King freed the white man. And we didn’t know until he did how heavy the burden of racism was that we had been bearing all of those years. And thank God for what he has done, and he should be remembered” (1983b, 114). Despite these expressed sentiments, however, Reagan continued to oppose a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday for most of his first term in office. The president's statements about the establishment of a national holiday shed light upon Reagan's attitudes toward King and civil rights, at the same time that they reveal his perceived need to associate himself positively with the slain civil rights leader's memory.

Reagan's rhetoric about the proposed holiday was at odds with his affirming words about King, for they suggested that King was a hero only to a particular segment of American society. As the president explained at a press briefing in Chicago in May 1982, “We’re quite a mix in this country” and “There's no way that we could afford all of the holidays that we would have with people who are also revered figures in the history of many of the groups that make up our population here in America” (1982d, 592, 593). King may have been important to both blacks and whites and to the United States as a whole in Reagan's celebratory comments, but he was demoted to the category of a noteworthy ethnic hero whenever the president was questioned about the possibility of a federal Martin Luther King Day.

By 1983, sentiment to approve the holiday had grown, and Congress took up the debate. Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina would not give up easily, however, and launched a filibuster in which he attacked King for advocating “action- oriented Marxism.” When even fellow Republican Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a staunch opponent of past civil rights legislation, began working to end the filibuster, Helms finally conceded (“Martin Luther King will have his day” 1983, 16). Reagan agreed that he would sign the bill into law if the Senate approved it, as the House had done, but he also exhibited very little enthusiasm at the prospect. When reporters at an October 1983 news conference asked him to respond to Helms's charge that King was a Communist sympathizer, the president—in reference to the future opening of sealed FBI records on King—said, “We’ll know in about thirty-five years, won’t we?” (quoted in Cannon 2000, 524). The answer shocked even the president's advisers who had thought he was joking when he gave the same answer earlier in the day at a rehearsal. Although his staff convinced Reagan to call Coretta Scott King and apologize, White House Communications Director David Gergen admitted, “I almost lost my dinner over that” (Church 1983, 32; Gergen quoted in Cannon 2000, 524).

Still, Reagan remained true to his word and signed the bill making King's birthday a national holiday on November 2, 1983. The president’s remarks at the bill signing praised King as the “man whose words and deeds . . . stirred our nation to the very depths of its soul” (1983h, 1529). Even in his celebratory rhetoric, however, Reagan maintained a sense of distance between himself and King. He noted that “our nation has decided to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” (our emphasis), but never indicated that he himself was pleased to sign the bill into law. Instead, the president concluded his remarks with “Thank you, God bless you, and I will sign it” (1983h, 1530).

As we shall explain, Reagan's words at the bill signing also incorporated themes that he used consistently during his terms in office. Specifically, the president recalled King and his words in ways that argued equal opportunity had been achieved, that individuals—rather than the government—had to take responsibility for any additional progress that was needed. In addition, Reagan claimed that the dismantling of federal civil rights laws and social programs was consistent with King's words as he narrowed the purview of civil rights to exclude government intervention that might provide any form of compensatory help to blacks. We now turn to these themes to shed light on how Reagan's strategic recollections of King served to subvert the ideas for which the civil rights leader stood.
Because King Changed Our Society, Additional Civil Rights Protection Is Not Needed, Although Individual Effort and Responsibility Are

To argue that additional civil rights protection was not really needed, Reagan used two basic strategies: (1) he discussed civil rights as though equal opportunity had already been largely achieved and (2) he praised and encouraged individual efforts to secure equal opportunity, as if collective action and/or institutional change were completely irrelevant. As one would expect, Reagan discussed King’s accomplishments when he signed the King holiday into law, but the way that he discussed them suggested that civil rights protection was no longer needed. For instance, the president said, “The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had made certain that from then on black Americans would get to vote. But most important, there was not just a change of law; there was a change of heart. The conscience of America had been touched. Across the land, people had begun to treat each other not as blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans” (1983h, 1530). While the Voting Rights Act was important, its passage had certainly not removed all barriers to blacks’ voting, let alone to exercising their other rights of citizenship. Reagan’s recollection also simplistically described King as immediately creating a massive change in American attitudes such that, presumably, no new civil rights protections would be needed. The president gave credence to this interpretation when he stated, “As a democratic people, we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it.” Although Reagan admitted that “traces of bigotry still mar America” (1983h, 1530), his depiction of the United States in this and other public speeches during his years in the White House suggested that equal opportunity for minorities had, in fact, been achieved and, by implication, suggested further federal measures were unnecessary.

In an address at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in 1986, for example, Reagan told students and faculty that King and the other civil rights workers of the 1950s and 1960s “won their great battle because America had a conscience that they could appeal to. . . . Our national conscience told us to change and start to be fair. And we listened and changed, and we started to be fair” (1986a, 52). Comments such as these played off the public memories of King that emphasized “I Have a Dream” and his successful efforts to end Jim Crow, thereby locating the civil rights struggle in a mythic past. In public statements to largely adult audiences, the president continued to emphasize that King had touched the nation’s conscience, soul, or heart and, as a result, brought about change. Upon signing the 1988 Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Proclamation, for instance, Reagan said, “Martin Luther King pierced to the heart of American society and changed it, irrevocably, for the better” (1988a, 28). Likewise, at a ceremony in observance of Fair Housing Month, the president mentioned King and then remarked, “The struggle for equality of rights moved our nation to the very depths of its soul. Throughout the land, people began to treat each other not as blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans” (1984b, 501). Recollections like these implied that we were moving steadily toward a colorblind society, and they made past civil rights abuses seem purely a matter of unenlightened conscience, rather than the result of systematic institutional discrimination.

Although Reagan’s ceremonial speeches on civil rights were careful to say that additional progress was still needed (something that each president since at least Truman and after Reagan has repeated ritually and consistently) or that “traces” of prejudice still remained (e.g., 1983a, 61), his rhetoric as a whole implied that equality had largely been attained. The president shed further light on his views in a January 1985 interview when he grumbled about black leaders who were criticizing his civil rights policies:

“I think there is a tendency of some individuals who have positions in organizations that have been created for whatever purpose, but for some purpose—to rectify some ill—that then, once that gets going, they’re reluctant to admit how much they’ve achieved, because it might reveal then that there’s no longer a need for that particular organization, which would mean no longer a need for their job.”

“And so, there’s a tendency to keep the people stirred up as if the cause still exists. (1985a, 78)”
For Reagan, the attacks on his policies were politically inspired because the need for civil rights had dissipated. Later in this interview, the president conceded, “There is still further to go, but let's not forget what has been accomplished” (1985a, 79). Reagan's point that citizens should recognize how far our nation had come in regard to civil rights was well taken, but he nevertheless reverted continuously to themes and rationales in his public address that de-emphasized the inequities that remained. Such rationales became arguments for less federal intervention in civil rights enactment and enforcement.

A second strategy that Reagan employed was to praise individual efforts to secure civil rights, as if collective action and/or institutional change were completely irrelevant, and to encourage individual perseverance and responsibility. When Reagan signed the King holiday bill into law, for example, he praised the individual efforts of both King and Rosa Parks on behalf of civil rights; moreover, he suggested that any additional progress that might still be needed also lay in the hands of individuals, rather than in the hands of government. According to the president, King had two commandments that he “believed in and sought to live every day: Thou shall love thy God with all thy heart and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself. And I just have to believe that all of us—if all of us, young and old, Republicans and Democrats, do all we can to live up to those Commandments, then we will see the day when Dr. King's dream comes true” (1983h, 1530). There is no doubt that King's religious faith was integral to his efforts; his vision of acting on those beliefs, however, not only involved individual effort, but also collective action (see King 1959, 1963a, 1967b; Wolfson 2003, 46-50). Because King and Parks were icons of the civil rights movement, it was easy for Reagan to depict them in a way that overlooked how they acted in concert with others in order to gain governmental or systemic change.

And while it may be human nature to focus on the leaders of movements to the detriment of understanding their allies and followers, the president’s other public discourse also focused exclusively on individual, as opposed to collective, action as the way to further King’s civil rights dream. For example, Reagan emphasized that citizens should be “totally intolerant of racism anywhere around you” (1987a, 25). Relatedly, he expressed that it was the job of parents to educate their children and the job of clergy to educate their fold in order to create a more tolerant society. At the annual convention of national religious broadcasters in 1982, for example, the president said that parents had a responsibility for “teaching children respect for skin color that is different than their own; religious beliefs that are different than their own” (1982b, 158). In both 1983 and 1984, he urged the National Association of Evangelicals to “use your pulpits to denounce racism, anti-Semitism, and all ethnic or religious intolerance as evils” (1984a, 307; also see 1983d, 362). Just as Reagan said King had pierced the conscience of the nation in regard to civil rights, he emphasized that individuals were responsible for raising the consciousness of those around them.

The president also frequently pointed to King as an example of “how much a single life, well led, can accomplish” (1983a, 61) and encouraged children and youth to make the right decisions in their own lives. On Martin Luther King Day in 1986, for instance, Reagan recalled that King had said he wanted to leave “a committed life behind.” The president said, “That's a wonderful way to feel” and then told students that they should use their “freedom to make a better life. And how do you make the best use of freedom? Well, you get a good education. . . . An education is like a spaceship; it can take you anywhere” (1986a, 52, 53). Reagan's comments here are significant for two reasons. First, the president excerpted King's statement from a February 1968 sermon in which the civil rights leader argued that “the drum major instinct”—the desire for recognition, dominance, and importance—leads poor whites to discriminate against blacks rather than marching with them and the United States to “engage in a senseless, unjust war, [such] as the war in Vietnam.” Instead, King said people should consider themselves “brothers because they are children of a common father” and emphasized the need to work for justice and righteousness “in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world” (King 1968b, 259-61, 263-65, 267). While King's sermon mentioned controversial issues and argued that one should act with others in order to change society, Reagan relegated the civil rights leader's
desire for a committed life to a feeling and encouraged students to educate themselves in order to prosper as individuals. Second, the president completely neglected any situational or systemic factors that might work against getting a good education: a poor school system, a crime-ridden neighborhood, a poverty-stricken home. Indeed, the president proudly pointed to individual “minority schools” in his King Day remarks in 1988 that were “located in the poorest of big city neighborhoods [that] are meeting high academic standards in reading, mathematics, and other vital subjects” (1988d, 45; also 1988a, 26-27). What Reagan did not account for was why these schools were the exception, rather than the rule, and why so many other poor inner-city, predominately minority schools were failing. In Reagan’s reconstruction of King’s memory and accomplishments, individual attitude and commitment made all the difference. Philosophy, ideology, and notions of collectivity and structural and institutional impediments to progress for the collectivity often dropped from view.

Instead, he put the challenge squarely in the laps of individual citizens. Reagan emphasized that “we can’t expect children to excel in an environment of drugs and permissiveness. All Americans should stand shoulder to shoulder against this evil that undermines the moral fiber of the Nation and attacks our youth. It’s time to get drugs off our campuses and out of our schoolyards” (1987b, 491-92). Adults, primarily parents, simply needed to provide their children with moral guidance. For their part, youth needed to take responsibility, too. The president explained to high school students in 1987, “As young people, you can honor Dr. King today by making certain you try your hardest to take advantage of the great opportunities available to you. Certainly that includes being diligent in your studies, but it also means saying no to drugs and keeping clear of other temptations that will undermine your future” (1987a, 25-26; 1988c, 44; 1988d, 45). Government’s role in helping minority students fulfill their potential was primarily relegated to “leading the charge for higher standards and more discipline” (1988b, 27). In effect, Reagan argued that responsibility for civil rights rested with individuals, not the government. Just as Mackey-Kallis and Hahn observed of the administration’s “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign, the president’s focus upon the individual in civil rights allowed him “to abdicate political and fiscal responsibility while maintaining the dominant position in power relations” (1991, 12). Paradoxically, the individual was free to make a moral choice about civil rights and economic status, but only because Reagan said so. Under this dictum, any investigation or analysis of systemic problems was deemed irrelevant.

On a number of occasions, the president conveyed these lessons through narratives extolling particular individuals other than King. One story dealt with Franklin Burghardt, a black student who played football with Reagan at Eureka College. In one game, Reagan recalled, a racist white player intentionally attempted to hurt Burghardt. What happened next depended upon the speech in which the story was told. In an address to the National Council of Negro Women in 1983, the president said, “And to give you an indication of what we all thought of Burky, we ended the half 14 to 14 and ended the game 43 to 14” (1983f, 1099-1100). Reagan’s account here suggested that Burghardt’s teammates had all fought back on his behalf. When the story appeared a few years later in a Martin Luther King Day speech delivered at an elementary school, however, the president relayed a different version. He explained that “all of his [Burghardt’s] teammates wanted to go after the fellow. And Burgie said, ‘No, this is my problem; this is my fight.’ ” According to Reagan, Burghardt played fair, but played hard until the racist player was wobbling and started to leave the field.

“And he came staggering back, elbowed his way through the two teams as we stood there in the time-out waiting for play to resume, and up to Burgie and faced him. And then I saw he was crying; the tears were running down his face. And he stuck out his hand, and Burgie took it. And he grabbed it with his other hand, and then crying he said, “I just want you to know you’re the greatest human being I’ve ever met,” and turned and left the field.”
“You see, just one individual with principles like that, like Dr. King and like Franklin Burghardt—a conversion right there from hatred to respect and even liking on the part of another man. (1986a, 53-54)"

The melodramatic second version of the Burghardt story shifted responsibility for eliminating racism from a group (the team joined together) to that of a single individual (Burghardt proved his mettle). In addition, the comparison with King almost gave the impression that all King had to do to ensure his civil rights was to make his case, one on one, to individuals with attitudes akin to those of Eugene “Bull” Connor. Reagan’s rhetoric consistently placed the burden on the individual, rather than the system, suggesting that the need for change is always at the level of attempting to transform one individual, one heart at a time, day by day, person by person. The role of government, when mentioned, was largely portrayed as inimical or as a major impediment to individual freedom.

According to President Reagan, yet another person who exemplified heroic individual virtuosity was Daniel “Chappie” James, who helped train the famous Tuskegee airmen and became one of the nation’s two black four-star generals. According to the president, James “stayed a first lieutenant for seven years. It was unfair but he didn’t complain.” Reagan not only admired James’s military record but the fact that the discrimination he endured “didn’t make him bitter” (Reagan 2001, 40). At the 1987 Tuskegee University commencement ceremony, Reagan shared a narrative about James that underscored the need for individual responsibility in regard to civil rights. The president detailed how James worked hard as a youth, earned his degree at Tuskegee, and went on to work his way through the ranks. From James, the president then turned his attention to the military as “one of the most successfully integrated institutions in the country.” He acknowledged how many of its sergeants and officers were black and added, “The military is seen by many as an avenue for advancement, a job where individual merit will be recognized and rewarded” (1987b, 491-92). The president omitted the fact that it took presidential action to bring about integration in the armed forces, while his story of James suggested that an individual who applied him- or herself would succeed in the military and, listeners might infer, elsewhere, as well. Why so many black Americans felt compelled to turn to the military as a way to get ahead was not a question that troubled Reagan. Although the president also noted that King helped put laws enforcing civil rights into place, the majority of his address at Tuskegee encouraged the perception that black Americans could succeed on their own merits by working hard as individuals. The decision to be successful or not was now theirs to make.

The clear negative implication of such narratives, of course, was that those who somehow stumbled, or fell along the way, merely lacked the mettle, self-discipline, and character to succeed. Employing the rationale that the barriers to discrimination have been removed, Reagan simultaneously offered his audiences a de facto conclusion: those who lag behind have only themselves to blame.

The Dismantling of Federal Civil Rights Laws Is Consistent with King’s Words and the Purview of Civil Rights Is Narrow

To justify the dismantling of federal civil rights laws and social programs, as well as government intervention in arenas such as employment and education on behalf of African Americans, Reagan employed three rhetorical strategies: (1) he associated his support for civil rights—support often given grudgingly—with King; (2) he argued that the dismantling of affirmative action and social programs was consistent with King’s desire for a colorblind society; and, simultaneously, (3) he narrowed the purview of civil rights in his rhetoric to exclude government regulations that provided African Americans with compensatory help for the years of discrimination they had endured.
Early in his presidency, Reagan attempted to reassure citizens that he supported civil rights. He told the NAACP in June 1981, for example, “My administration will root out any case of government discrimination against minorities and uphold and enforce the laws that protect them. I emphasize that we will not retreat on the nation's commitment to equal treatment of all citizens” (1981c, 574). It quickly became clear, however, that equality for the president meant that people should be treated solely as individuals, rather than also considering the advantages and disadvantages that individuals incurred through their membership in particular groups. Reagan was unable to grasp the systemic nature of discrimination as it had existed prior to civil rights legislation, but instead saw those laws themselves as discriminatory.

Indeed, even as the president sought to provide general reassurances, he also expressed concern over particular civil rights laws. Reagan spoke in support of the principles behind a proposed extension of the Voting Rights Act in June 1981, for instance, but questioned “whether the Act continues to be the most appropriate means of guaranteeing those rights” (1981b, 513). He also argued that particular states and localities should be allowed to “bail-out” of the program and that violation of the act should be based upon intent, rather than effect (1981d, 1018). When his opposition became a political liability, however, Reagan signed the extension of the act into law and, ironically, associated his support with King in his subsequent public remarks. He told a national radio audience in January 1983 that King “was instrumental in getting passage of legislation that provided Federal protection for the crown jewel of American liberty—every American's right to vote. That legacy still lives. Last year I signed into law the longest extension of the Voting Rights Act since its passage—a measure that will protect the right to vote for many years to come” (1983a, 60). Reagan's remarks here provided no hint that he had opposed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and had initially worked against its extension, thereby allowing him to make the most of his capitulation. Similarly, the president strengthened the penalties for discrimination in fair housing laws, but also emphasized that violation was dependent upon intentions, rather than effects, an approach that made proof more difficult to obtain. Reagan nevertheless thanked everyone who had worked on the bill, including Representative John Lewis, and exclaimed that the legislation “has brought us one step closer to realizing Martin Luther King's dream” (1988g, 1156). In sum, the president often associated himself with King and civil rights legislation when it was politically prudent to do so, even if he had sought to eliminate or weaken the law in question. According to Miller, Reagan was prone to overstating his administration's civil rights record (Miller 1984, 62-68).

At the same time, the president also expressed his opposition to other civil rights laws, most notably affirmative action, throughout his terms in office. At his very first presidential news conference, Reagan commented that some civil rights laws “may not be as useful as they once were or that they may even be distorted in practice, such as some affirmative action programs becoming quota systems” (1981a, 55). Similarly, when his nominees for the Civil Rights Commission came under fire in 1983, the president responded, “They don't worship at the altar of forced busing and mandatory quotas. They don't believe you can remedy past discrimination by mandating new discrimination. They are committed activists for genuine civil and human rights, wise and courageous citizens” (1983g, 1113). Reagan's statement contrasted the civil rights effected through busing and affirmative action with “genuine” civil rights that could exist only without laws that, in his mind, mandated discrimination against (white male) “individuals” in favor of minority groups and women. By 1986, however, the president and his speechwriters adopted an approach that a few writers and lower level politicians had already taken (Hansen 2003, 222): they used Martin Luther King's words to justify the administration's opposition to affirmative action.

In a radio address in January 1986, *Reagan* said, “We’re committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, and so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a colorblind society that, in the words of Dr. King, judges people ‘not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character’ ” (1986b, 67). Reagan's words here refer to one of the best-known passages from “I Have a Dream” in which King
states, “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.” According to Michael Eric Dyson (2000, 14), “Of the
hundreds of thousands of words that King spoke, few others have had more impact than those thirty-four.”
Hansen likewise notes that the line “referred to the end of white racist assumptions of black inferiority,” but
taken out of context has allowed conservatives to argue that King opposed affirmative action (2003, 222).
Nothing could be further from the truth.

In Why We Can’t Wait (1964), King dedicated the book to his children “for whom I dream that one day soon they
will no longer be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” He also, however,
argued for government intervention that would provide blacks with benefits to make up for years of
discrimination.

“Among the many vital jobs to be done, the nation must not only radically readjust its attitude toward
the Negro in the compelling present, but must incorporate into its planning some compensatory
consideration for the handicaps he has inherited from the past. 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 do not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip
him to compete on a just and equal basis?”

“Whenever this issue of compensatory or preferential treatment for the Negro is raised, some of our
friends recoil in horror. The Negro should be granted equality, they agree; but he should ask nothing
more. On the surface, this appears reasonable, but it is not realistic. For it is obvious that if a man is
entered at the starting line in 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. (1964, 146-47)”

Despite King’s clear position on the issue of compensatory treatment, President Reagan’s discourse
appropriated those words and images already most familiar to Americans to argue for policies that were the
very antithesis of what King advocated.

When reporter Helen Thomas challenged the president’s opposition to affirmative action, he replied, “We want
what I think Martin Luther King asked for: We want a colorblind society. The ideal will be when we have
achieved the moment when no one—or nothing is done for anyone because of race, differences, or religion, or
ethnic origin.” Thomas then pointed out that affirmative action law forbade quotas and “you’re the
enforcer.” Reagan responded, “Not individually and personally, no. But we find down there at the bureaucracy
level and out there actually in personnel offices and so forth, they choose the easy course—set down a system
of numbers and say, ‘Well, we’ll go by that’ ” (1986c, 201-2). Reagan’s answers here depicted affirmative
action as a discriminatory policy at odds with King’s ideals. Interestingly, too, the president who so insistently
urged the need for individual responsibility in other venues was unwilling to assume responsibility for the
appropriate enforcement of federal civil rights policy. And while it is literally the case that the federal judiciary
and the Justice Department are responsible for interpreting the law and ensuring law enforcement, a president’s
appointments can make a crucial difference in the application of the law.

Besides citing King’s words on color and character specifically in regard to affirmative action, Reagan also
referred to them in ceremonial contexts in a way that encouraged listeners themselves to supply the association
with affirmative action. In his 1988 proclamation for National Civil Rights Day, for example, the president said
that King “helped awaken among his fellow Americans a strong and true sense that justice if it is ever to be
genuine, must ever be color-blind. The anniversary of this event is a fitting time for all Americans to reflect on
our achievements in this regard and to recall the need for continual vigilance and constant effort in behalf of the
promise of equality for all” (1988f, 1069). On the surface, this proclamation appeared to be a celebration of civil rights legislation, but Reagan's rhetoric also suggested that civil rights law had not yet provided “genuine” justice because, listeners could infer, affirmative action was not “color-blind,” thereby necessitating the need for “continual vigilance.” The president's appropriation of King's rhetoric in both deliberative and ceremonial settings not only attempted to legitimize Reagan's opposition to affirmative action, but also to change history by suggesting that King had been against affirmative action.

Moreover, Reagan insisted that the large cuts he imposed on social programs, coupled with tax breaks for the upper income brackets, were really initiatives for freedom that would benefit minorities. According to the president, social programs created economic dependency and harmed the economy by leading to excessive government growth and taxation. He told the NAACP in June 1981:

“I believe many in Washington, over the years, have been more dedicated to making needy people government-dependent rather than independent. They've created a new kind of bondage, because regardless of how honest their intention in the beginning, those they set out to help soon became clients essential to the well-being of those who administered the programs. . . .”

“Just as the Emancipation Proclamation freed black people 118 years ago, today we need to declare an economic emancipation. (1981c, 576)”

Reagan argued that cuts to social programs would force people to become independent, while his tax cuts for upper-class Americans would stimulate the economy and therefore benefit everyone. In his words, the economy would function for black Americans as it had in the past, as “something of an underground railroad” that “spirited them away from poverty to middle-class prosperity and beyond” (1981c, 575). Just as Reagan asserted that progress in race relations had to take place on the individual level, his policy rhetoric implied that unjust institutions and arrangements would take care of themselves. There was no need for the government to take measures that would equalize the playing field in light of present and past discrimination. Not surprisingly, the NAACP gave Reagan's speech “one of the coolest receptions of his presidency” (Cannon 2000, 458-59). The themes that the president articulated, however, would gradually begin to resonate with and influence many audiences.6

Nevertheless, particularly in the early years of his administration, Reagan remained mindful of the controversy that his policies sparked, at the same time that he associated his efforts to cut taxes and social spending with King and justice. In March 1982, for example, Reagan quoted King's warning that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He then continued, “The struggle goes on. To be alive and to be human is to struggle for what is right and against what is not. Our nation today is engaged in a serious and, at times, even acrimonious debate over what policies will best serve the interests of America and a troubled world.” In regard to the economy, Reagan stated,

“Well, today I'm accused by some of trying to destroy the government's commitment to compassion and to the needy. Does this bother me? Yes. . . . I'm not trying to destroy what is best in our system of humane, free government; I'm doing everything I can to save it, to slow down the destructive rate of growth in taxes and spending, to prune nonessential programs so that enough resources will be left to meet the requirements of the truly needy. (1982c, 359)”

To hear the president tell it, he was working against the injustice created by unneeded social programs just as King fought against racial injustice. Reagan declared that social programs for the “truly needy” were endangered, but that Reaganomics could save them.
Once again, though, Reagan's words were more than a little disingenuous. Although he slashed social programs in the name of fiscal responsibility, the combination of tax cuts for the upper class and massive defense spending led to unprecedented budget deficits. Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer (1984) also have shown how the administration consistently argued that it would protect the “safety net” of social programs for the “truly needy,” while simultaneously, over time, it decreased the number of programs that were included and masked its efforts to institute cuts to even those programs.\footnote{Reagan’s creative excerption of King’s words about injustice also distorted the meaning of the civil rights leader's total message. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King’s words about injustice were part of his efforts to justify a direct action approach to civil rights in response to white clergy who urged moderation.}

Reagan’s creative excerption of King’s words about injustice also distorted the meaning of the civil rights leader's total message. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King's words about injustice were part of his efforts to justify a direct action approach to civil rights in response to white clergy who urged moderation. Throughout King's letter (1963a), he argued that discrimination was part of “the evil system of segregation” (194), reminded his readers of Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that “groups tend to be more immoral than individuals” (185), and urged that conscious action must be taken to combat discrimination because “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability” (190). King's letter, in other words, made the case for the systemic nature of prejudice and the need for systemic changes to counter it. By contrast, Reagan and the men around him were what Haynes Johnson (1991) described as “a familiar American type, self-made men who espoused rugged individualism, free (that is, unfettered and unregulated) enterprise, and a belief in the survival of the fittest. They were Social Darwinists who had made it out of poverty. So could others if they were worthy” (72-73). From Reagan’s point of view, Great Society social programs worked against such progress. The president told those in attendance at a National Black Republican Council dinner in 1982 that Great Society programs had been ineffective in reducing poverty among blacks and that the accompanying growth in government “had started a binge that would slowly change the nature of our society and, even worse, it had threatened the character of our people” (1982e, 1162-1163). While King argued for systemic change to combat prejudice, the president and his administration relegated discrimination to a purely individual issue and emphasized that only governmental intervention could prevent a dose of gumption and industriousness from transforming the status of an individual and, in turn, the world.

In his public discourse, Reagan also narrowed the purview of civil rights policy. At a 1987 White House briefing for minority business owners, the president praised the civil rights movement as “one of the proudest moments in our history,” and then added:

“But at the same time that some freedoms were being fought for and won, the laws that violated those freedoms were struck down and removed from the books, the Government was steadily and massively encroaching on other individual freedoms, and the regulatory apparatus reached out to touch and control every aspect of our economic life. Civil rights are empty rights if not accompanied by economic opportunity. Our country fought for the right of all to sit at a lunch counter. At the same time, the Government was making it harder and harder to own one. We fought for the right of all Americans to hold whatever job they were qualified for but made it even harder to find any job at all. (1987c, 828)”

Similarly, Reagan raged against the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, eventually approved by Congress over his veto, that overturned Grove City College v. Bell (1984) in which the Supreme Court ruled that Title IX of the 1972 Education Act Amendments barring sex discrimination applied only to the specific program or activity of the institution receiving federal aid, rather than to the institution as a whole. According to the president, “The truth is, this legislation isn’t a civil rights bill. It's a power grab by Washington, designed to take control away from States, localities, communities, parents, and the private sector and give it to Federal bureaucrats and judges” (1988e, 364). Just as Reagan’s rhetoric about the “safety net” for the “truly needy” had allowed him to narrow what were considered essential programs for the social infrastructure, his discourse about economic policy and Title IX permitted him to narrow what fell within the scope of civil rights. Regulations in these arenas
were no longer guarantors of equal opportunity, but rather unwanted government intrusion into economics and education that had nothing to do with civil rights.

The president also periodically evoked the memory of King to support such assertions. In a 1986 radio address, for instance, Reagan alluded to King’s words from “I Have a Dream” that the freedom of whites and blacks were linked. Reagan said, “I agree with the late Dr. King that our country won’t be free until we’re all free. But I take it a step further: Our nation won’t really be prosperous until everyone in it enjoys a share of the fruits of prosperity.” Reagan then detailed how his administration had decided to “cut tax rates, stop penalizing initiative, and sit back and watch the fireworks” with the result that his economic policies had proven beneficial to “Americans—and that includes black Americans.” Additionally, the president maintained that “if we continue to allow the economy to expand and continue to work for a more perfect society, the people of all colors will prosper. And isn’t that what Dr. King’s dream and the American dream are all about?” (1986b, 67-68). Reagan's fusion of King's dream with the American dream ignored the way in which ongoing racism and discrimination gnawed at equal opportunity not only as a concept, but also as a result. Not every citizen had the aim of building a “more perfect society,” nor did every citizen share a single vision of what such a society might entail. Many Americans who were not prospering felt that Reagan's own policies were actually contributing to the decimation of King's dream, rather than helping to foster it (see, e.g., Jacob 1988, 710). Still, Reagan persistently associated King with his own policies. After quoting King on shared destiny in 1984, for example, he commented to black appointees:

“And that's why you and I are working to improve the destiny of all Americans—to make it possible for our people to walk together into a glorious future of freedom and prosperity. I'm convinced that if each of us gives this great cause our best efforts, then our dream will come true, and in Dr. King's words, “All of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, ‘Land where my fathers died, Land of the pilgrims’ pride, From every mountain-side Let freedom ring.’” (1984c, 905)

Reagan's words to the contrary, the administration's dream—“our dream”—appeared to be directly at odds with King's dream, just as his policies of social Darwinism conflicted with King's impassioned appeals for societal change. According to King, “America would never be free . . . unless the descendents of its slaves were loosed completely from the shackles they still wear” (1967a, 390). Although King argued, as Reagan did, that equality and freedom could not come without attention to economics, his proposed solutions were directly at odds with Reagan's policies. On April 4, 1967, for instance, the civil rights leader spoke out against the Vietnam War because it had “eviscerated” Lyndon Johnson's poverty program, which had held “a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white” (King 1967a, 388-89). In March 1968, days before his death, King was in the midst of planning the Poor People's campaign to be held in Washington, DC, in late April. The answer to poverty and prejudice, he believed, lay in systemic alterations. King observed, “We feel that there must be some structural changes now, there must be a radical re-ordering of priorities, there must be a de-escalation and a final stopping of the war in Vietnam and an escalation of the war against poverty and racism here at home” (1968a, 405). Where Reagan saw solutions in individual attitudes and action, King saw the need for radical structural change.

Through the themes and strategies of the president's rhetoric that referenced Martin Luther King, Jr., it becomes clear that Reagan simply did not perceive racism and poverty in systemic terms. In fact, on nearly a dozen occasions, he reverted to a defense of his personal beliefs and actions whenever his policies came under attack. These personal apologias reinforced the importance of individual values in ameliorating racial inequities. In 1983, Reagan defended himself with, “I, fortunately, was raised by a mother and father who believed that the—well, the only intolerance they had was they were intolerant of intolerance” (1983e, 947). Reagan's autobiography recounted how his friend and teammate, Franklin Burghardt, whose story of overcoming racial adversity on the football field he often repeated, was not allowed to stay at a hotel when the team was
traveling. Reagan then took Burghardt and another black teammate to his parents’ home, where they were both welcomed (Reagan with Hubler [1965] 1981, 64). Although Burghardt later confirmed the story, he also recalled that Reagan was extremely naïve about race relations. Burghardt observed, “If you listened to the Carter debate during the [1980] campaign, Reagan said that when he was growing up they didn’t know they had a race problem. It was the dumbest thing a grown person could say, but he’d never seen it. I believe that [the hotel incident] was his first experience of that sort” (quoted in Cannon 2000, 457-58). As Reagan’s controversial biographer, Edmund Morris, interpreted the episode, “[A] youth unaware of evil must also be unaware of evil's effects” (1999, 89). Relatedly, we might add, a president unaware of racism’s effects will see no need to take governmental action to alleviate those effects (also see Amaker 1988, 161).

Nevertheless, in response to criticisms of his civil rights policies, President Reagan emphasized that he had always fought for civil rights. He told a gathering of local television anchors, for instance, that “anyone who knows my life story, knows that long before there was even a thing called the civil rights movement, I was busy on that side.” According to Reagan, at the time he was a sports announcer, the “opening line of the Spaulding Baseball Guide said, ‘Baseball is a game for Caucasian gentlemen.’ And as a sports announcer I was one of a very small fraternity that used that job to editorialize against the ridiculous blocking of so many fine athletes and so many fine Americans from participating in what was called the great American game” (1983c, 193). According to Wilbur Edel, this story did not appear in Reagan's autobiography in 1965, where it not only would have been progressive and controversial, but also heroic. In regard to Reagan’s alleged campaign against the baseball guide, Edel (1992, 85-86) reported, “A St. Louis sports editor who examined issues of the guide published in the 1930s could find no such statement.” Such a campaign also would have been out of character for a man who as late as 1968 refused to condemn George Wallace’s segregationist policies (see Cannon 2000, 458).

Overall, then, the president did not perceive prejudice in systemic terms. He was unable to understand how critics could accuse a person like himself, who was not racist in his personal relationships, of being someone who perpetuated racist policies. Meanwhile, his recollections of his individual efforts on behalf of civil rights appeared to be somewhat embellished at best and were limited in time to actions he allegedly took during his young adulthood. Not surprisingly, then, Reagan saw little need for systemic corrections to discrimination. He talked about civil rights as an issue that King had successfully resolved in the past and argued that individual efforts were needed for any additional progress. To defend his civil rights policies, Reagan appropriated King to serve as an endorsement, always carefully choosing uncontroversial King quotations that Americans were already familiar with or skillfully decontextualizing quotations to give the impression that King would have agreed with him. Simultaneously, the president’s language narrowed the acceptable scope of civil rights to eliminate government regulation in the areas of economics and education, further undermining what King would have seen as necessary compensatory action.

The Reagan Political and Rhetorical Legacy

Although the Reagan administration clearly brought change to the contentious arena of civil rights, we question the direction of that change, for the Reagan White House made a concerted attempt to slow down civil rights enforcement in a number of crucial areas. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was able to capture only 9 percent of the African-American vote. He did little to add to his luster during his subsequent administrations. Whether it was siding with Bob Jones University’s tax-exempt status even though the university was said to practice racial discrimination or removing sympathetic members from the Civil Rights Commission, Ronald Reagan made many black Americans feel that a direct and hostile war was being waged against them (“In Trouble with Blacks” 1983, 28). The actual policy outcomes seem to indicate that those feelings were justified. For example, Reagan tried to weaken the original 1965 Voting Rights Act, opposed sanctions on South Africa intended to end apartheid, opposed the creation of the national holiday for Martin Luther King, appointed a number of federal judges seen
as inimical to the civil rights cause (including three Supreme Court justices—O’Connor, Scalia, and Kennedy—which arguably tipped the balance in a more conservative direction), employed the reconstituted Civil Rights Commission to advance his administration’s opposition to affirmative action, and tried to dismantle the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs which monitored discriminatory practices of federal contractors. As a result of these and other actions, “employment discrimination was permitted to go unchecked for almost a decade during the 1980s” (Anderson 1997, 58). In addition, Reagan’s Justice Department undertook initiatives to weaken civil rights enforcement in the areas of voting, education, employment, and housing.

Perhaps even more important to the Reagan legacy is the moral suasion that the White House promulgated. First, Reagan was able to evoke a public memory of King that would serve his political purposes. By excerpting certain passages from Dr. King’s speeches (and frequently quoting Dr. King out of context), the president was able to interpret King’s words in ways that helped his own policy arguments, especially as King was not alive to defend himself from the president’s appropriations. The symbolic context in which Reagan’s rhetoric took place aided his efforts because the public images and words most often associated with King lent themselves to Reagan’s depiction of civil rights as an issue of the past, provided a famous line that could be decontextualized to support the president’s version of a colorblind society, and overshadowed King’s specific policy recommendations that were at odds with Reagan’s agenda. Second, the president was able to extend his philosophy as premises for persuasion while simultaneously riding King’s coattails. The fact that Reagan offered the majority of his interpretations of King during ceremonial speeches also proved advantageous, as listeners are less likely to challenge speakers or think critically about what they have to say in such a setting. A speaker’s association with the revered figures and values in ceremonial—or epideictic—discourse may also serve to enhance his/her image. Furthermore, value premises that are reinforced in ceremonial rhetoric may later be drawn upon in policy discourse with little controversy, thereby adding to the potential success of presidential policy rhetoric (Bostdorff 2003, 312-13; Bostdorff and Vibbert 1994, 141-58; Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 21, 29; Crable and Vibbert 1983, 380-94; Hart 1987, 69-72; Jasinski 1997, 71-89; Murphy 1992, 72; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2000, 417-37). In appropriating King, Reagan managed to extend and amplify his view of the world. In the process, the president transmogrified King into an anti-government, anti-affirmative action, pick-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps, rugged individualist. Individual action, according to Reagan’s light, would overcome any historical, systemic, and structural vestiges of being marked by race, gender, or—given the arc of the rationale—even disability. Thus, under this particular rationale, there was no need for special laws to protect categories or groups of people from discrimination and social inequality. Character, moxie, and rugged determination were the virtues touted, and such virtues became part of the new national lexicon, with the president as “interpreter-in-chief” educating Americans to new ways of thinking and acting through individual narratives that “proved” people had innate tendencies to overcome obstacles. This sunny view certainly had the propensity to blind white listeners to the counterevidence and the need for initiatives to address still extant problems. It also resonated with the deeply rooted American myth of individualism and its accompanying Horatio Alger optimism that anyone can succeed if he or she works hard enough. As such, Reagan’s version of the historical King was much more palatable to most white Americans because it not only tapped into American myth, but also denied the necessity of addressing institutional racism.

We note in passing that we are not condemning Reagan’s idea that the United States had made substantial progress in civil rights by 1980, nor are we saying that individuals have no responsibility or control over their fates. Rather, we take issue with the president’s implicit arguments that no further progress on civil rights was really needed and that every individual can fulfill his or her potential, despite serious historical, systemic, and situational obstacles. These kinds of impediments were largely missing from the president’s oratory and therefore largely missing from his national moral and political “lessons.” Even more seriously, we get very little sense from Reagan that King led a movement on behalf of a social and political constituency that envisioned major institutional and structural change. In this sense, we believe Reagan distorted both King’s
memory and his legacy. Moreover, we object to the president’s appropriation of King to legitimize policy arguments that the civil rights leader would have opposed. And we are not alone. As the slain civil rights leader’s daughter, Yolanda King, told the first author, Reagan’s use of her father’s words was “tragic” (King 2005). She explained that her father had long advocated policies akin to affirmative action as “a way of leveling the playing field” and that Reagan’s excerpt of the line from “I Have a Dream” to legitimize his civil rights policies was no different than the way that passages from the Bible had been selectively used to justify racist actions in the past. We also think that Reagan’s “lessons” have had a lasting impact. Reagan’s rhetorical strategies have been influential in shifting the national conversation over civil rights. Recent debates and court decisions in the area of affirmative action certainly reflect the values adumbrated by Ronald Reagan. Political ads—as well as hundreds of law review articles and newspaper editorials in the 1990s—argued against affirmative action using the approach that Reagan popularized: relying on the image and carefully excerpted words of King. Hansen (2003), in fact, writes, “By the mid-1990s, the most common ways in which Americans heard the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech were either during celebrations of King’s birthday or in editorials, speeches, or political ads against affirmative action” (222-23; also see Dyson 2000, 26). Reagan’s arguments for individual effort as the means to equal opportunity, endorsed through his use of King, are also reflected in the policy changes that have occurred in social welfare. President Bill Clinton, a Democrat who had a very strong following among African Americans, continued to support affirmative action, but nevertheless signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996, a law that radically undermined the social welfare system in keeping with Reagan’s assertion that such programs were not relevant to civil rights.

Indeed, Reagan’s influence can be seen in Bill Clinton’s references to Martin Luther King. In a radio address in 1995 (1995a, 47), for example, Clinton declared: “One of Martin Luther King’s greatest lessons was that every American deserves a piece of the American dream, the chance to pull oneself up and work our way to the middle class. . . . The most important civil right is the right to dream the American dream and to have the opportunity to live it.” Like Reagan, Clinton linked individual freedom to economic empowerment and upward mobility. He also touted individual virtue over government action, as when he noted that even as King “marched all across this land and took that vast throng to Washington, DC, and asked the government to act, he knew that in the end, what was in the heart and the spirit and the mind of the average American citizen was even more important” (1995b, 49). Although Clinton saw a greater role for government than Reagan did, his rhetoric nonetheless bore the mark of Reagan’s focus on individualism and economic freedom in his references to King. In announcing 104 new empowerment zones and enterprise communities, for instance, Clinton (1994, 98) said, “That is the sort of thing that Martin Luther King would want us to do, not just let discrimination go away, but to create opportunity.” One might note here that the “government action” is built on the virtues of free enterprise and targeted as a means of economic empowerment. Even government action is invoked as a means to realizing the material strand in the American dream. Clinton’s appropriation of King reflects a changed rhetorical landscape, as Clinton’s neo-liberalism seems quite distant from Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. The uses of the American dream by Clinton in his references to King reflect the conundrums associated with the evocation. All of these statements, even the kind of government action that is proposed, would seem to fit quite comfortably in Reagan’s lexicon. But we must also remember that King himself saw economic inequality as one of several barriers to freedom that had to be removed. The March on Washington, after all, concerned “jobs and freedom.” Clinton also reminds us that Reagan is not the only politician to have invoked King for his own political benefit; according to Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2000), Clinton made use of eulogistic tributes to King in 1998 in an effort to restore his political image in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Reagan’s rhetorical legacy can also clearly be seen in the George W. Bush administration. In 2003, the president chose, certainly not coincidentally, January 15—what would have been King’s seventy-fourth birthday—to announce that the administration would file a brief with the Supreme Court arguing against the University of
Michigan's admissions policy. Bush claimed, in words that echoed the oft-excerpted line from “I Have a Dream,” that students were being admitted or rejected based upon “the color of their skin.” Furthermore, the president observed, “America's long experience with the segregation we have put behind us and the racial discrimination we still struggle to overcome requires a special effort to make real the promise of equal opportunity for all. My administration will continue to actively promote diversity and opportunity in every way that the law permits” (2003a, 71-72). Two days later, Bush proclaimed the official Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday for 2003 and noted, “Dr. King's enduring contributions to America remind us and countless others around the world that people should ‘. . . not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character’” (2003b, 81).

Reagan’s reconstruction of King had clearly not been lost on George W. Bush. Reagan’s use of collective memory in his discourse referencing King suggests several points that made his rhetorical strategies especially appealing: (1) his use of collective memory had a basis in history because Reagan drew upon well-known images of actual events and because King really spoke and wrote the words that Reagan attributed to him; (2) the images and words of King that the president adopted were not controversial with the vast majority of Americans and were abstract enough—hence malleable enough—to allow their adaptation for Reagan’s ends; (3) the collective memory of Dr. King that Reagan drew upon already overshadowed other aspects of King’s history that would have been at odds with the president's assertions; and (4) Reagan carefully excerpted the King quotations that he employed in order to mask the civil rights leader’s other words, words that were part of the historical record and also antithetical to Reagan’s purposes.

Ironically, the recent death of Reagan himself may provide further opportunity to study how political rhetors make use of history and collective memory, as 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry and other critics seized upon the president's death from complications associated with Alzheimer’s disease as a way to attack George W. Bush’s position on stem cell research; meanwhile, Bush attempted to depict himself as upholding the mantle of Reagan's leadership. When examining such efforts, we must remember, as political communication scholars have observed elsewhere, “the narrative lessons of history are necessarily partial and incomplete. Accepting them without reservation produces an incomplete understanding of the rhetorical uses of history” (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 1992, 75).

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**Footnotes**

1 Gronbeck considers the rhetoric of collective memory to be epideictic and “arguments from the past” to be deliberative. Although Gronbeck's essay offers genuine insight into characteristics of “the rhetorics of the past” (1998, 47, 54-59), we find Hasian and Frank’s conception more useful, for it recognizes that discourse may draw upon collective memory in a variety of speech settings. Indeed, even forensic rhetoric draws upon the past as judicial opinions draw upon precedents in order to support their conclusions (see Vibbert 1990, 19-34).

2 Condit explained that ceremonial rhetoric—or the epideictic—serves particular functions for the rhetor and audience: defining a situation and providing understanding; creating community and providing an opportunity to share in community; and displaying the rhetor's leadership while also providing “entertainment” for listeners (1985, 284-91).

3 In a *Washington Post* poll in December 1987, 60 percent of whites indicated that Reagan was doing a good job, but only 27 percent of blacks felt that way—and those numbers represented one of Reagan's better polls (Barnes 1988, 10-11).

4 In one version of the story, Reagan called Burghardt “Burky” and in other versions he referred to him as “Burgie.” In *Where’s the Rest of Me?* (Reagan with Hubler [1965] 1981, 64), Reagan wrote that the newly enlightened player told Burghardt, “You’re the whitest man I ever knew.” Later versions bowdlerized the quotation.

5 Edel writes that the White House and the Justice Department provided “disinformation” on civil rights, but that other departments in the administration were also not immune. Housing and Urban Development was accused of outright discrimination by a federal judge. By 1984, the Office of Equal Opportunity had halted investigations of discrimination complaints and stopped conducting compliance reviews, and it failed to prepare and adopt required amendments to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The Department of Education was found to have falsified compliance records and avoided its enforcement responsibilities.
Over thirty violations filed against the Department of Heath and Human Services were “‘put on hold’ for an indefinite period” (Edel 1992, 87).

6 By the end of the 1980s, James Blanton (1989, 28-32) reported that even some white liberals were having “second thoughts” about affirmative action. Scott Minerbrook (1988, 20-21) and C. Vann Woodward (1989, 38-44) pointed out during the same time period that Americans continued to support principles of equality, but showed disdain for policies like affirmative action and housing policies that were aimed at upholding them.

7 In his 1982 State of the Union address, for example, Reagan had narrowed the original list of safety net programs so that they included only Head Start, senior nutrition programs, and child welfare programs and promised that they would “not be cut from the levels we proposed last year.” Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer observed, “This statement had two implications. First, reductions in spending levels had been proposed the previous year for both senior nutrition programs and child welfare programs but the cuts failed to pass Senate scrutiny. Reagan therefore could propose the same reductions again without breaking his promise not to cut further. Second, the statement would allow Reagan to retain current spending levels without any increase resulting in a reduction of spending in real terms” (1984, 117, their emphasis).