AFTER THE DREAM DIED: NATIONAL MEMORIES OF THE KING ASSASSINATION AND HOW THEY PLAYED OUT IN SUBSEQUENT LEGISLATION

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The main thing most people remember, or think they remember, about Martin Luther King Jr.’s death was the rioting that came in its wake.1 Significant upheaval did follow the news of his death in April 1968 in some cities. *Newsweek* thought that King’s murder had “touched off a black rampage that subjected the U.S. to the most widespread spasm of racial disorder in its violent history.” *Time* said that the reaction to King’s murder in city streets “seemed to threaten the onslaught of a race war.”2 Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Minister of Information and a best-selling author, said that his contacts in the movement were now “unanimous” that the war had actually begun, and “holocaust” was imminent: “America will be painted red. Dead bodies will litter the streets.” The ghettos would erupt in violence, Cleaver said, because the failure of nonviolence had just been proven. There had been hesitation and division before, he believed, “But now all black people in America have become Black Panthers in spirit.” There would be no more nonviolent pleas for mercy: “Now there is the gun and the bomb, dynamite and the knife, and they will be used liberally in America. America will bleed. America will suffer.”3

Another long hot summer of riots — like the first wave in 1964, or the massive, horrifying ones that followed in 1965, 1966, and 1967 — had been widely predicted even before King died. To this day, many textbooks and retrospective accounts of King’s assassination in the media recall a national upheaval, a great orgy of violence and destruction.

This is misleading. Memory of the riots cuts the rest of national memory short. Americans actually began correcting their memory of the riots within a week of the assassination — very widely and publicly in the press, in white papers as well as black. Their experience of mass violence in the streets had swiftly failed to live up to the hype.

Large-scale violence, in the event, was confined to four cities: Chicago (11 dead), Washington, DC (10 dead), Baltimore (6 dead), and Kansas City (6 dead). (In 1968, as in previous years, there were great discrepancies in the reporting of deaths and other measures of destruction. Initial

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1 Clay Risen faithfully reproduces this emphasis in his evocative recent book, *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination* (New York, 2009). It is almost entirely about the riots.


reports went as high as 46 dead nationwide. But that came down to a consensus figure of 43.\(^4\) The emphasis in the first few days after the assassination was on violence and pleas for calm. The other main theme in the headlines, long forgotten now, was the manhunt and the related question of the identity of the assassin, who turned out to be James Earl Ray. He was not caught for over two months, on June 8, and his capture was obscured by news of the assassination of Robert Kennedy two days earlier, on June 6. Within a few days after King’s assassination, however, *Time* and other news outlets could not make up their minds which was more astonishing: the alarming violence in some cities, or the strange lack of it in so many others. How to account for the widespread failures to burn, kill, and maim was a big question at the time, though the question has since been forgotten.

In the event, *Time*’s tentative answer was the “[s]wift action by authorities” — with exceptions like Chicago’s Mayor Daley — and that “restraint by police in direct confrontations kept the lid on most communities.”\(^5\) Most city governments apparently heeded the Kerner Commission’s best-selling report on civil disorders, released about a month before King was killed, which argued that tough police tactics tended to provoke and to exacerbate rather than to deter or to quell riots. The *Baltimore Afro-American* took a similar view, the week after its copious riot coverage — even though its city was tied for third place in riot casualties, with six dead: “Police, National Guardsmen, and Federal troops don’t deserve the abuse being heaped upon them,” it editorialized, “… [Commanders of these forces] did not panic. Baltimore owes them a tremendous debt of gratitude.”\(^6\) The *Afro* even took the unusual view that “we did not have a riot” at all.\(^7\) The *Afro* defined riot as mass violence directed against persons, a historically sound definition, though American riots after World War II deviated from the pattern by devoting more of their energy to destruction of property. Major black papers in the two other cities that witnessed great violence in 1968, namely, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Kansas City Call*, also adopted a calm, anti-alarmist editorial and reporting posture.

The *Baltimore Afro*’s neighboring white liberal paper, the *Washington Post*, was then beginning to integrate its news staff. The *Post* took a strange pride in interpreting its city, which ranked number two in


\(5\) *Time*, April 12, 1968.


\(7\) Ibid. The *Afro* apparently took the casualties in Baltimore — six dead — to be bystanders. It is possible that the *Afro* editors did not consider white vigilantes — a significant and possibly decisive feature of Baltimore’s reaction to King’s death — to be rioters. The *Afro* was widely respected by black and white journalists. Its editorial gloss on the riots was not widely shared.
total riot deaths with ten dead. The Post emphasized “the relative absence of personal violence, of open racial hostility in confrontations between whites and blacks, and of snarling defiance of police and soldiers.”

Black and white people on the streets of several cities had been quoted threatening violence in cities where, in fact, there was none. Generally, as in previous 1960s riots, the overwhelming majority of those who died were black. All eleven people killed in Chicago, for example, were Negroes, according to the Associated Press.

But when the riots ended that year (never to return on that scale), the press counted only 43 deaths nationwide — which was a smaller number than had been widely feared; exactly that number was reported in Detroit alone in the previous year’s riots. Several newspapers, black and white, ran long, speculative analyses and editorials about why certain places known for extreme violence had no riot at all in 1968: Watts, with 36 dead in 1965, did not even make the list of minor disturbances in 1968; Newark, with 23 dead in 1967, reported no deaths or major injuries in 1968; Detroit, with 43 dead in 1967, had no riot in 1968; and Harlem, which had pioneered the new phase of rioting in July 1964 (which left one person dead), had none of it in 1968.

One answer to the forgotten mystery of why there was comparatively little violence in the streets in 1968, and comparatively few deaths, was that, in many cases, militant figures like LeRoi Jones — soon to remake himself as Amiri Baraka — went into the streets to plead for calm, surprising many who expected him to deliver on his violent rhetoric. Charles 37X Kenyatta, Malcolm X’s former bodyguard, then leader of the paramilitary Harlem Mau Mau, walked through Harlem arm-in-arm with Republican Mayor Nelson Rockefeller, urging people to maintain the peace. Kenyatta also praised Republican Mayor John Lindsay for his brave efforts to calm people down.

Soul Singer James Brown was largely apolitical but a great symbol of black pride and defiant rejection of cultural assimilationism. He was in Boston (where a concert of his was almost canceled), sternly scolding obstreperous members of his audience for their disorderly and disruptive behavior, and calling on all to support their newly

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8 Editorial, Washington Post, April 16, 1968. It went on to say that instances of violence, hostility, and defiance “never reached the scale they did in Detroit or even in Baltimore [this year].”

9 Time, April 12, 1968. UPI also stated 43 dead: Norfolk Journal & Guide, April 13, 1968. For the previous year’s death figure, 43 in Detroit alone, see the Kerner Commission Report (New York Times edition, 1967), l07. The AP initially reported a total of 39 deaths on April 13, 1968, all but 5 of them Negro (AP in New York Times, April 13, 1968). United Press International stated deaths, e.g., in the Kansas City Call, May 3, 1968. Other outlets for a time stated 46, but 43 emerged as the consensus figure. Of the 43 dead, according to Time, 39 were men, 14 were under 21 years old. One tribute to restraint was that army and National Guard troops were apparently responsible for none of the deaths. Police were known to have killed 13. Ten died from fire or smoke inhalation. Nine were killed by private citizens. For 8, Time could not establish the killer’s identity. Three others fell to various causes, including one black construction worker killed when the wall of a smoldering building he was walking by collapsed on him, another in a collision with a police car en route to the riots in Baltimore. According to Time, only 6 of the deaths were directly attributable to rioters’ anger. Time, April 12, 1968. According to the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, about 10 percent of the deaths in the 1967 riots were public officials, mostly police and firemen. As the Kerner Commission emphasized, “The overwhelming majority of the civilians killed and injured were Negroes.” House Committee in Kerner, and Kerner Commission Report, 116.
elected young, idealistic mayor (whom Brown called a “a real swingin’ cat”). Brown was then called into Washington, DC, by Mayor-Commissioner Walter Washington to calm the crowds there. Despite Brown’s attempted intervention in DC, the city still had a significant number of deaths (ranked second, with ten deaths). Many thought the reason was that Stokely Carmichael, former head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, went into the streets either to rile people up or at least to preach a very different message from other militants’ pleas for calm.

The Pittsburgh Courier, often seen as the leading voice in black journalism, had a different answer: “No Riots Hit Race Mayors.” There had been no riot in Gary, Indiana, where Gary Hatcher became the first black mayor elected in a major city, in November 1967, or in Cleveland, Ohio, where Carl Stokes had become the first black mayor elected to a major city with a white majority, the same day. The Courier managed to overlook Washington, DC, which had significant riot deaths but had also had a black “mayor-commissioner,” Walter Washington, since 1967. (He perhaps did not count, since his office was still appointive, not elective, at that point, and DC still had no home rule.) Though its point was strictly correct, the Courier’s implied logic was misleading: the paper neglected to take into account the many other cities that also experienced no significant violence but had white mayors.

10 I thank Nancy Dillon and especially Keith Luf, who doggedly tracked down the video and audio recordings I sought of Brown’s Boston concert. Before their efforts, all that was available were noisy, fragmented bootlegs. But the copy that Luf dug up — untouched since it went into storage in 1968 — is clear enough to allow researchers to see and hear nearly all that happened on or near the stage, including Mayor Kevin White’s brief speech to the crowd, and Brown’s scolding of audience members who jumped on stage. Much of the WGBH footage has since been made into a commercial film, James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden, April 5, 1968 (Shout Factory, 2009). See Brown with Bruce Tucker, Godfather of Soul (New York, 1986), 187-88. The Bay State Banner also credited Boston councilman Tom Atkins and several community leaders for working hard to keep the peace in Boston streets. Jo Holley in Bay State Banner, April 11, 1968. On James Brown in DC, see Pittsburgh Courier, April 13, 1968, editorial in Birmingham Post-Herald, April 10, 1968; and Human Events, April 20, 1968.

11 There is much conflict over exactly what Carmichael said and did on the night of King’s assassination when he appeared near the corner of 14th and U Streets and spoke to those who gathered there. There is agreement that he mentioned guns, but some testified that he was urging people not to use them lightly or impulsively that night. Others say he urged people to go home and get their guns, implying that they should bring them back into the streets and use them that night. The best work on that night in DC remains a collection of the Washington Post’s coverage: W. Gilbert, ed., Ten Blocks from the White House: An Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968 (London, 1968). Some of the conflict over Carmichael’s role stems from a tendency of some newspapers and magazines to conflate testimony about Carmichael on the night of April 4 with testimony about him on the following day, April 5. According to the available sources, Carmichael was much more firmly urging violence on April 5, when he attempted to speak to students at Howard University. On that occasion, however, his audience was clearly not inclined to follow his lead: Howard students did not resort to violence during or after Carmichael’s appearance. According to DC police reports sent to the FBI, the police wanted to arrest Carmichael for inciting a riot (which would be a federal offense of interest to the FBI). But the officers and informants present stated that the students were walking away from Carmichael as he spoke: there was nobody to incite within hearing range. The only people listening to Carmichael, other than those who reported directly to the police, were newsmen. Police reports and other materials from Justice Department Case File 146-1-51-19654, released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act, in author’s possession.
The best general answer, so far, to the forgotten question of why cities failed to riot came into public consciousness twelve years later, in the words of Andrew Young, when Miami broke out in a riot in 1980 — the first significant urban disorder since 1968 — and left 18 people dead. The great lesson learned in the 1960s, Young said, was that “[n]o neighborhood riots twice.” People in riot-torn areas learn, he explained, that whatever they may have wanted to achieve when they went out to burn and loot and rampage, they had ended up worse off. The painful memory stifled the impulse to riot the next time. Poverty and other “conditions” often worsened in poor neighborhoods in the 1970s and 1980s, but large-scale rioting became rare. There were no significant riots from 1968 to 1980, or from 1980 until the 1992 LA riot (53 dead).

Looking back, it appears that the most significant response to King’s assassination was not the over-reported and over-remembered riots but the under-reported and under-remembered Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the Fair Housing Act. It was the third of the three great civil rights acts of the decade.

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Supporters of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 said that they wished to pay homage to King and to show restive ghetto-dwellers that hope was not lost. King had strongly supported the bill for more than two years before his death. Since his strategic shift to northern cities in 1965–66, King had been losing hope of ever passing the bill or any other significant legislation. But the bill’s prospects suddenly changed when King died. The resulting Civil Rights Act was not just a symbolic purge of emotion, or a mere show of respect: it was a substantive answer to some of the civil rights movement’s most radical demands, and if King can be credited with any of the movement’s victories, it was his last real victory. It was also the one victory for which King could most plausibly take the lion’s share of the credit.

Yet the Civil Rights Act of 1968 has been almost completely forgotten — unlike the previous two major civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965, which historians and the general public tend reflexively to attribute to King and the movement he has come to symbolize.

Before he died, King and other supporters of the housing bill highly doubted that any serious civil rights legislation could pass, given the widespread conservative reaction to the summers of rioting, in 1965, 1966, and 1967. People have forgotten how controversial King

12 Accounts differ on Miami’s death toll. Early estimates ran from 14 dead (Amsterdam News, May 24, 1980) to 20 (Los Angeles Sentinel, May 22, 1980). The Washington Post (e.g., on July 8, 1982, and March 17, 1984) and the Wall Street Journal (e.g., on July 29, 1980), agreed on 18. The New York Times, after initially reporting 15 dead on May 20, 1980 (as did the LA Times that same day), later switched to “a dozen,” and stuck with that (e.g., on September 12 and 13, 1984).

13 More information on the Housing Act can be found in David L. Chappell, Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King (New York, 2014), chapter 1.
was — that he was one of the most widely feared and hated men in American history. He was controversial within the black population as well as the white. Not only did Black Muslims and Black Panthers criticize him, rather viciously, along with the mainstays of the established old black civil rights organizations, who said he was a loose cannon with a messiah complex, but also many of his own best friends and associates on the staff and board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference said that he had lost his way. Several urged him to abandon the Poor People’s Campaign demonstrations he had planned to begin in April 1968. He himself worried he might have to call off the demonstrations, saying in March 1968 that the opening one, in Washington, DC, scheduled for April 22, was “doomed.”

Yet King had drawn some encouragement from a Harris Poll published in August 1967, at the end of what turned out to be the worst and last of the long, hot summers. The poll showed that a majority of white Americans were (as Newsweek glossed the poll) “ready and willing to pay the price for a massive, Federal onslaught on the root problems of the ghetto.” Speaking to the DC Chamber of Commerce in early February 1968, King gave a hint as to why he was not following Bayard Rustin’s advice to abandon protests in favor of working within the system. If violence broke out in the ghettos again that summer, he said, “I don’t have any faith in the whites in power responding in the right way.... They’ll throw us into concentration camps. The Wallaces and the Bircherites will take over. The sick people and the fascists will be strengthened.” Launching the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington had to succeed, King believed. The movement had to prove that people who had been left out in the cold of America’s history of progress could still get a hearing by nonviolent means. “We’re going to plague Congress,” he said.

Opponents of the pending civil rights bill — which had been languishing in Congress since 1966 — mercilessly flung King’s name about as a symbol of all that had gone wrong in America. King was fomenting disorder, they said. He claimed to be “nonviolent,” but in fact he preached and practiced disrespect for the law, they said. By choosing to obey the laws he liked and to violate those he disliked, King used his charisma — and the authority conferred on him by congressional attention, a Nobel Prize, and adoring masses — to turn lawlessness into a moral imperative. This is what his many critics charged, right up to his death, and in a few instances after

14 On King’s fear of violence in planned April 22, 1968, protests in DC, see David Garrow, Bearing the Cross (New York, 1986), 594–618; King worried that the plan might have to be delayed or called off (597, 615).

15 Quotations from Newsweek and King in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 596–97, 618; and Stewart Burns, To the Mountaintop (San Francisco, 2004), 395–96.
it. But national grief, and the need to make at least some concessions to the grief following King’s assassination, finally — if only temporarily — overwhelmed the growing backlash.

The bill was signed into law on April 11, two days after King’s funeral, by President Lyndon Johnson — who had already fallen on his own sword, just days before King’s assassination, resigning from politics by announcing he would not seek a second term, thereby cutting short one of the most impressive political careers in American history. This gave the newsweeklies, including many of the major black papers in the country, trouble: they had to crowd the earth-shattering news of Johnson’s surprise resignation onto the same front page as King’s assassination a few days later. The act sweepingly outlawed housing discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin, in about 80 percent of yearly housing transactions nationwide — including mortgage financing. Some state laws raised the percentage higher, and a Supreme Court decision in June 1968 curtailed the exemptions nationwide, raising the coverage to nearly 100 percent. (Strong enforcement provisions were not added until 1988, but the original formulation clearly put most housing discrimination outside the bounds of law.)


17 Exceptions included (a) those involving sale or rental of single-family dwellings without use of a broker or other professional help, or discriminatory advertising; (b) rental of living space in an owner-occupied dwelling for four families or fewer; and (c) rental of dwellings operated by religious societies or private clubs for the noncommercial benefit of their members. The act covered about 80 percent of the housing market, though state and local laws already covered exempted areas and court decisions soon raised coverage.

18 Even the exempted unassisted single-family dwelling owner fell under the act’s coverage if he or she used discriminatory advertising. The act went into effect in stages, expanding until it reached its final form, effective after Dec. 31, 1969. Herbert A. Danner, “The Civil Rights Act of 1968: Brief Summary of Basic Provisions,” Congressional Research Service, April 23, 1968, 5. The estimate of the 80 percent left » after these exemptions (as of Jan. 1, 1970) is in the Washington Post, April 14, 1968, which also summarizes the 154 existing state laws. In June 1968, in Jones v. Mayer Company, however, the Supreme Court eroded the departmental basis of the 1866 Civil Rights Act, which affirmed that blacks had “the same right … as is enjoyed by white citizens” to buy and sell property. New York Times, June 22, 1968. Sex was added in 1974; physical handicap and family status were added in 1988.

19 The act banned discrimination not only in the sale and rental of housing but in the making of loans for purchase, renovation, and maintenance of housing, and for professional services of realtors and brokers. A buyer or renter who believed he was subject to discrimination could report it to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, whose secretary would have to investigate and respond within thirty days, though the secretary could defer to state or local fair housing laws where applicable. If the secretary or local agency failed to resolve the dispute, the complainant could file suit in federal court, which could award punitive damages as well as order an end to the discriminatory practice. PL-90–284, 82 Stat. 73, secs. 804 and 805; U.S. Code, Congressional & Administrative News, 90th, 2nd (St. Paul, 1968), 1:101–102. The best guide to the revisions of the act in 1988 and other changes in the law in the two decades after its passage is John Reiman, Enforcing the Fair Housing Laws: A Practical Manual (Washington, DC, 1990).
It was a toss-up whether Congress had honored King’s memory directly or responded to the over-reported violence that followed his death. While some black militants insisted that white America had ignored or thwarted the pleas of nonviolent Negroes, Bayard Rustin would later complain that America’s rich and powerful went in the other direction and actually rewarded violence. American authorities had failed to respond to responsible political action — to the peaceful efforts of black Americans to take responsibility for their blighted communities and reconstruct them — Rustin said. He was referring to all the attention given to rioters and all the programs directed at riot-torn areas. There may thus be some perverse justice in America’s amnesia over its last great civil rights act. For the act’s passage did not unambiguously honor the constructive politics of nonviolence. King wanted and fought for the housing law. But in the event, its passage was ambiguous. Those who wanted King to win could interpret the act as a tribute to his methods, an endorsement of his plans to empower the poor to liberate themselves. But to other observers — aided by the national habit of exaggerating the extent and severity of the 1968 riots, which so many scholars reinforce — looked too much like a reward for the rioting that King and his supporters opposed.

White conservatives emphasized their view that the act was a capitulation to the rioters. The Pittsburgh Courier argued, however, that that conservative line was, at best, illogical and shortsighted. The Courier’s editor believed that violence actually increased congressional resistance to civil rights. Referring to passage of the housing bill as “A King Dream,” the Courier pointed out that before King’s death, “a riots-aftermath-angry 1967 Congress and a rock-willed 1968 Congress were almost solidly against passing” it. Yet its passage “miraculously” came, according to the editorial — and its passage was “directly due to Dr. King’s assassination, subsequent riotings in 110 cities and more than 150,000 persons of all walks of American life who attended his [memorial march on April 8 in] Memphis.”

Segregationists and other conservatives generally took the narrower line that Congress had responded to the rioting. The segregationist standard-bearer, the Charleston News & Courier, scolded Congress for surrendering to “emotional pressure” to create new buyers’ rights that sacrificed sellers’ “more precious” rights, and for raising expectations that “the law cannot fulfill.” The law thus presaged “greater disappointment and more violence.” Rep. William Colmer of

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20 Pittsburgh Courier, April 20, 1968. The Courier added that it was nonetheless only a minor step toward the goal of eradicating poverty in America — the goal that King had founded the PPC to accomplish.
Mississippi, who had held the bill hostage in his Rules Committee for some time, said his committee caved in “under the gun.” Only King’s murder and the reaction to it made it possible to muster the votes to move the bill to the floor. “Needless to say,” he added, “it was a great disappointment to me.” When the bill passed the House, Republican Rep. H. R. Gross of Iowa suggested flying the flag at half-staff in mourning for “this once great House” that had now surrendered to intimidation by rioters.21

The best measure of the depth of the memory hole into which the 1968 Civil Rights Act has fallen is the failure of King’s opponents to recall it when they were debating legislation to establish the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday, eleven to fifteen years later, in 1979-1983. Holiday opponents failed to make what could have been the best argument against passage of the holiday. Congress had already paid tribute to King, they could have said. Indeed, Congress had paid him a far more meaningful and substantive tribute than a ceremonial day off in his name. Congress had, that is, done something real to advance his cause, in April 1968, by passing a major law that he himself had supported — as opposed to a merely symbolic gesture of a holiday, which King would in all likelihood have opposed. He was on record, after all, opposing grandiose tributes that smacked of a cult of personality. Indeed, he always minimized his own significance, insisting he was just a poor, ordinary sinner.22

As it was, the holiday opponents’ arguments in 1979-1983 were weak and unmemorable. Almost all opponents confined their objections to two. The first was to the cost of paying federal employees for another day off ($195 million in salaries and wages paid out for a day when no work would be done, according to the Civil Service Commission), during an unprecedented economic crisis.23 The second was a concern that other great heroes — conservatives emphasized Abraham Lincoln and Booker T. Washington — who didn’t have federal holidays were being passed over and that King’s death was too recent: more time was needed to determine King’s true historical significance, relative to other past heroes, and to gain a nationwide consensus on it. Only two members of the House — Democrat Larry McDonald of suburban Atlanta and Republican John Ashbrook of rural Ohio — publicly opposed a national holiday devoted to King on ideological grounds. By resorting to ugly, unseemly tactics of character assassination and guilt by association, they helped supporters of the holiday in the same way that arch-segregationists Bull Connor and Sheriff

22 For a discussion of the King holiday, also see Chappell, Waking from the Dream, chapter 4.
Jim Clark had inadvertently helped the movement back in King’s day, when their unpopular brutality was caught on camera.24 At any rate, Ashbrook died on April 24, 1982, and McDonald died (dramatically, in a civilian Korean airliner, Flight 007, shot down by the Soviet air force when it strayed into Russian airspace) on September 1, 1983. Both were dead before final congressional action on the bill in October 1983.

Just one member of the Senate took an openly ideological stance against King, and he did so only at the last minute. Jesse Helms had generally stayed out of the congressional debates and hearings on the King holiday, only jumping in to repeat what Ashbrook and McDonald had said so counterproductively in the House. Helms’s party leaders, and the Reagan White House (which had initially opposed the bill, though it had also issued some respectful and laudatory statements about King) began to support the holiday on October 4. It was widely rumored that Helms took his eleventh-hour stand for the cynical reason that he wanted a tobacco subsidy, which he would indeed get, by agreeing to give up his threat of a filibuster, along with a lot of publicity that energized his right-wing supporters. By such means, Helms generated sufficient turnout among his right-wing base in North Carolina — barely enough — to keep getting re-elected in close elections.

It is tempting to see the holiday as a sop — a consolation prize, at best, for the dismal string of disappointments and failures the movement had endured since 1968 — especially in light of the failure of the last legislative campaign of the old social-democratic/labor-liberal-civil rights coalition, the campaign for the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment law, which absorbed the legislative attention of Coretta King and labor-movement allies, and much of the Congressional Black Caucus (along with figures ranging from Hubert Humphrey and Jesse Jackson to Stevie Wonder) from 1973 to 1978.25 Thus, the King holiday may appear, in retrospect, as a bone thrown to the tattered remnants of the civil rights movement and its liberal-labor allies in Congress.

The holiday, however, helped to touch off a remarkable — though still unheralded — run of successful civil rights legislation in the 1980s, beginning with the extension and strengthening of the Voting Rights Act in 1982, and, after the holiday, comprehensive sanctions on South Africa, passed in October 1986, overriding President Reagan’s veto; the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which reversed major conservative Supreme Court decisions on civil rights, passed in 1988, also over President Reagan’s veto; the final fulfillment of Congress’s original

24 On the efforts of extreme anti-communists to discredit King during debate over the King holiday legislation in the 1970s, see Chappell, Waking from the Dream, Chapter 4.

25 On the Humphrey-Hawkins crusade, see Chappell, Waking from the Dream, Chapter 3.
tribute to King, strengthening amendments to the Fair Housing Act, also in 1988; and what became (after a false start in 1990) the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which also reversed major Supreme Court decisions.

These remarkable achievements — more significant civil rights victories than in any decade other than the 1860s and 1960s — were all the more striking in light of the Republicans’ control of the Senate from January 1981 to January 1987, and the opposition of the Reagan administration to many of the initiatives.

The conjunction of those substantive victories with the holiday is the strongest evidence against suspicions that the holiday was just designed to pacify black voters and distract them from the lack of real progress. To be sure, during the Reagan-Bush years, civil rights, and many other programs supported by black voters and their remaining liberal allies, were incrementally and gradually cut back, in quiet ways, which established a general and demoralizing pattern of backlash against the gains black protesters and voters had made in the decades since A. Phillip Randolph threatened to mobilize them and forced Franklin Roosevelt to desegregate military industry in 1941.26 When seen from the perspective of major, national legislation, however — the sort of legislation that got sustained public attention — the holiday victory marked a new mood, a new disposition, and a new resolve among those carrying on King’s unfinished business. That new mood, partly because of its lowered expectations, led to greater achievement and perhaps to greater resilience in an inconclusive, uphill struggle.

This new democratic realism — in contrast to the bureaucratic and judicial leverage, often funded by corporations that purchased a separate peace from Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) and the NAACP — led the Congressional Black Caucus and its allies in Congress to work towards more achievable goals than they had pursued in the 1970s. Many of the goals they achieved warrant far more of our attention than they have gotten. Those new civil rights laws of the 1980s and early 1990s are among the most significant, yet most underappreciated, parts of King's legacy.

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26 The most comprehensive sources on all that incremental backlash activity are the yearly reports of the National Urban League and the various reports from the Leadership Council on Civil Rights from the years 1982-1992.