
Marvin T. Chiles  
*Old Dominion University, mchiles@odu.edu*

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the freedom movements led by FOR, CORE, and the inheritors of the prewar socialist Left. Here, Wolcott focuses on a number of outward-facing communes, from cooperative farms to the Catholic Worker movement to the Harlem Ashram. Wolcott contrasts—and defends—these activists’ radical, provocative, and nonviolent interracialism with the ameliorative liberal interracialism of more conventional white-led organizations.

Wolcott demonstrates a coherence of vision across civil rights efforts where historians have more often seen fracture and rupture. This is not a consensus history, but it is a history of coherent, deeply rooted, and ideologically cohesive dissent—and a plea for its continuation.

Emory University

ALISON COLLIS GREENE

Living the Dream: The Contested History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.


Civil rights historiography began in the 1950s with biographies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a genre known to experts as King studies. The social history movement of the 1970s shifted civil rights historiography toward a focus on Black female activists, the grass roots, and litigation. However, more recent discussions about memorialization have allowed Daniel T. Fleming to reintegrate King studies into the field in Living the Dream: The Contested History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Fleming assures readers that, like King’s life, the holiday “has a history of its own”—a history interconnected with America’s transition from the civil rights era to the age of antiracism (p. 11).

King’s legacy is riveted to the meaning of his birthday as a national holiday. Moreover, King has been “co-opted by all” as a symbol showing how far America has or has not moved beyond racism (p. 4). Fleming sides with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, and others in seeing civil rights memorialization as a social commentary about the movement’s successes and failures in the present. He distinguishes himself, however, by focusing solely on the man whose persona defined the original course of the modern civil rights movement and its historiography.

Black activists, including King’s widow Coretta Scott King, fought to make King’s birthday a nationally celebrated holiday from the aftermath of King’s death in 1968 to the 1990s. Conservatives opposed these efforts because of King’s known ties to communism and criticism of the American government. Thus, “holiday activists” downplayed King’s radical past and promoted him as a nonviolent proponent of America’s highest ideal of racial equality (p. 21). By the time King’s birthday became a national holiday in 1983 (it was first observed on January 20, 1986), King was no longer thought of as a radical, and neither was the civil rights movement discussed as an incomplete project. Rather, King was held up as a symbol of American exceptionalism during the Cold War. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush cemented King’s new legacy by “downplay[ing] King’s Blackness” and promoting American global and economic hegemony as “Living the Dream” King had envisioned (pp. 66, 72).
This consensus about King’s legacy ended in the 1990s. President William J. Clinton used King’s holiday to promote federally funded community service programs and to celebrate America’s multiculturalism. Beginning in 1996, Dexter Scott King, the civil rights leader’s second son, monetized his father’s intellectual property, rendering King’s legacy an extension of the neoliberal policies that defined the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, President George W. Bush evoked King’s name to champion American hegemony and racial reconciliation, just as the first President Bush had years prior. And as Barack Obama framed his own election to the presidency as King’s dream coming into full form, grassroots activists evoked King’s holiday to platform his forgotten radical advocacy for antipoverty priorities and antimilitarism after national tragedies in the 2010s. President Donald J. Trump went out of his way to embrace King as well, but from the reconciliationist perspective cultivated in the 1980s. As different people used King to push their political agendas, his legacy became more distorted and contested. The King holiday is less understood today than it has ever been because holiday activists willingly sacrificed King’s radical legacy for Black representation in America’s memorial landscape.

A presentist history about King should have more in-depth discussion of America’s refusal to end poverty and segregation. Nevertheless, Fleming uses the King holiday to show that desires for racial reconciliation collapsed under the weight of good intentions set out by whites and Blacks alike. This is the book’s most important message.

This jargon-free volume is very accessible to both specialists and nonspecialists. For experts, Living the Dream is a much-needed addition to the growing literature on civil rights memory. Instructors can use this book to teach about America’s transition from the civil rights era to the age of antiracism. For casual history consumers, this book provides a clear understanding of the issues inherent in memorialization.

Old Dominion University

MARVIN T. CHILES


For much of the mid-twentieth century, white liberal politicians in the South appeared to have a chance. Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas and Albert Gore Sr. of Tennessee won U.S. Senate races in the 1950s with campaigns that advocated strongly for social welfare spending, and Jimmy Carter of Georgia and Bill Clinton of Arkansas won gubernatorial elections in the 1970s thanks to a biracial coalition that favored increased aid to education. But today there are almost no white southern liberals in Congress or statehouses. States such as Tennessee that were once represented in the Senate by moderate liberals now have all-Republican Senate delegations that are strongly supportive of Donald Trump’s brand of politics.

What happened to white southern liberalism? Why did white southern liberals fail to change the political culture of their region—and ultimately fail to
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