Fifty years ago next August, two hundred fifty thousand Americans gathered in this city to protest racial discrimination as un-American. Martin Luther King, Jr., 34, leader of the successful Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), engaged in a bitter campaign to desegregate police chief Bull Connor’s Birmingham, Alabama, spoke last. His speech was one for the ages, an oration whose eloquent content matched the Gettysburg Address. Unlike Abraham Lincoln’s address, carefully prepared well in advance of his trip to a battlefield dedication, Martin Luther King’s speech was a masterpiece of eleventh-hour composition and inspired improvisation. He tells us that he only finished it at 4 AM on the morning of the 28th. The famous speech commenced with a Lincolnesque flourish: “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” As his fine baritone rolled over the great crowd, “the audience response was wonderful,” Dr. King recalls. “All of a sudden, this thing came to me.” “I have a dream,” the phrase that he had used many times before. At that point, “I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether and didn’t come back to it,” he says.[Auto-223] The powerful cadences,
the edifying biblical allusions, the hypnotic iteration of the leitmotif—"I Have A Dream"—would spellbind the nation.

“Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.” “I have a dream.”

Probably no better analysis of the multiple sources of the Dream speech exists than that offered by the former editor of the King Papers Project, Stanford historian Clayborne Carson, whose new memoir *Martin’s Dream* should become indispensable reading for scholars and those interested in the world Martin Luther King helped make. Carson describes the Zeitgeist importance of the March On Washington moment and a young preacher’s centrality in it. “As television beamed the image of this extraordinary gathering,” he writes, “... everyone who believed in man’s capacity to better himself had a moment of inspiration and confidence in the future of the human race.”[Auto-228] Certainly, that should be true, but “I Have a Dream” has been a litany depressingly susceptible to disingenuous exploitation, even and especially on some occasions celebrating the third Monday in January.

Far too little notice is often paid to the hard economic truth at the heart of the majestic oration: the historic disempowerment of one tenth of America’s people by her dominant ninety percent. Too often inaudible above the thunder of ceremonial applause for his ennobling dream is Dr. King’s remonstration that black Americans were dealt a check after the Civil War “that came back ‘marked
insufficient funds.”---that the funds on deposit are still insufficient for populations of color and great swaths of others fifty years after the March on Washington and the Dream dreamt that epic day. The “bad check” note would continue to be sounded ever more loudly until the aspirational content of King’s public pronouncements gave way in the last months of his life to aggrieved concern for the appalling asymmetry of wealth and poverty in America.

When Ruth and I visited the King Memorial for the first time last year, we found ourselves drawn to speculations about the enormous national balance sheet that will have been accumulated as of the fiftieth anniversary this year of the March On Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The King Memorial confronts Jefferson’s Memorial directly across the Tidal Basin, a perfect study in contrasts. Jefferson, the personification of democratic ideals traduced by his own slave-holding hypocrisy. King, the embodiment of democratic ideals his own society was loath to honor. From that morning’s speculations came the thought that the reissue of a book about Dr. King and his times written some forty years ago might profit the historical curiosity of more recent generations. With a new interpretive preface added, professional peers might see some value in a third edition appearing on the eve of the March’s fiftieth anniversary commemoration. My privilege and good fortune, as I hope it may be yours this evening, is to have been asked to reflect on Dr. King’s life and legacy by the directors of NYU Washington, the newest unit in what we at NYU proudly call our Global Network University. Abundant thanks to Tom McIntyre, Assistant Director of NYU”s Washington office of External Affairs and Special Programs, and to Michael Dinesca, Associate Director of the John Brademas Center
for the Study of Congress without whose congenial administrative capabilities, together with their capable staffs, neither this event nor New York University in Washington would have been realized.

The day Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, I had reached a decision that I never imagined would be mine to make. Asked to consider writing this biography just two weeks earlier, I was drafting the acceptance letter to the publisher when news bulletins announced the tragedy in Memphis. *King: A Critical Biography* was finished sixteen months after Martin Luther King, Jr., died a few minutes past 6 PM on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. The original title was not intended to connote disapproval of its then controversial subject. Rather, it denoted its newly minted Ph.D. and novice author’s commitment to the ideal of objectivity prescribed to professional historians. That the choice of title was less problematic than it well might have been was signaled early on in the canonical *American Historical Review* where, I was relieved to read, a distinguished senior historian judged *King: A Critical Biography* to be “an excellent book” that would “do more to keep Martin Luther King and his ‘dream’ alive in a different era than would a more fulsome tribute.”

The biography established itself as the first scholarly appreciation of Dr. King. Four decades after a dutiful preface confession that “the serious limitations of instant history have not dissipated with the writing of this biography,” *King: A Biography* (unfettered of “critical” in the second edition) retains its special value as a book written in the unique interpretive space between Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death as a beleaguered public figure and his future beatification as America’s
greatest secular saint. The past had only just begun to become unrecoverable from its future. It was still possible to track 'Mike' or 'M. L.', the privileged son of a powerful fixture of Atlanta's racially segregated, conservative, black upper middle-class as he absorbed his family's rich religious tradition, acquired a more cosmopolitan academic culture in Boston, alternately led and followed the black freedom movement as it accelerated beyond the control of his nonviolent passive resistance, until he surpassed the civil rights parochialism of peers in order to combine racial emancipation, economic democracy, and world peace into a transcendent, if still inchoate, philosophy of human rights that inspired many, yet puzzled and offended many more.

I came from the same Atlanta social background as Dr. King and in the turbulent summer of 1968, I found ready access to prominent families, peers, teachers, associates, opponents, and public officials (most since deceased) whose firsthand memories were as yet unsacralized by an apotheosized Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lanky, voluble E. D. Nixon, Pullman porter guardian of black Montgomery's long smoldering indignation, bounded into the Holiday Inn dining room minutes after I arrived to tell me about the drama among the city's preachers and teachers in the hours after Rosa Parks's arrest on December 1, 1955. He and local NAACP director K. L. Bufford replayed the byzantine yet serendipitous weekend of politics that put a surprised newcomer at the head of an organized bus boycott that would change history. Dora McDonald, Martin Luther King's private secretary, hadn't a scintilla of doubt that it was John F. Kennedy's late evening phone call to Coretta Scott King that put Kennedy in the White House by the wisp of a margin after King's
father endorsed him---a claim later made in Harris Wofford's *Of Kennedys and King* (1980) and Taylor Branch's 1988 *Parting of the Waters* (even if others have cited misplaced ballots found in Mayor Richard Daley's Cook County and Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson's Texas).

Ella Baker, the multi-tasking civil-rights indispensable who said she seldom met an NAACP official or preacher she respected, served the cause in spite of its misogyny and even though she deplored, as did SNIC leaders Julian Bond and Charles Sherrod, Martin Luther King's penchant for opportunistically dropping into and out of local protest hotspots. Where was Dr. King when the Freedom Riders were bleeding on Alabama tarmacs in Greyhound and Trailways bus stations, Baker wanted to know? One heard that Alabama’s Reverend Shuttlesworth was still furious that better desegregation terms hadn't been extracted from the Birmingham power structure, no matter the moral high ground seized by Dr. King’s inspired “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” The transformative 1965 Voting Rights Act had capped Selma-Montgomery, a grand racial, regional, constitutional catharsis that would find its arresting tableau in historian Taylor Branch’s sprawling King trilogy, but Stokely Carmichael insisted to me that nonviolence had been more a hindrance than an advantage to what he saw as the civil rights movement’s ultimate objectives.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., may have been one of the few who had known of the covert 1965 collaboration between President Johnson and Dr. King that anticipated the grand Selma-Montgomery drama and consequent passage of the Voting Rights Act---what historians now describe as their civil rights *pas de deux* recorded by the Oval Office's electronic taping system. Certainly, I had no knowledge of President
Johnson’s critical telephone call to Dr. King on his 36th birthday setting so much in motion. In late summer 1968, Lyndon Johnson was a president much reviled because of his unwinnable Asian war, and I remember interviewing no one who praised his “We Shall Overcome” address as one of the truly great presidential addresses of all time, which it is. Peering into the packed chamber, Johnson said: “But rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or our abundance, or our welfare or security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation. . . .

There is no Negro problem. . . . There is only an American problem. . . . Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

Thus spoke American Exceptionalism at its finest. Almost simultaneously, the wizard in the White House ordered Secretary of Defense McNamara to send 144,000 troops to South Vietnam, a decision that would gut his Great Society programs and alienate a generation of young people.

Thus, what most people remembered in 1968, was Dr. King’s speech from the steps of the former capital of the Confederacy at the conclusion of the Selma-Montgomery march. His sermon was a stemwinder beginning with an encapsulation of Reconstruction history and ending with a riff of magnificent call and response. He knew that some of his people were asking: “‘How long will justice be crucified, and truth buried?’ he cried. ‘Not long!’ answered a female voice above the others,”” He answered her. “‘How long? Not long! Because the arc of the moral universe is long, but
bends toward justice. How long? *Not* long! Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”’ American Exceptionalism magnificently reaffirmed.

Notwithstanding the polls indicating that many doubted whether demonstrations any longer served a positive purpose after the explosion of the Los Angeles ghetto, Watts, in August 1965, and the parallel sentiments of many in the NAACP and Urban League, that the times were right for pause and consolidation, King decided to move into the urban centers of the North. Heading north, I met young Chicago militants and inconsolable community organizers who disparaged King’s pledge “to deliver results—nonviolent results in a Northern city” as a naively provocative, poorly planned and led fiasco. The mayhem encountered during SCLC’s march through Cicero, matched the savagery of Birmingham. Mayor Richard Daly was puzzled by an opponent who had no purchase price, but after he assembled religious leaders, real estate brokers, bankers and union bosses to broker the 1966 Chicago Summit Agreement, the White House and much of the civil rights leadership pressed Dr. King to make the best of the bargain. The Summit Agreement was a hollow bargain that might have been a fatal humiliation. Instead, the Chicago defeat proved to be Dr. King’s personal catharsis.

In a confession of signature insight and candor after his Chicago miscalculations, Martin Luther King wrote that he had lived too long “with the idea of reforming . . . society, a little change here, a little change there.” Nervous SCLC preachers had watched King embark on a radical political and economic program that gradually alienated northern white liberals, the business community, much of organized labor, as well as the senior civil rights leadership. NAACP secretary Roy
Wilkins and National Urban League director Whitney Young assured me that Martin Luther King had badly gauged what was possible after Selma—especially after he ventured his first reservations about the Vietnam War. Fair to say, the permissible parameters of what historians denote as “cold war” civil rights had been set in concrete after the 1948 defeat of Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party and the ostracism of W.E.B. Du Bois. In A. Philip Randolph’s colorful formulation, “Being black was bad enough, being red was fatal.” Dr. King’s civil rights audacity was to twin progressivism and pacifism and insist, ever more eloquently, that Lyndon Johnson’s Asian war fatally undermined American democracy.

An outraged Lyndon Johnson had good reason to feel betrayed. The Watts riot coming days after passage of the Voting Rights made a mid-term Republican upsurge in Congress likely. After vocalizing the civil rights hymn before a joint session of Congress (and privately apprehensive that the white South would bolt the Democrats), LBJ believed it at least conceivable that Martin King might endorse a war against Godless communism. But as the furies of the urban cauldron and Black Power extremists beset him and Johnson’s Great Society imploded, Martin King chose to bear the cross of moral greatness. Stanley Levison, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s bête noire and one of SCLC’s most trusted advisors, told me that King overruled his advice about the dire financial consequences of speaking out against the Vietnam War. Reading Dr. King’s Nobel Peace Prize speech, I believed one could have anticipated a redoubled pacifism twinned with an evolving progressivism. He said in his acceptance speech, “that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow down
before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and non-violent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land."[Auto-260] So he told Stanley Levison, “I don’t care if we don’t get five cents in the mail.” King’s thoughts at this time define the meaning of character. “The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on,” he preached. “It may mean the death of your bridge to the White House. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut down your budget a bit.”[Auto-343] An active participant in the antiwar organization Women Strike for Peace, Coretta King could have shared Martin’s and her tribulations over the costs their antiwar courage. Although tempted to do so, her book contract prevented our meeting.

W.E.B. Du Bois is alleged to have said that he never expected to live to see a militant black Baptist preacher. Truthfully, a similar bias in 1968 prompted me to construe King’s evolving civil rights militancy as having less to do with his Baptist faith than with his grounding in secular philosophy. This is not at all to say that the biography ignored the nurturing influence of the black Baptist church or the mobilizing power of evangelical Protestantism, or that it failed to dramatize the people and the prophet moving in splendid call and response from Montgomery to Memphis. That said, King: A Biography decidedly privileged its subject’s philosophical ideas with what was probably an excess of exegesis. Influenced by Reverend J. Pious Barbour, a close King family friend who was positive Martin King found more value in Marxist methodology than it was politic to reveal, I decided the truth lay more with socialist ideas implicit in Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel than with the traditionalism of the Baptist faith. I would revise that judgment today.
Although only hinted at in the biography, I believed it an unprovable certainty in 1968 that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover harbored an insensate hostility to Martin Luther King and the black civil rights struggle that would eventually be corroborated. Director Hoover politely declined a written request for an interview, then ordered a tap of my home phone. Seven years later, Senator Frank Church's committee on intelligence investigations exposed outrageous civil liberties violation by the FBI and CIA. Political scientist David Garrow wrote his indispensable *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986) with the benefit of FBI files. Between the Church committee's revelations and those served up in Michael Beschloss's edition of electronic transcripts and Taylor Branch's final King volume, it might be said that the tawdry record of the civil liberties perversions perpetrated by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI matched that of a totalitarian dictatorship's secret police.

Reviewing Branch's book for the *New Yorker*, I could still be astonished that Hoover flooded the federal bureaucracy's upper echelons and the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses with salacious recordings from bugged hotel rooms, as well as putatively definitive reports of active communists at the center of SCLC decision-making. The FBI director dissuaded universities from bestowing honorary degrees, intimidated foundations from making grants, embargoed the communication to King of assassination plots, and barred FBI agents from providing him with covert protection. The sex was real. What has never been shown to be real is any meaningful, significant impact of the sex upon the integrity of Dr. King's public conduct as the premier civil rights paladin of his time.
This third edition of *King: A Biography* appears shortly before the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the March on Washington and the democratic vision Martin Luther King shared with the nation that remarkable August day in 1963. The funds on deposit are still insufficient fifty years after the March on Washington and the Dream dreamt that epic day. Martin Luther King’s crusade of nonviolent passive resistance faltered badly after successful confrontations with institutional segregation in the South. He himself said so on the television program, “Issues and Answers,” the summer before his death, “It didn’t cost the nation anything to guarantee the right to vote, or to guarantee access to public accommodations, but we are dealing with issues now that will cost the nation something.” What those costly issues were, he had disclosed off the record to SCLC staff members several months earlier. “We are treading in difficult waters,’ he told them, “because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong . . . with capitalism . . . . That there must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a Democratic Socialism.”

On his last night on this earth, Martin Luther King said that he had just wanted to do “God’s will.” God had allowed him to go up the mountaintop. And he had looked over. And he saw the promised land. How might the promised land look to Dr. King on the extraordinarily portentous tomorrow when his fellow Americans inaugurate a man of color as their 45th President for the second time, and on the very Monday officially set aside as Martin Luther King, Jr., Day? A president of color elected for the content of his character and ability who pledged fundamental changes to a dysfunctional status quo had to have elated Dr. King four years ago.
Quite likely, he must have pondered at the time the unique assets and liabilities of a president without deep roots in American slavery, the era of Jim Crow, or urban ghettos, and unassociated with the great crucibles of African American life. We continue to ponder.

To be sure, the legacy of Barack Obama is writing itself as we speak. Many believe they have already seen enough to recognize in the President’s signature, an aversion to racial discourse and a political, economic, and international pragmatism that disconcerts many of his progressive supporters. In a smart little book entitled *Obama’s Challenge*, published immediately after the 2008 inauguration, a leading progressive economist predicted that the President would lose his solid majority in the 2010 mid-term congressional elections unless he acted audaciously. The key to greatness was living up to the audacity of hope. If he did so, the author believed Obama would enter the special ranks of transformative presidents after Lincoln, comprised of FDR, LBJ, and, yes, Ronald Reagan.

To paint history with broad interpretive brush strokes, it may be argued that the America afforded our 44th president after tomorrow has come to pass because of Dr. King. Without his unique nonviolent strategies, that troika of civil rights legislation enacted during two years of turbulent African American struggle---1964 and 1965---are inconceivable. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 with its Title VII emancipated black people for the third time and granted American women equal rights for the first time. Gay Americans followed along gamely. As for the 1965 Voting Rights Act, think of voter suppression in Ohio, Florida, and much elsewhere, and President-elect Mitt Romney would take the oath tomorrow. Neither King nor
LBJ could have anticipated the full force of the 1965 Immigration Act, but Dr. King embraced the rightness of enactment as self-evident—an act that has all but terminated the biracial narrative of the United States. Think Tea Party anger and a beige majority. Surely, when President Obama places his right hand on the bibles of Lincoln and King, he means to symbolize his deep understanding of the complicated possibilities he inherits.

I should like to close with these words: Mrs. King chose these words that her husband spoke at Ebenezer Baptist Church the month before his death to be replayed at his funeral: “The quality, not the longevity, of one’s life is what is important. If you are cut down in a movement that is designed to save the soul of a nation, then no other death could be more redemptive.”

Thank you.

Grossman on Obama -- the HoldaiInauguration - 2 Nobel address – Kuttner

ansformational president