Title: The Bullitt Lecture in American History presents Taylor Branch

Speaker 1:

This is the Seattle Public Library podcast of the library's 2007 A. Scott Bullitt Lecture in American History with Pulitzer Prize winning historian Taylor Branch. His most recent work, At Canaan's Edge, concludes America in the King Years, his three volume history of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. The series includes the bestselling Parting the Waters and Pillar of Fire. He spoke on Myth and Miracles from the King Years, January 23rd at the Central Library.

Taylor Branch:

Thank you. I'm talking about myth and miracles tonight, growing out of 24 years of work on the King era series. Didn't plan it to be 24 years. My wife would have never agreed. I wouldn't have agreed. But it just came that way and I feel blessed for every extra year beyond the three that we budgeted, that it took.

I want to start off by warning you that I'm going to try to create my own myth or at least paradox and challenge you to think of the King years as something that's not about the past, but about the future. I believe very strongly that unless we make it about the future, that we will suffer. So I hope maybe we can create not a myth, but a conviction out of the problems that I'm going to try to present to you tonight. And I think they're very serious ones, that we are trapped in this, that prevent us from appreciating the miracles of what occurred in this amazing period of our history.

Now, one thing right up front, I should say that the most frequently asked question I always get is you sound like a Southerner. You're a white Southerner. Why did you spend the bulk of your life and your life's work chronicling an almost entirely African American-led movement? And I think it's a legitimate question. So I would like to give just a little background as to how I got into that, to buttress or to introduce the myths and the miracles.

I am not a natural person to have done this from many standpoints. I was born in Atlanta, Dr. King's city. I never even saw him in the flesh. I grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, with it going on all around me. But I was studiously avoiding it, partly by fear, which was the dominant emotion then for Black people and white people about the Civil Rights Movement. It was scary.

But also out of disinclination, and to be honest, training. My dad was a dry cleaner. He was the most overeducated dry cleaner in the history of Atlanta. He had a law degree and an MBA from the University of Chicago and decided, as an orphan from the Depression, that he didn't want to be

dependent on anyone, so he bought a dry cleaning plant so he could work for himself. His motto growing out of that life was anyone interested in politics can't find honest work. And that we should ignore politics, that they were all parasites and that it was dangerous and that hard work was our only refuge in a dangerous and rocky world.

And I kind of agreed with that. We worked really hard and the Civil Rights Movement started in my formative years. When I was in elementary school, the bus boycott happened. I didn't pay any attention to that. I was 12 or 13 when the sit-ins started, I didn't pay any attention to that.

By that time, I had been kind of an athlete. I was recruited to play baseball at a very fancy prep school in Atlanta called Westminster on a scholarship. Once they got me there, of course, they cut the scholarship off after a couple of years. So we worked out a historic arrangement actually, or unique certainly for the history of Westminster, in that my dad made an agreement with them that we would take out tuition in trade by doing the laundry for the athletic department. So that every day, I would drive home with a trunk full of dirty socks, jocks, t-shirts, and towels, and swap cars with my dad the next day coming back. And he would have the previous days once cleaned in his trunk and we would swap cars.

That's how I got through this school where the elite of Atlanta went at a time in the early 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement had been going on for eight or 10 years. And when it plainly, to the keen years of high school students attuned to hypocrisy, it plainly reduced the leadership of Atlanta to putty in confronting the issues involved in segregation. They're trying to teach us to prepare us for the world in a religious preparatory school that was rigidly segregated, and they can't speak honestly about what's going on.

That weighed on me, it got me more interested. But I was still planning to be a surgeon, dutifully following my father's plan. I had to have a scholarship. And I was about to sign a football scholarship, believe it or not, to go play football at Georgia Tech. When somebody from the high school came and said that they might offer me an academic scholarship at the University of North Carolina, where I had never been. That was way north to me. And they gave me a day to think it over and I said, "I don't need a day. I don't even need a minute. If it doesn't involve playing football, I want an academic scholarship. And I love North Carolina already and I hadn't even been there."

To show you what a rube I was, still planning to be a surgeon when I got there, 1964. The first day I was there, I was a little bit wistful about having been an athlete, although very much determined that I didn't want to ... I was glad that I didn't have to play football. I went over to the athletic fields when I first got there and asked somebody who unfortunately was destined to become a lifelong friend and never let me forget it, why it was that they had beekeepers running around on the athletic fields at the University of North Carolina. This was the lacrosse team and they were wearing these big ungainly looking masks. And I had never heard of lacrosse and it looked to me like they were beekeepers.

So I arrived at Chapel Hill 1964. The alumni magazine for last year had a special issue that reviewed my trilogy and had four or five articles about race demonstrations on the campus at Chapel Hill in 1963. It's exactly the kind of thing that virtually every alumni magazine on earth runs from as fast as they can. These were racial demonstrations that gripped Chapel Hill by the throat in such an interesting and telling way because when I arrived, shortly thereafter in the fall of 1964, you couldn't find people to talk about it.

They were demonstrations in which some religious students from the Methodist Union and from the Quaker Union and from ... These are white students mixed with African American students connected with Dr. King, had conducted sit-ins in downtown idyllic Chapel Hill, which prided itself on being the bastion of Southern liberalism, the area of Frank Porter Graham, Chapel Hill, and all of those people. Frank Porter Graham, establishment of Chapel Hill was mortified by these demonstrations because it got the Klan in, it got violence in. These kids went to jail and these were top students, these were Moorhead scholars. I was a Moorhead scholar, that was my scholarship. And a number of them went to jail and they were dragged down the street.

And in a famous thing, the only thing I could get anybody to talk to me about was the culminating demonstration right downtown when the owner of one of the restaurants, because with the police standing there and they had beaten all of the demonstrators, the owner of the restaurant, a woman, came out and urinated on all of them down the line, all down the line. And then the police arrested the demonstrators and not her.

And these demonstrations went on through there, gripped Chapel Hill and rendered the university utterly paralyzed. And then when I arrived, they were over. They were done. Nobody wanted to talk about them. We had a whole new issue of the speaker ban because they had banned having communist speakers come on the campus. And politics went with relief to new controversies, that and the Vietnam War.

So I arrived at college planning to be a surgeon and the Civil Rights Movement was still going on elsewhere, if not there. But by that time, it had worn me down, particularly because of the demonstrations in Birmingham. Nine years after the Brown decision, I'm sitting there as a high school student saying, "Perhaps," although I still don't believe in politics, still planning to be a surgeon, "Perhaps when I get impossibly old, like 30, and really secure in my surgical career, I might stick my toe in the water here and see if there's something that we might do. This is a frightening thing, but I don't want to be as hypocritical as the people that I've seen in my high school."

Just about the time, by perverse coincidence that I resolved to do that, I turned on the TV and saw the demonstrations in Birmingham in which young Black kids in Birmingham, as young as six years old, and I took photographs, made sure to put photographs of them in Parting the Waters, mostly girls walked through dogs and fire hoses on May 2nd and May 3rd, D-Day and Double D-Day, 1963. I'm going to tell you a little later how these things came about, but they stupefied me to see this happen. Here I have been with all of my advantages in life saying that when I got to be 30, maybe I would do something. And I turn around and here are these kids who aren't waiting until they're even 10. And they're walking into the face of these big motorcycle cops with boots and they're singing songs just like I sang in Sunday school.

And I said, "Where did this come from?" And I didn't get an answer. And nobody had an answer and everybody was mumbling again. And the power of that, in conjunction with all of the relentless years of Civil Rights, changed the direction of my life's interest against my will. So that when I got to Chapel Hill and got over the lacrosse team and the beekeepers, I lost interest in my pre-med classes very, very quickly. And I was a sophomore when I went out and made a cherry bomb necklace to blow up the tiger shark I was supposed to be dissecting in a pre-med biology course. Dropped all of those courses and started taking philosophy, history, political science, anything I could to shed light on the urgent moral dramas that seemed to me were gripping the country in spite of the best efforts of people to avoid them and put them away.

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I graduated. I went to graduate school at Princeton, the Woodrow Wilson School, which is kind of a halfway between an academic career and an activist career, which was about where I was. But at that time, I already knew that what had gotten me interested in this and changed my life's interest was the Civil Rights Movement and it was disintegrating and I hadn't been part of it. Dr. King by then was dead. I had never seen him. And I wanted to do something in the Civil Rights Movement, even just a little bit to get started.

So I knew Vernon Jordan, who was the head of the Voter Education Project. He's the same Vernon Jordan that now wears $700 shirts and is former President Clinton's lawyer. But back then, he was at the Voter Education Project in Atlanta. And he told me that everything was falling apart. He didn't have very much money, but that he could pay me $10 a day to go to, in the summer, if I was willing, to go to 20 counties. They had 20 tiny counties in Georgia that were Black majority counties with virtually no Black registered voters. And they had no contacts, nobody on the Rolodex. They didn't know anybody. And he said, "We want you to parachute in there in the summer, three days, and see if you can find anybody willing and able to take a voter registration grant and register the first voters."

The people at Princeton, which is a pretty highfalutin school, thought this was a terrible idea. They said it was not a policy relevant job experience because I would be doing it by myself. They wanted me to work in the World Bank or the Ford Foundation or the Bureau of the Budget or something like that. But we worked out something and I left all by myself. Those were the terms.

And believe me, when Columbus headed west from Spain, he was not more lost than I was when I went into this first little county. These are tiny little courthouse counties in Georgia. It has 159 counties. And it's the courthouse, the Confederate statue, a hardware store, a few car dealerships, the pharmacy, a couple of places to eat, a bunch of churches, white households with big porches, and Black households with unpaved roads, and then farmland, every county. And all I knew to do was to drive in, find the place with no pavement, look for the Baptist church, knock on the door and hope I was finding the next Martin Luther King. And believe me, that did not work.

All of the preachers said they had things well in hand and I could not penetrate their rhetoric, even though with the statistics showing that there were no Black registered voters in these counties. Didn't matter. Didn't matter with the school principles, the morticians, or any of the other authority figures I tried either.

I got so exasperated, and I only had three days for each county, I got so exasperated that very shortly on in this, I knew something. I'd studied, I'd read everything I could about the Civil Rights Movement. I said, "Well, maybe I'll try kind of a Stokely Carmichael Black power approach and go try to find some rebels who think that these preachers and so forth are stuffed shirts."

Anyway, this strategy developed in an unpromising direction because I thought what I needed to do was to get in poker games. And that if I could take the money of these guys on kind of the wrong side of the tracks, that I might get them interested in penetrating the pomp of all of these people who were ignoring the fact that these counties were futile.

I would go in on Saturdays and see the prisoners come out of the jail in the courthouse, right in the middle of the courthouse, carrying the shoes of the prominent citizens that they'd shined in jail on the way to deliver them and to cut the lawns so that the people could go to church the next day. That was just the way things were.

Well, the poker strategy led me to a place called Bubbadoo's Big Apple in Cuthbert, Georgia. It was called a juke joint. I'm sure you don't have juke joints in Seattle. Nobody here has ever even heard of anything like that, but they're completely illegal. All the counties were dry. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to play poker by exactly the same rules that we had had at Princeton and I didn't win any money. And then in the middle of all this, the sheriff came in with the Miller beerman. It was a dry county, so the sheriff was there to get his cut because they were making a beer delivery.

And of all of the illegal things going on at Bubbadoo's, and there were many, other than the poker game and the beer, the only thing that interested the sheriff was me. I was arrested for being a white person in the wrong part of town. And he hauled me down to jail, scared me to death, but I'm half laughing and half scared to death, which was the way I was a lot of that summer.

He brought over the mayor, who was also the druggist, who instructed me not to think ill of his town, that this was really serious and that just because he was a little town didn't mean anything. That he went to Atlanta every Saturday, rain or shine, to get a haircut and go to the opera, and that this was a serious matter.

And then he's going through my ... The sheriff had my wallet. He said, "Sheriff, this man went to Princeton. I went to Princeton. We can't have a Princeton man in our jail, even if he's a communist." So he instructed the sheriff to take me to the county line and that was another county. So I'm about 10 counties or five or six counties down the road, hadn't gotten anything.

Got so desperate after a while that I just started going out, in new counties when I would arrive, going out into unplowed and furrowed cotton fields and talking to sharecroppers out in the middle of the blistering sun about whether anybody might be interested in voter registration, just blindly asking people in overalls and big, I remember big goiters and tumors and sick people out in the middle of these fields.

And this led to something that I never would have dreamed. They told me that I should go talk to the women in the county. And in particular, after a while I said, "Well, which one?" And that was another difficult, "What kind of women?"

And finally, they sent me in Schley County, Georgia, and I'll never forget this, to a woman who was what they called a Civil War person. She was 100 years old, and they said that if anybody in this county would know anything about this voting mess, it would be this lady. So I went and found her porch and went up there in the morning and started asking her about voter registration. This lady is rocking on her porch and she keeps rocking. She doesn't acknowledge her name. She doesn't acknowledge me. She doesn't say anything. And I keep asking questions and I keep talking about the Voter Education Project and Atlanta and so on and so forth.

And finally, she looked at me and she said, "Son, do you really believe we landed on the Moon last night?" Because this was July 22nd or whatever it was, 1969. That's how long I've been working on this. And I said, taken aback why she would ... She never even said who she was. I said, "Yes, ma'am. I do believe that we landed on the Moon. I saw it on Walter Cronkite back at the motel before I came over here." And she nodded and then didn't say anything.

So I'm wondering why she asked me that and why she hadn't even told me what her name, what's going on. And she just kept rocking and I started asking questions and talking about voter registration and all the terrible things I had seen. And I don't know about you, but graduate students tend, when

they get nervous, they use bigger and bigger words and more jargon. So I was talking to her about how a 5013c tax-exempt organization grant would work and so on and so forth and all this. And she never said anything for, it seemed like an eternity, 10 or 15 minutes.

And finally, she looked at me and I got all excited. I thought she was going to say something. She said, "Son, have you seen the Simoniz Wax commercial?" I've been there 20 minutes, she's asked two questions. And I thought and I said, because there was a memorable commercial, I said, "You mean the one where the little children float across the kitchen floor on an invisible shield of Simoniz Wax and they don't scuff the floor because they're on Simoniz wax? And yes, I've seen that." And she said, "Do you believe that?"

So now I'm really thrown off because I thought maybe she was loony. Now I think maybe she's ahead of me, but I hadn't quite figured out how. So I said, "I believe they can make it look like the kids float across the kitchen floor on an invisible shield of Simoniz wax, but that's a commercial and they do that with techniques and tricks and everything. I saw the Moon landing on a news show and a new show is different from a commercial." So now I'm trying to ... I'm all flustered trying to talk about the difference between a commercial and a news show and what you can and you cannot believe on TV.

This conversation went on for a long time with her asking questions out of different parts of the far universe. It seemed like Pluto to me. And it wound up with her saying, "Son, I can prove that we didn't land on the Moon last night in less than one sentence. That if we had, all we'd have to do is fill up our tank on the Moon and on the next jump we could make it into heaven. And you know God wouldn't allow that to happen, so we didn't land on the Moon." How could I argue with that?

But she had asked me all these other questions on all kinds of other subjects, but I had the sinking feeling that she was not the future of voter registration in Schley County for some time. But more important than that, I had a tremendous urge to go back to the motel and write down everything she had said. She asked me all kinds of other strange questions. Had I been in a fistfight? And had I been in a fist fight where more than one tooth was knocked out at a time? All kinds of things. And I wrote them all down and everything that I had said.

And by then, it had been settled in me that there was a method to her madness. She was really talking to me in a way that stunned me and kept me off balance about what was real and what was not real and what was fearful and what was not fearful, and communicating in a way that I never would have appreciated if I'd heard it in ordinary language like I heard at Princeton. That voting in her county was, down to the bone marrow, a matter of life and death, and that she wasn't about to recommend it to her people on the word of a 22-year-old graduate student who showed up on her door the day after the Moon landing.

I did, by the way, by the end of the summer, I recommended voter registration drives in three counties and John Lewis took over from Vernon Jordan and he granted them. They were all three projects headed by women and they were all three from the same profession that I would never have dreamed in a million years before I started. They weren't teachers, they weren't the things that most people guess. They were all midwives in the various counties. They were independent people, didn't depend on anybody for income, but they had a natural authority in matters of life and death that served them well when it came to talking about voter registration and their people who were afraid even to meet with me or be seen with a graduate student on the subject of voting. It was that radioactive. And these midwives would say, "Yes, you are coming to that meeting because I birthed you and everybody in your

family and I know stuff about your family and I don't care." And they had this natural authority and two of them became county commissioners.

But for me personally, the really important part of this, I was compelled to write this down. And by the end of the summer, it grew to be 400 pages long. I wrote it down because there were hundreds of experiences like that where there were so many surprises in the language and in the way these people behaved. It was the first thing I'd ever written that wasn't assigned to me by a teacher.

And when I got to Princeton, I turned it in in protest. I was supposed to write a policy memorandum and I said, "The language of policy doesn't touch the reality of what goes on down there. Here's my diary." And of course that caused a big stink. But one of the professors sent it to a magazine and the magazine started publishing excerpts of my diary. It's the first thing I ever had published. I didn't even submit it for publication. I later got a job at that magazine, backed into a magazine career, backed from there into ghost writing with Bill Russell and into books.

But it grew out of this diary and the work in the summer with this lady. And what really grew out of the diary was my conviction that what I had learned that summer was not by any of the analysis that we had been trained to use, any of the policy language, any of the words that we use about who's militant, who's racist, who's anything, it was when people were so human and threw me so much off balance that I absorbed something very personal, that that made me think and rearrange all my categories. So that out of that was born my conviction that I still hold 24 years later. It's the reason my books are so long. I don't use words like racist, militant, all the standard fare of race relations because I think it's fool's gold when it comes to making discoveries across the lines that divide us. We make discoveries in things that are human and things that are real and stories.

So what I tried to do was to do enough work. And this meant I had to do a lot of work and talk to a lot of people, get embarrassed a lot and make a fool of myself a lot to make all the characters, whether it's the president of the United States or the head of the FBI or a sharecropper trying to decide whether to risk her life to register to vote, human enough that my readers would be able to have a personal sense of what that was like. So I believe we learn in storytelling across the lines. I believe stories are really important.

I got into that for a long time and 20 years later, I was making this point to somebody and they said, "Of course. Why do you think in the Bible, which communicates every cosmic reality the Hebrew people ever knew, from where the world came to the nature of good and evil, by page three, you've got brothers killing brothers and there are all these fights and it's all stories?" Stories are how we learn and I believe that. So in race relations, make things personal and I believe in storytelling.

Right now though, I'm going to violate all those rules because for 24 years, just because I tried to keep it storytelling, that doesn't mean that I don't have deeply held beliefs or lessons after all that time about what all of this means. And I believe we're profoundly out of sorts with the basic facts of the Civil Rights era in our politics today, which is dangerous. The myths that we are living with in our national politics are big and dangerous. They're larger than race, but they're grounded in race and they start in race.

First of all, just on a basic level, we are now supporting in our public discourse two mutually exclusive and inconsistent myths about race. One, that the race problem is solved and that we don't need affirmative action and so on and so forth, that we got all of those laws off the books and everything, and it's now up to everybody else, and we've got basically a level playing field. And number two, that we

have proved that the race issue is unsolvable, that nothing has changed. That look at birth rates, crime rates, cities, schools, drugs, so on and so forth, things are bad if ever or worse, and therefore the race issue is unsolvable. It is both solved and unsolvable. And the only two things that those have in common is, in either case, we don't need to worry with it. Therefore, it has not been an object of intense empirical debate and experimentation and part of our political language now for two generations.

One small example, just to suggest how big that is, is that most people are completely unconscious of the basic facts of even something like school segregation. What have been the great trends in the 40 years, it's now 50 years since the Brown decision? 17 states had de jure segregation where 0% of the Black kids went to anything but segregated schools. After 10 years of struggle with the united, unanimous Supreme Court behind them, 10 years later, it was less than 1% of those same students in those 17 states were outside of integrated schools. When Dr. King was killed in 1968, 14 years later, it was just up to 2%.

Heroic struggle and people thought the world was going to fall apart and collapse backwards. And the Civil Rights Movement kind of disintegrated, people stopped paying attention. Over time though, it went into the 20s in the early 1970s. It went to past 30% in the 1970s. It peaked in 1988 at 43.8% of the students in those same 17 states were in integrated public schools. People who followed it, and they were relatively rare, followed it closely, but nobody's talking about it. There's no national effort on any area of race relations, let alone public schools, national discourse, national laws. We started backwards in 1988, that was the peak. We got to 30% two years ago, and now we're going backwards, resegregating pell-mell, even in those states where we had made so much progress.

But beneath that, the resegregation and the strong segregation has proceeded apace so that the basic facts elsewhere are beyond anybody's attention. The most segregated school systems by state in the United States aren't in any of those 17. They are California, Michigan, Illinois, and New York. The four most segregated school systems in the United States, nobody pays any attention to that. The state with the most integration in its public school system is Kentucky.

Kentucky, very interesting to me, just speaking of things that happen under the radar. Not only is it the state that produced the great basketball game in 1966 where the University of Kentucky lost to five Black players from Texas, El Paso and shocked the world and practically overnight got basketball to ban the dunk. I used to love talking to ... Learning from Bill Russell about the weird things that went under the radar that would happen about race, even in the world of sports.

But Kentucky was also the school that signed the first football scholarship, Black players in the Southeastern Conference. Two of them in 1965, Nat Northington and Greg Page. Neither one of them played because in practice, the white players broke Greg Page's back before he ever played in the game and killed him on the field. He died. There was enormous investigation as to whether this was a deliberate conspiracy. How can you prove that it's a conspiracy? How can you not suspect that it is when the first two African American players in the history of the school are there brutalized on the field and one of them killed?

People thought there would never be integration of sports in the Southeast, even of sports in the SEC. They were still segregated. Even college sports, when Dr. King was killed, if you turned on the radio, college sports was all white. Things were that slow.

Today, all of the dormitories at the University of Kentucky are named for Greg Page. They have, I think, 27 dormitories and they're all named Greg Page, number one, all the way up through, they're all named for him. And of course, the university, the state of Kentucky has made a lot of progress, but not because of any political discourse or even attention on the part of the United States. We have accepted the myth that this is either unsolved, unsolvable, or solved, but in any case, we don't pay any attention to it.

In part because we are enthralled to an even larger myth from the 1960s and more pernicious one, that politics is bad. That politics ran off the rail in the '60s into an era of license and useless effort that produced politically correct nuisance solutions that diverted us, and that the best thing to do is to stay out of politics. Virtually everybody who run for national office since then, Democrat or Republican, has run against Washington and against the prospects of doing anything, any great dreams, anything on the equivalent in the social field of going to the Moon or curing cancer or establishing a Civil Rights bill, the things that we did back then. We live under the myth that politics is a hostile and benevolent and parasitic environment. And in fact, the whole world has accepted my father's motto that I got. Politics can't find honest work.

And the third myth that we have is that violence is the true measure of our strength. We have to give up our values to have to find strength through violence. And in part, this is because the nonviolence Civil Rights Movement evaporated and the movement itself abandoned nonviolence. Out of weariness, out of anger, out of belief that maybe more could be done with violence. Agonizing debates between Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King in 1966. "Dr. King, why is it that America admires nonviolence only in Black people? They want Black people to be nonviolent so they can be safe, but they admire James Bond and John Wayne. And they just want us to be nonviolent. That's not fair. Why is it that people who are victims of injustice have to seek out further suffering to get people to do what's right? What kind of sense does that make?"

And Dr. King would say, "Stokely, I'm not saying it's fair. I'm saying it's a leadership discipline for the whole country and the whole world. And if we go from nonviolence to violence, you think we'll be stepping up into the ranks to be just as ornery as anybody else. And I'm saying we'll be stepping back, to be just as nasty as everybody else and we'll lose the leadership."

And that argument went on in that period and the media and the country were tired of it and nonviolence, which had produced the history I'm about to tell you out of the miracles, became the first passe idea from the Civil Rights Movement and it has not been part of our public discourse ever since as a discipline.

Now, why is this such a tragedy? Because it blinds us to the scope of the miracles that were set in motion in this period. We tend to want to reduce it to something that was quaint and just about race and just about where people sat on buses in the segregated South. Dr. King himself said, "This is about the principles of this country, redeeming the soul of democracy. This is about things far beyond the state of Black America."

Now it did, the movement ended terror. Terror is big in the news these days. Our country was afflicted with terror across many, many regions. People were killed, people were lynched, nothing happened. The killers were acquitted. There was terror everywhere, there was fear in people's palms. Any integrated audience, I knew that. I went to social events where people were scared stiff just because there was one Black person there. And they were afraid the police would come, the Klan would come,

and it was always somewhere else. It's not me, I don't care, but it's my father's business clients. They'll ostracize him and then he'll be mad at me and everybody finds it somewhere else and the fear and the terror was all there. That was gone. The nonviolent movement abolished that.

But Dr. King said, "When we do that, we will liberate the white South too. By the methods that we're going to do this, refusing to have enemies, nonviolent discipline. An example to the world, we will liberate the white South in every way, psychologically, economically."

My mayor, Ivan Allen, said within weeks of passing in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the city of Atlanta built the first professional sports stadium in the south with money we didn't have, on land we didn't own for a team we hadn't found. And they got the Milwaukee Braves to move to Atlanta and become the Atlanta Braves the very next year. And Danny Thomas organized the Miami Dolphins and brought professional football down there when there was no longer a segregated South.

International companies could do business. The Sunbelt sprang into being. You never heard of the Sunbelt when it was segregated. Southern politics was destigmatized, which had kept it a one-party ossified, politically rigid and uncreative region of the country. And all of its leading politicians were stigmatized, ineligible for national office. All of a sudden you've got two parties and for better or worse, the leaders of both national parties now tend to be white southerners, not one of whom, except maybe Jimmy Carter and maybe Bill Clinton would say, "I owe my opportunities to Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer and the people who demonstrated and broke the back of our own privilege for the benefit and they did it in a way that created love and growth for all people in spite of our anger and our oppression." It was like a reverse bank robbery. The bank robber bought the money and gave it to them. "You've been oppressing me and now I'm going to give you this blessing." S.

O these blessings flew all through the white South, but not just the white South, every parent of a daughter here should give thanks to the Civil Rights Movement for making it possible for your daughter to go to Princeton or Harvard or most private colleges, all of which were all male until the Civil Rights Movement had people struggling over what equal citizenship really means in education and elsewhere. My university, the University of North Carolina, by state law, forbade female students to go to the state university unless they were nursing students, so that Chapel Hill was 5% female when I was there. I'm old, but I'm not that old. And this is an enormous change. It's now 65% female. They were just allowing, deigning, after years of litigation, to have the first Black students, undergraduate students, but they were men because they didn't want women by state law.

Philip Clay, I met Philip Clay. He's now the chancellor of MIT. Google him, he's an amazing guy. He was one of the first Black students at Chapel Hill.

But for women, the blessings flowed as well. Pauli Murray, one of my idols from this book, got an official letter from North Carolina saying, "We do not admit students of your race to the University of North Carolina." Then she got a letter from Harvard Law School, where Karen went, saying, "We do not admit students of your sex to Harvard Law School." She persisted anyway. She became a great pioneer lawyer in the Civil Rights era. She was one of the few who would scold Martin Luther King. She wrote an official blistering letter during the March on Washington because they had the male leaders walk up Constitution Avenue and Coretta and all the women walked up Independence Avenue. And there were no female speakers. In a movement that was overtly and heartfeltly and explicitly about removing discrimination and invidious distinctions, it was just taken for granted that the women would mess up the picture, the news picture, unless they were a whole street over.

And Pauli Murray was on their case about that. She wrote a law review article called Jane Crow about the whole ... But then in 1966, she filed a historic lawsuit or worked on a historic lawsuit called White v. Crook. When religious people flocked down at the end of the Selma voting rights march that changed the whole country, got three million new Black voters in the South, but to get that clergy and people from everywhere, including Seattle, went down there to join that march. And one of them was a seminary student from Boston who was murdered by the Klan. He stayed on and he was shot down in broad daylight in Hayneville, Alabama, Lowndes County, which is the central site of the third volume of this series.

The Klansmen who killed him was acquitted by an all white male jury in less than 30 minutes in a travesty trial, an earmark of terrorism. Pauli Murray filed suit against this case, challenging this case on ... It was all white by custom, but it was all male by state law because Alabama, by state law, females of any race could not serve on juries, any kind of jury, anywhere. A petty jury, a grand jury, a civil jury, anything. They might hear nasty words. They might hear rough language, offensive language. 30 states restricted the right of women to serve on juries. We have a hard time remembering this because we take for granted the miracles.

She filed suit against this. Alabama was one state that had a total ban, so was Mississippi, so was South Carolina. The reigning Supreme Court decision, Hoyt v. Florida ... I know there are a lot of lawyers here. You can go look up Hoyt v. Florida. It upheld a 1960 Florida statute that said if you were a woman in Florida and you wanted to be on a jury, you wouldn't be eligible unless you first went down and filed an affidavit saying you wanted to be considered for jury duty and that it wouldn't interfere with your homemaking duties.

That law was upheld. Pauli Murray filed suit against this and it struck down the Alabama statute and very swiftly it went like dominoes through all of these restrictions constitutionally in the other states. So now we have, and we can virtually ... We find it hard even to imagine a time when women would not be eligible just like all the rest of us for jury duty as an essential pillar of being a citizen in a democracy.

Pauli Murray, 10 years later, aside from being a lawyer, she went ... She was deeply religious. She went to seminary and stood in the first group of females ever ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. In 1976, she was almost 70 years old and started another career as a priest and a lawyer. Many male bishops did not recognize her ordination on the ground that they argued that the Bible reserved religious authority in the church for men. There were schisms, there were some diocese pulled out and it was just like it is today over gay clergy. That's only 30 years ago. Now we take it for granted.

Not just there, but in ... Even more telling. In Judaism, 2,000 years of rabbinic Judaism, the idea of a female rabbi was unheard of until people started struggling with the doctrine of equal souls in the Civil Rights Movement, at what it meant. And in 1972, Sally Jane Priesand of Cincinnati became the first female rabbi ordained in the history of Judaism, any place on the face of the earth, in America and the example struggling out of the Civil Rights Movement. And now we take rabbis and canters and everything else for granted.

So these things that were let loose in the Civil Rights Movement, in sports and prosperity in the Sunbelt and women and the Final Four and female sports, changing all of that from what I grew up with when girls couldn't even cross half court in the basketball because they would mess up their reproductive apparatus, all these things we take for granted, but they came out of great struggle in the Civil Rights Movement.

And then these things didn't stop at the borders, they went all around the world. And the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement was there in Gdansk when the shipyards and they had the sit-ins there. And then it went to Berlin where they sang, "We Shall Overcome," as they're taking the Berlin Wall down. And all along the streets of Prague, they're singing, "We Shall Overcome," in the Velvet Revolution.

And in my view, it's the world trying to hit America on the snout, saying, "Your inspiration, your nonviolence has worked miracles. You built mountains of nuclear weapons and thought it would take millions of casualties to end the Cold War, either on your victory or the Soviet Union, and here it has dissolved without a shot being fired and they're singing We Shall Overcome to try to tell you how to concentrate your politics and how to concentrate your hopes." And we persist in thinking that the Cold War ended in some sort of military phenomenon because they couldn't keep up with their defense budget over there. As though if the shoe were on the other foot, we'd say, "Gosh, we can't keep up with these military expenditures. Let's just scrap the Constitution and take down the National Archives and throw out the Declaration of Independence." We believe that. How fatuous can we be that we don't even recognize our own example?

And then if that weren't enough, Nelson Mandela comes out of prison. 27 years, the greatest case for vengeance ever, in a system that none of us honestly thought we'd ever live to see end without bloodshed from one end of Africa to the other. A river of blood, the most violent and vile subjugation by race in the face of the earth. And he calls for a non-racial, biracial democracy, nonviolently and the miracle of South Africa occurs. And our own example is vindicated again, and who is numb to this? We are. The rest of the world is unbelievably inspired by and studying South Africa.

Even Tiananmen Square, I submit to you, China has had rebellions for 5,000 years and warlords of every kind, but they never had one modeled on a sit-in until those students stood nonviolently facing the tanks and got run over. Now, they didn't end communism in China and they didn't preserve their lives, but nonviolence tells you that's not the point. The individual life's not the point. The example is the point, the principle is the point. They're not forgotten. Tienanmen Square is an international symbol of hope in the midst of tyranny. And it has planted the seed of freedom in the husk of an authoritarian system that doesn't even bother to call itself communist anymore. And it is the hope that we should be cultivating.

So what I'm trying to say to you is that we are attached to the myth that has paralyzed our politics and we are ignoring the miracles that we let loose. Now, there are reasons for that. Some of it is that the movement itself abandoned nonviolence and hasn't studied it very much. These were enormous changes that were set in motion and the world had excuse, if not good reason, to say, "Let's suggest these changes." These are enormous changes. Every institution in America has been transformed. In the slow time that it took to get us our Colin Powells and our Condoleezza Rices and our two football coaches in the Super Bowl.

We've taken these slow things, but the rest of the country has changed. So maybe we needed a breather, but the lessons should always be studied. We don't study violence and nonviolence in universities. We don't study citizenship. The myth of government is bad has destroyed respect for public service, to the point that when you really need it and you look around for it after Katrina, it's not there because all the people in government don't even believe in the mission of the agencies they're in anymore.

My university, Princeton, abolished the Public Service Award. The family that gave the money to create the Woodrow Wilson School where I went to graduate school is suing Princeton because it was for public service and the number of graduates that go into public service has gone from 48% when I was there down below 10%. And Princeton's now saying, "That's not our fault, that's because everybody wants to make money."

But that's emblematic of the times. We have turned against public service, we have turned against the example of democracy, and it is dangerous. Some of it also I think is race. There's no question about it. In this sense, the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including the kids that marched, and the ones that are my great heroes that nobody's ever heard of like Diane Nash and Jim Bevel and Bob Moses and these people, they weren't just race leaders trying to make things good for Black people. They were examples for all of America. They were doing just what the Founding Fathers did. They were confronting systems of subjugation and moving the whole country toward equal citizenship. They were modern founders. And we don't know enough about them to treat them as modern founders and we're reluctant to treat them as modern founders because they're Black. And the country needs to elevate them into their true position.

That's what Martin Luther King was too. That's the reason it's good to have a Martin Luther King Day, not to have a holiday to be nice to Black folks, but to honor somebody who came along and reformed and rejuvenated American democracy, not only to work miracles, but to revive an example for the whole world.

And we are really, sadly, out of sorts with that. These people were struggling with big ideas, huge ideas like violence and nonviolence, the nature of politics. How do you change the power structure of a whole country without any of the major tools of politics? No armies, no banks. You're an invisible culture. No nothing except your beliefs and your horizontal ties, the strength of the movement.

And Dr. King's wonderfully balanced rhetoric, equal souls and equal votes, one foot in the Constitution, one foot in the Scriptures. Take your pick. Remarkable fact to me that he talked about religion and politics every day, often four and five times a day, had many enemies, many critics. New York Times told him, "Stay out of Vietnam. You don't know anything about it. Stick to race relations." He had many people, but nobody ever criticized him for mixing church and state.

How can that be? Because of the way he did it. He didn't try to subjugate one to the other. He just said, "Take your pick. Equal souls or equal votes, I'll talk about either one of them. The promise of America is either way. Those are the roots. That's where it comes from. It's good for you, it's good for us, but it's hard to do and you've got to go through your fear and you've got to go through your reluctance." He said, "That's why it's so great that in the Bible, time after time, the first words at a transcendent moment out of the mouth of an angel is, 'Fear not.'"

And that's what I'm telling you and all these children who are about to march in Birmingham. Fear not. They worked all these miracles and we ignore them at our peril because our democracy is becoming fragile. We're hooked on violence. We have a diminished public language. The basic new word in politics to me in this era is spin.

What does spin mean? In such contrast to movement, which moves you all the way from a small inspiration to the people marching into Montgomery at the end of the Selma march, knowing that every step they're changing history, not just there, but in the world, a worldwide movement. We have spin,

which basically means that politics is going around and around, it's not going anywhere. And it doesn't really matter which way it goes except for the people playing the game for entertainment, and that there's no inherent substance in any of it. So we have a politics of spin and spitballs. Substituting, at a time of great peril, reduced and atrophied from a time when Martin Luther King and the movement could offer so much hope in the face of lynchings and terror and the great efforts of the world to ignore them.

Therefore, I think it's up to all of us. That's the first lesson of the Civil Rights Movement is that these kids even said, "It's up to us. Even if they won't let us vote and they call us names, we will liberate them." Because the first thing you got to do, if you really believe you're in a country where everybody has the same vote as the president and that we're all equal shareholders and we own the country and the government works for us is you have to act like it. And you have to believe that you can work miracles. And we can work miracles. But not unless we act in that spirit and change the public discourse.

To me, as a white Southerner who has been privileged to study this movement, the greatest miracle of all of these from that period is that a largely African American movement of people who had felt very few of the blessings or privileges or even the rights of democracy, had experienced mostly its backhand and its backlash, nevertheless, had the nonviolent discipline, the political genius, there was political genius in there too, and the indescribable grace to lift the rest of the whole country toward miracles out of our own professed values.

This is an amazing example, and we do our country great danger by pretending that it's over and done and it's small and allowing the reduction in our public space and our public sense of possibility to go as far as it has so far. So I am here to plead with you to go out as renewed citizens, to ask questions, to do what they did, to take chances, even if your knees tremble a little bit, to take leaps in the unknown, to interact with other citizens. That sort of percolation is how the movement started and it can start again. And the only story we have in the United States is freedom. And all our history tests what it means and the citizens are the ones who ultimately set the tone of our own history. So I commit this history to you and thank you for having me with me tonight.