

**A More
Beautiful
and Terrible
History**

**THE USES AND MISUSES OF
CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY**

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"ALWAYS MORE THAN A LABEL":
CORETTA SCOTT KING'S LIFE OF ACTIVISM

An interesting thing happened a few weeks into the Trump presidency. Attempting to read a 1986 letter by Coretta Scott King opposing the nomination of Jeff Sessions to a federal judgeship, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren was silenced by the Senate. According to Scott King, Sessions had used "the awesome power of his office to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens."⁵ Citing these words and a rule that senators must not impugn colleagues, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell interrupted Warren, and Senate Republicans voted to prohibit her from speaking for the remainder of debate on Sessions's nomination for attorney general. Leaving aside the differential and gendered treatment of Warren (Senator Tom Udall read Scott King's entire letter into the record the next day without censure), part of what was interesting about the episode was how McConnell and his fellow Republicans recognized the power of Coretta Scott King's words.

Many expressed shock that Republican leaders would treat Scott King like that. Former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders proclaimed on the Senate floor the next day, "The idea that a letter and a statement made by Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King Jr. . . . could not be presented and spoken about here on the floor of the Senate is, to me, incomprehensible."⁶ But elevating her to some sort of sainthood as the widow of Martin Luther King, hasn't necessarily meant Scott King has been taken seriously as a political thinker in her own right. As horrifying as it was, the censoring of Warren backhandedly acknowledged the substance of Scott King's letter—not to mention that it brought the letter to the attention of millions more Americans than would have heard it if Warren had simply read it on the Senate floor.⁷

During her life, Coretta Scott King lamented how she was too often seen but not heard, admired but not considered in her substance. "I am made to sound like an attachment to a vacuum cleaner," she explained, "the wife of Martin, then the widow of Martin, all of which I was proud to be. But I was never just a wife, nor a widow. I was always more than a label."⁸ Her memorialization as wife and helpmate, and the corresponding backgrounding of her lifelong commitments, misses the wider critique of social injustice that underlay her life's work. Not simply an accessory of her husband's, Coretta's activism complemented and at times led Martin's

politics. Active in racial-justice politics and the peace movement *before* marrying King, she spoke up earlier and more forcefully against American involvement in Vietnam than her husband did, and her critique of American economics and war making continued for decades after his death. An examination of her political commitments highlights the international dimensions of the Black freedom struggle and the long-standing commitment to nonviolence, anticolonialism, and human rights around the world held by her and many civil rights activists. And it returns a much fuller and more militant picture of her husband's activism to public view, particularly the ways Coretta Scott King helped shape his antipoverty work and his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Born on April 27, 1927, in Marion, Alabama, Coretta Scott graduated valedictorian from Lincoln High School. Her childhood was marked by racial violence: as a teenager, her home and her father's sawmill were burned down. Attending Antioch College, she became politically involved in the campus NAACP, the Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committees, and various peace activities.⁹ Majoring in music and elementary education, she encountered discrimination at Antioch when the college sided with the local school system's decision not to allow her (or any Black person) to student-teach in the city's schools. "This . . . made me determined to become more involved in addressing issues of social and political injustice."¹⁰ A strong supporter of racial progressive Henry Wallace's 1948 third-party bid for the presidency, she attended the Progressive Party convention, one of 150 Black people in attendance.

An accomplished singer, she earned a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music, where she received her bachelor of music degree. It was in Boston where she met Martin Luther King Jr., who was working on his doctorate at Boston University. Scott, according to King biographer Clayborne Carson, "was more politically active at the time they met than Martin was."¹¹ Independent and "ferociously informal," according to James Baldwin, Scott worried about how "circumscribed" her life might become if she married a pastor.¹²

Part of the attraction between Coretta and Martin was political, as letters between the two of them reveal. While they were courting, Coretta sent Martin a copy of Edward Bellamy's socialist utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, with the note: "I shall be interested to know your reactions to Bellamy's predictions about our future." She later told Baldwin

that her emerging relationship came to feel “somehow, preordained.” And she made clear, “The media never understood Martin so they will never understand Coretta. I didn’t learn my commitment from Martin, we just converged at a certain time.”¹³ They married in June 1953, Coretta insisting that “obey” be removed from their wedding vows.

In September 1954, they moved to Montgomery, where Martin had received his first pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Montgomery would be where Martin’s civil rights commitment first caught national attention, when he emerged as the young leader and spokesman of the Montgomery bus boycott. But Coretta played a decisive role there as well. Seven weeks into the boycott, the Kings’ house was bombed. Coretta and ten-week-old baby daughter Yolanda were at home when the bomb went off, but they escaped uninjured. Terrified by this violence, both Martin and Coretta’s fathers traveled to Montgomery to pressure the family—or at least Coretta and baby Yolanda—to leave. She refused. As she explained later, “This was a very trying time, when everyone seemed frightened. I realized how important it was for me to stand with Martin. And the next morning at breakfast he said, ‘Coretta, you have been a real soldier. You were the only one who stood with me.’”¹⁴ Had Coretta flinched in this moment, the trajectory of the bus boycott and the emerging civil rights movement might have been very different.

While the Montgomery bus boycott is customarily seen as the advent of Martin Luther King’s leadership, Coretta was vital to its emergence. “During the bus boycott I was tested by fire and I came to understand that I was not a breakable crystal figurine,” she said. “I found I became stronger in a crisis.”¹⁵ During the year of the boycott, their phone rang incessantly with hate calls, and Coretta often had to answer them. She took to quipping, “My husband is asleep. . . . He told me to write the name and number of anyone who called to threaten his life so that he could return the call and receive the threat in the morning when he wakes up and is fresh.”¹⁶

Coretta Scott King’s peace activism and global vision continued after her marriage as well. In many ways, her commitments to global peacemaking helped inspire Martin’s, since he had not been active on these issues before meeting her. In 1957, she was one of the founders of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. In 1958, Scott King spoke on her husband’s behalf at the Youth March for Integrated Schools. Drawing inspiration

from India’s march to the sea, led by Mohandas Gandhi, and from the Underground Railroad, she praised the young people for “proving that the so-called ‘silent generation’ is not so silent.” In 1959, she and her husband traveled to India for five weeks to learn from Gandhi’s work, meeting with India’s prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and dozens of local leaders and activists. In 1962, she was a delegate for the Women’s Strike for Peace to the seventeen-nation Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Switzerland.¹⁷ Joining the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, she became even more vocal on peace issues as US involvement in Vietnam escalated in the early 1960s.

With four kids, Scott King had to contend with her husband’s contradictory beliefs on women’s roles—his appreciation of her politics and his conviction that she should stay home to raise the children. Forced to scale back her singing, she continued to do benefit concerts for the movement: “I once told Martin that although I loved being his wife and a mother, if that was all I did I would have gone crazy. I felt a calling on my life from an early age. I knew I had something to contribute to the world.”¹⁸ After he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, she stressed to him “the role you must play in achieving world peace, and I will be so glad when the time comes when you can assume that role.”¹⁹ Following the award, she pressed him to make the international dimension of the philosophy of nonviolence more prominent; their belief in nonviolence and commitment to human rights necessitated speaking out on global human rights as well as domestic ones. The work and responsibility that came with the award were clear to her: “I felt pride and joy and pain too, when I thought of the added responsibilities my husband must bear and it was my burden too.”²⁰

The death threats and continued harassment took their toll. In 1966, she explained the effect of John F. Kennedy’s assassination to reporter Trina Grillo: “It seemed worse than seeing a member of my own family dying . . . a feeling of complete despair. After that, Malcolm X’s assassination disturbed me more than anything else. I was depressed for several days.”²¹

While her husband wavered in publicly speaking out against the Vietnam War, having been attacked severely for his early criticisms of US military escalation, Coretta Scott King remained steadfast in her public opposition to the war. In 1965, two years before her husband’s famous sermon against the war at Riverside Church, she addressed an antiwar rally at New York’s Madison Square Garden, the only woman to address

the crowd. Late in 1965, when her husband backed out of an address to a Washington, DC, peace rally, she kept her commitment to speak.²² Following her appearance, a reporter asked Martin if he had educated his wife on these issues. He replied: "She educated me."²³

Coretta continued to push her husband to take a stronger public stand against the war.²⁴ In April 1967, Martin Luther King made his public declaration against the war at Riverside Church, decrying the resources being diverted from the War on Poverty to wage war in Vietnam, and the deployment of Black soldiers to a conflict thousands of miles away when their rights were not guaranteed at home—and was lambasted for it. When Martin spoke in New York at the Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam, Coretta flew to San Francisco to speak at a peace demonstration attended by sixty thousand. In January 1968, missing celebrations of her husband's birthday in Atlanta, she joined five thousand women in the Jeannette Rankin Brigade in Washington, DC, to protest the war. At the end of March, she presided over a conference in Washington, DC, organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, where she called for a cease-fire in Vietnam.²⁵

Along with peace activism, issues of poverty and economic justice motivated both Coretta and Martin. After her husband's assassination in Memphis, where he had gone to take part in a sanitation workers' strike, Coretta Scott King stepped in to fill the political void and lead the march he was supposed to have headed. "I gave a speech from the heart and some people 'saw' me for the first time," she recalled.²⁶ As historian Michael Honey observes,

[Coretta and Martin's] partnership came not only from personal love but also from a joint political commitment. . . . True to the patriarchal society in which they had been raised, Martin felt she should devote herself primarily to making a home and raising the children. She did that, but she did it in the context of two lives absolutely committed to changing the world. . . . Now, as the King family reeled from tragedy, Coretta began to demonstrate her own quiet and steely commitment to nonviolence.²⁷

Understanding the tremendous work to be done in the wake of Martin's assassination, she committed to carrying on the fight for racial and

economic justice, making clear that this was how his death was to be honored: "The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day want is abolished, on the day wars are no more, on that day I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace."²⁸

Her leadership was not always recognized. According to biographer Barbara Reynolds, after Martin's assassination, "Many of the men told her she should step aside, and let them run things" but she refused.²⁹ Four days after her husband's assassination, she traveled to Memphis to continue the planned march on behalf of the striking workers, stressing, "Every man deserves a right to a job or an income so that he can pursue liberty life, and happiness."³⁰ Indeed, Scott King was resolute that an appropriate memorial for her husband's death was to continue the struggle they had both committed their lives to.

And for the next four decades, that is exactly what she did. On April 27, 1968, Coretta Scott King delivered a speech at an antiwar demonstration in Central Park that Martin was supposed to have given. She linked her opposition to the war to antipoverty activism at home, drawing out what would be a persistent theme of hers on the multiple manifestations of violence in American politics. She saw the war abroad and economic injustice at home as "two sides of the same coin."

Our policy at home is to try to solve social problems through military means, just as we have done abroad. The bombs we drop on the people of Vietnam continue to explode at home with all of their devastating potential. There is no reason why a nation as rich as ours should be blighted by poverty, disease and illiteracy. It is plain that we don't care about our poor people, except to exploit them as cheap labor and victimize them through excessive rents and consumer prices.³¹

She ended her speech with a call to the power of women to "heal the broken community now so shattered by war and poverty and racism."

Even though her husband had kept a distance from welfare rights, Coretta linked the struggle for economic justice to the need for a real safety net for poor families. She decried a proposal before Congress to cut welfare benefits as misguided and un-American: "It forces mothers to leave their children and accept work or training, leaving their children to grow up in the streets as tomorrow's social problems." She called for a

guaranteed annual income for all Americans as a moral imperative—and encouraged people to join welfare mothers for Mother’s Day at the nation’s capital to “call upon Congress to establish a guaranteed annual income instead of these racist and archaic measures, these measures which dehumanize God’s children and create more social problems than they solve.”³²

Coretta Scott King helped kick off the Poor People’s Campaign the month after her husband’s death. Martin had been working to build a poor people’s movement to descend on Washington and engage in massive civil disobedience to make poor people unignorable and force Congress and the president to action. But it was Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy, and a host of other antipoverty activists across the country who took up the task of actually enacting the plans. On May 1, Scott King launched the southern caravan of the Poor People’s Campaign from the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, singing “Sweet Little Jesus Boy.” She declared her own dream, “where not some but all of God’s children have food, where not some but all of God’s children have decent housing, where not some but all of God’s children have a guaranteed annual income in keeping with the principles of liberty and grace.”³³ Coretta Scott King’s dream was not ephemeral but one rooted in economic justice. Her Christianity was not an otherworldly religion but a living theology that understood Jesus as an advocate for the poor and oppressed.

On May 12, she joined seven thousand welfare recipients and their allies from twenty cities at Cardozo High School in Washington, DC, to decry the violence of poverty, call for the fulfillment of the spirit of the original 1935 Social Security Act, and kick off the events in the city. The next month, on Solidarity Day, June 19, 1968, in the midst of the Poor People’s encampment on the National Mall, she gave a powerful speech to fifty thousand people at the Lincoln Memorial calling on American women to “unite and form a solid block of women power” to fight racism, poverty, and war.³⁴

The stand-by-your-man image of Coretta Scott King thus misses the extended critique of injustice that underlined her political work before and during her marriage, and long after her husband’s assassination. “I am not a ceremonial symbol,” Scott King made clear. “I am an activist. I didn’t just emerge after Martin died—I was always there and involved.”³⁵ At both the Mother’s Day March and then again on Solidarity Day, she criticized the hypocrisy of a society “where violence against poor people

and minority groups is routine.” She reminded the nation of its own acts of violence: “Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence. . . . Ignoring medical needs is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence. Even the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence.”³⁶ Coretta reframed the political language of the time, foregrounding issues of economic violence that were prevalent in American society. “More forcefully than her husband had articulated,” King biographer Thomas Jackson explained, “Coretta King connected poverty and policy neglect to systemic social violence.”³⁷ She critiqued the stereotypes of poor Black women as lazy, loud, castrating figures as a way to further disfigure women who advocated for themselves and their families and to take attention away from the structural causes of Black poverty. Indeed, Coretta Scott King’s analysis of poverty highlighted the intersections of race and gender that often kept Black women poor and disregarded.

Her activism did not simply uphold her husband’s legacy but expanded it. Scott King understood the need for a unified Black power and, according to historian Komozi Woodard, was a key driving force behind the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. She struggled with being marginalized in SCLC, in part because she was a “strong woman, not one to be pushed aside. . . . Most thought that women should stay in the shadows; however I felt that as women, we had much to contribute. In fact for the longest time, way before I married Martin, I had believed that women should allow our essence and presence to shine, rather than letting ourselves be buried or shunted to the sidelines.”³⁸

In a way similar to how she was treated in those years, there has been a tendency in popular histories of the movement to marginalize her work and focus only on her efforts to preserve her husband’s legacy. Books allude to the fact Coretta Scott King spoke at a rally against Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan in 1972; attended the National Black Political Convention; and joined marchers in Boston in 1975 to support school desegregation. In descriptions of those events, Scott King’s attendance is mentioned but not elaborated on, as it would have been for other activists who were keeping the kind of political schedule that she was and building the kinds of connections between movements and issues that she did. Indeed, in 1976, she told a friend, “Sometimes I wish I could get at least four hours of sleep a day.”³⁹

As historian David Stein documents, Scott King played a pivotal role in the push for governmental guarantees relating to full employment in the 1970s.⁴⁰ Alongside her commitment to welfare rights, Scott King stressed unemployment as a crucial issue to be addressed: “if we could solve the unemployment problem most of the social problems we have could be solved. In fact, most of the social problems stem from unemployment.”⁴¹ Guaranteed jobs, Scott King believed, was a way to link the needs of Black and white workers, who were often pitted against each other. In 1974, she founded the National Committee for Full Employment/Full Employment Action Council, which, according to Stein, “was the energetic lobbying force behind the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978. The law set the goal of getting the country down to 3% unemployment within five years and attempted to hold the monetary policy of the Federal Reserve accountable to elected officials.”⁴² Their efforts did not succeed.

In the 1980s, she took an active role in the anti-apartheid movement and in 1984 was arrested outside the South African embassy. She traveled to South Africa, and subsequently met with President Reagan to urge divestment. To the end of her life, she continued her international peace work. In the months leading up to the second Iraq War, Scott King came out against the invasion: “A war with Iraq will increase anti-American sentiment, create more terrorists, and drain as much as 200 billion taxpayer dollars, which should be invested in human development here in America.”⁴³

She also became a vocal advocate of gay rights and a supporter of same-sex marriage. In the late 1990s, despite criticisms from civil rights leaders and her own children, she reminded the nation that “Martin Luther King Jr. said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream to make room at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.”⁴⁴ Scott King saw the struggle for gay rights as intimately connected to the one for racial justice and stood firm against those who would cast the battle for gay rights as dishonoring the spirit of the civil rights movement. In 2001, at the SCLC convention, she highlighted the threat of AIDS as “one of the most deadly killers of African-Americans. And I think anyone who sincerely cares about the future of black America had better be speaking out.”⁴⁵ Decrying the dangers of legalized injustice, she opposed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and reminded

Americans that “gay and lesbian people have families, and their families should have legal protection, whether by marriage or civil unions.”⁴⁶

Coretta Scott King’s political commitments and activism around international peace, economic justice, and human rights extended past her husband’s and far beyond the 1960s, yet many of the memorials continue to place her in Martin Luther King’s shadow. The erasures of Coretta Scott King’s broader life and activism dovetail with public erasures of Black women’s leadership at the time. While women took on key roles in the Black freedom struggle, there were numerous moments when their contributions were marginalized. Scott King herself had noted these gender inequalities in a 1966 article in *New Lady*:

Not enough attention has been focused on the roles played by women in the struggle. By and large, men have formed the leadership in the civil rights struggle but there have been many women in leading roles and many women in the background. Women have been the backbone of the whole civil rights movement. . . . Women have been the ones who have made it possible for the movement to be a mass movement. In Montgomery, it was mostly women who rode the buses because most domestic workers were women. If a boycott is employed, women are the ones who must stop buying.⁴⁷

In this 1966 piece, she highlighted a problem that had run through the movement: while women played crucial leadership and organizing roles throughout, at points that leadership was denied or dismissed by men in the movement. In other words, it wasn’t that women weren’t leading, organizing, and strategizing; it was that their work wasn’t always recognized or respected.