The Age of the Unheralded

by David J. Garrow

uture decades are likely to call the late 1980s and early 1990s the Age of Gorbachev, just as American historians speak of the Age of Jackson and the Age of Roosevelt. Such easy characterizations have meaning and usefulness despite their overarching simplicity, for on some occasions an individual does come to symbolize a national or international sea change that tangibly alters the lives of millions.

The distortions bound up in the narrow perspective of such grand phrases are not difficult to recognize; nonetheless, they are often slighted or ignored. Any careful reader of the daily news dispatches from East Germany or Czechoslovakia, for example, can readily appreciate that the re-markable nonviolent revolutions that have taken place in those societies occurred without the presence of any prominent individual leader or symbolic figure. Indeed, in both countries, the stunningly massive popular direct actions happened without the presence of any formal organizational structure-never mind hierarchy-among the people who stepped forward in peaceful revolt. Where organizations and focal figures have now emerged, such as Civic Forum and Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, they seem to be products of mass participation rather than directors or initiators of what has tran-

spired.

What we see abroad resonates with some of our own not-so-distant history, and the suggestive parallels are of considerable significance. Those parallels provide a chance to open our eyes to the distorted emphases and incomplete images of political change offered up in the mass media and popular culture and to the immensely important corrective role that critical historiography can play.

The history of the black freedom strug-

The history of the black freedom struggle in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s is a case in point. Three of its best-known events highlight the interpretive choices that must always be made—the 1954 Supreme Court school-desegregation decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the Montgomery, Alabama,

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bus boycott of 1955-1956, and the lunchcounter sit-in protests of 1960. A balanced and inclusive telling of the civil-rights story will make starkly clear how the transformation of the American South stemmed far more from direct involvement by thousands of relative unknowns than from the efforts of a few established organizations and prominent individuals.

The landmark nature of Brown highlights a strategic choice that black activists
faced at that time and that also confronts
present-day proponents of political
change. Brown was a tremendous victory
for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
and civil-rights lawyers who had made
courtroom litigation of constitutional
claims the dominant strategy of black efforts to achieve public equality. If formal
changes in the law were to be the primary
route to improved lives for black Americans, few doubted that the Federal courts—
rather than state legislatures or Congress—
should be the locus of action. The triumph
in Brown not only vindicated that litigation strategy but also seemed to herald its
primacy.

But the Montgomery bus boycott was a challenge—initially unintended—to the primacy of the litigation approach. It was also a direct, nonviolent, massive challenge to the day-to-day personal reality of Southern segregation. Montgomery signified the ability of thousands of ordinary citizens to take meaningful action by and in behalf of themselves, rather than wait for the lawyers. It also showed how quickly a mass movement can get under way, in the absence of a sponsoring group or formal leadership, and then generate an organizational form—the Montgomery Improvement Association—only after mass participation is an accomplished fact.

Nowadays, most popular references to the Montgomery boycott involve either the image of Rosa Parks, whose arrest touched off the protest, or of Martin Luther King Jr., who was drafted as chief spokesman and MIA president once the boycott had begun. One or the other, or both, represent the 40,000-plus black citizens who shunned public transit for more than a year. Although the actual desegregation of bus seating in December 1956 did take place directly pursuant to court order, much press commentary at the time appreciated how Montgomery's significance lay in the black community's mass mobilization and not in the legal details.

Neither then nor at any subsequent time until the 1980s, however, did either journalists or historians fully understand or portray how the real roots of the bus boycott predated Rosa Parks's arrest. Two important oral histories, Earl and Miriam Selby's Odyssey (1971) and Howell Raines's My Soul Is Rested (1977), both drew well-deserved attention to the role of E.D. Nixon, a long-term activist in both

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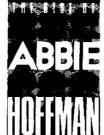
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Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.
Only in the mid-1980s did comprehensive scholarly accounts highlight the even more central role of a black professional group, the Women's Political Council, and especially its president, Alabama State College professor Jo Ann Robinson, in the instigation of the mass boycott. In 1987, the first of the Eyes on the Prize television documentaries featured Robinson as well as Nixon and Parks. Now, in 1990-and thanks, in part, to the University of Tennessee Press's publication of Robinson's memoir, The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It—comprehensive treatments of the civil-rights movement, such as Henry Hampton and Steve Faver's new Voices of Freedom, give the long-unheralded women of black Montgomery the credit they deserve.

he thoroughly revised historiography of the Montgomery boycott is just one example of the alterations and improvements in civil-rights history that will take place in time. Even the wellknown story of the lunch-counter sit-ins that spread across the South in the spring of 1960 will change. Historiography will in time give greatly increased emphasis to the youthfulness and student-movement aspects of the Southern black freedom

The central place of the student organization that grew out of those sit-ins, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), has long been noted by both movement veterans and careful students of the South from 1960 to 1966. But appreciation of the role of SNCC's youthful cadre of full-time organizers, in place after place the real cutting edge of black activism, has never kept pace with the tremendous posthumous emphasis accorded Martin Luther King Jr.

One of the tremendous values of the public-television documentary series Eves on the Prize, for which I have been an adviser, is its inclusiveness-the many, many participants and images shared for the first time with a sizable television audience. By depicting a civil-rights movement that is in no way simply the lengthened shadow of King or other prominent spokesmen for well-known national groups, a show such as Eyes widens the historical lens and displays that range of witnesses to a far larger audience than is reached by nonfiction books.

Over time, civil-rights historiography will not only give more attention to the youthful mass activism of those years but also to the grass-roots energy and initiative that repeatedly sparked protest campaigns all across the South. That will lead to less emphasis on King and to history-writing that will look at local activism from local perspectives rather than through the prism of involvement by such national organizations as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

SNCC's importance will make it an exception, for SNCC's conception of leadership-what it was and wasn't-set it apart from other movement groups and from the implicit tenets that have governed almost all portrayals of leadership. Nowadays, American culture presumes with barely a second thought that "leadership" is the result-and exercise-of formal, hierarchical position in one form of organization or another. Most often, "leadership" is attributed narrowly if not exclusively to those whose formal status allows them to function as spokespersons to the media, regardless of whether they are uninvolved, uninformed, or overscripted.

This causes serious distortion and harm. First, there is the increasing confusion of leadership with celebrity, and vice versa. Simply because people have attained some sort of fame or notoriety, they are presumed to be "leaders" and are quoted or portrayed as such.

Second, and more insidiously, individuals who do validly represent some definable constituency come to believe that the best measure of their impact and contribution is the amount of media attention and press coverage they draw. Unheralded one-on-one contact with real constituents is thus accorded far less significance than ephemeral media appearances, and success or progress comes to be measured by the height of a stack of press clippings.

From 1961 through 1965, SNCC consciously rejected narrowly formal conceptions of leadership and any belief that media coverage and individual fame had significant roles to play in mobilizing and organizing Southern communities. Governing itself as democratically as possible, SNCC shunned the idea of directives delivered from some central hierarchy. Instead, it used its staff to encourage and draw out potential activists, to stimulate local citizens' articulation of their needs and hopes.

In many communities, SNCC's organizers did indeed become leaders, but leaders who earned their influence through firsthand participation in tiresome, often dangerous work and through their informal support and encouragement of others. Some workers understandably came to resent the press attention devoted to King and SCLC or Roy Wilkins and the NAACP while their own valuable work rarely made the newspapers, but black electoral success in such places as Lowndes County, Alabama, and Albany, Georgia, bore long-term witness to the importance of their quiet leadership.

Just as important as SNCC were the indigenous activists who emerged as initiators and mobilizers in their communities without seeking or getting the media spotlight. Like Jo Ann Robinson in Montgomery, Amelia Boynton of Selma played a crucial role, long before 1965, when the town became a nationally known crisis point. Amzie Moore in Mississippi and Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham emerged similarly, influential not because of formal positions but on account of their sustained courage and activism in dangerous locales.

Many of the movement's most important memoirs and autobiographies convey this reality: that unheralded local leadership was usually more important than lawyers and chieftains of national organiza-

Cleveland Sellers's The River of No Return (1973) and James Forman's The Making of Black Revolutionaries (1972) are valuable on SNCC. John R. Saiter's little-known Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and Schism (1979) is a local activist's impor-

tant account of the deleterious effects the involvement of national organizations can have on indigenous protest movements. Pat Watters's elegiac Down to Now. Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement (1971), perhaps the most emotionally moving piece of writing on the Southern struggle, provides similar insights into the Albany movement.

The best of the more recent community studies—Robert J. Norrell's Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee (1985), Joan Turner Beifuss's At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King (1985), and William Chafe's Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom (1980)—are rich portraits of local initiative in diverse locales.

No one can dispute the contribution of such traditional organizational histories as August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement (1973), of such frank and self-critical leadership autobiographies as James Farmer's Lay Bare the Heart (1985), of such standard individual biographies as Nancy Weiss's sensitive and first-rate Whitney M. Young Jr. and the Struggle for Civil Rights (1989). But the future of civil-rights scholarship lies with those works that counterbalance the significant symbolic role of a Dr. King with the under-

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standing that it is the Mrs. Robinsons and Mrs. Boyntons who, in Montgomery or Leipzig, Selma or Prague, initiate the mass nonviolent activism that alters societies and broadens democracy.

Likewise, no one can dispute the importance of a Martin Luther King or an Alexander Dubcek, even if both journalism and history magnify their roles. What was unique about King was not his place in the national spotlight but the pronounced humility with which he responded to the fame and recognition that took him in eight short years from the Montgomery boycott to the Nobel Peace Prize.

Almost alone among major American political figures of the Twentieth Century, King refused to be seduced by such messages. His humility stemmed in part from a strong religious faith that let him see his public prominence and symbolic role as a responsibility he was called upon to take, whether he enjoyed the nonstop pace or not. It also stemmed from a self-effacing belief that the Southern black freedom struggle would have developed, at much the same time and in much the same way, whether his person was present or not. And he thought it largely happenstance that he, rather than someone else, had emerged as the media's primary personification of the Southern movement.

King's modesty allowed him to shun many (though not all) of the trappings that came with the "great man" role. It also inclined him to share the credit or spotlight with others. His aides often manifested no such humility on his behalf, but King himself regularly stressed his understanding of his prominence as representative of the movement, and not an indication of his individual superiority or greatness.

By the late 1960s, King fully appreciated two important political lessons learned from the non-elite, local, unheralded roots from which the Southern struggle drew energy and power.

First, he understood how a society's prolonged unwillingness to adopt modest change—be it providing decent schools for all children or treating all bus riders and restaurant patrons as human beings—ensured that, eventually, far more extensive change would occur with dramatic suddenness. Although Southern segregation toppled somewhat more slowly than the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, decades worth of unstinting dominance and oppression created deep reservoirs of energy that, when finally released, swept aside many old patterns almost overnight.

Looking back on the Montgomery bus

boycott, both King and Robinson realized that if white officials there had granted the black community's initial, nonintegrationist requests for better treatment, both mass mobilization and full desegregation would have been delayed, not hastened. One need not be a specialist on Eastern Europe to draw a similar conclusion from events there. Old orders that rigidly refuse to bend to early stirrings of popular revolt simply increase the size of the uprising that cannot forever be delayed—as China, too, will see one day.

The second crucial lesson King learned was that calculations of long-term selfinterest, rather than religious or moral suasion, determined who among the movement's opponents would most readily appreciate the need for change. In city after city, white business interests accepted desegregation with less hesitation than most white politicians and most white churches. They did so not because of racial or ethical sensitivity, but because they quite correctly judged that prolonged mass protest would be economically harmful to the entire area, themselves included. With those motives, majority support for racial change, however ambivalent or begrudging, took root across the South.

In Eastern Europe, some members of the old order, making just such calculations of longer-term self-interest, have become reformers if not democrats, thus speeding social change. Anyone who once puzzled at how such long-time segregationists as George Wallace or Strom Thurmond could transform themselves into public proponents of racial justice ought to reflect upon the similarly self-preserving conversions now happening among Eastern Europe's social and political figures.

Understanding the parallels between the successful mass activism of the Southern struggle and the popular revolutions of 1989 can illuminate and ameliorate the deepening economic divisions that characterize urban America in 1990: the lack of meaningful, legal employment opportunities for the growing young underclass; the deep-seated health and financial crises threatening urban hospital systems; the massive burden of saving and reviving urban public schools. With regard to any or all of these crises, corporate leaders and opinion leaders had best realize—as some do—that the increasing bifurcation of urban economic life bodes long-term ill for all of society, not just for the unemployed dropouts at the bottom.

As in other times and other places, selfinterest alone calls out for a renewed appreciation of the prerequisites of democracy. When those underpinnings attenuate, supposedly solid structures quickly grow weak. As our own civil-rights history shows, as the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe show, mass nonviolent action can topple and depose even the most seemingly invulnerable social orders.

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In "Turning," she writes: "Finally, we will make change." Yet the change she envisions comes slowly, imperceptibly, and it resides as much in the process of making change as it does in the change achieved:

no sudden revelation but the slow turn of consciousness, while every day climbs on the back of the days before:

no new day, only a list of days, no task you expect to see finished, but you can't hold back from the task.

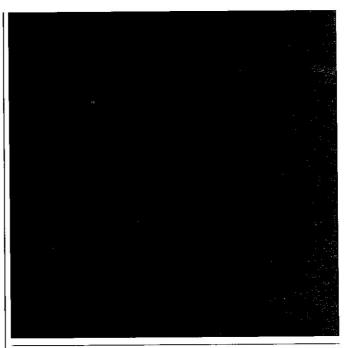
Rich seems in this collection to have found a peace that, at times, even approaches resignation—not to political defeat but to mortality. Her faith in "whatever you are that has tracked us this far," and her faith in the power and durability of words, seem to sustain her. In "Love Poem," she writes:

we're serious now about death we talk to her daily, as to a neighbor

we're learning to be true with her she has the keys to this house if she must

she can sleep over.

Carefully, lovingly crafted, this is a collection not to leave on the coffee table or slide on the shelf, but to read and reread; each time it yields a new reward.





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