

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Inaugural Lecture Speaker: Taylor Branch

Introduction: In 1963, Taylor Branch was a high school junior in Atlanta, Georgia. As he watched the evening news that spring, he recalls being thunderstruck by images of fire hoses and dogs turned against marching children in Birmingham, Alabama, images that led him to formulate his first political questions. What tremendous power made those children march and made police attack them? What was the Civil Rights Movement made of and where did it come from? It was a moment that changed the direction of his life and, twenty years later, finding answers to those questions would become his life's work.

After high school, Mr. Branch graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and received his graduate degree in International Economics from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He began a career as a reporter and a writer during the 1970's, holding editorial positions at the Washington Monthly, Harpers and Esquire while continuing to write for a wide variety of publications. In 1976 he wrote the best seller *Blind Ambition* with President Nixon's former counsel and Watergate figure, John Dean. Mr. Branch continued his successful collaboration, publishing *Second Wind* with Bill Russell and *The Labyrinth*, with Eugene M. Proper, in the following years. By the 1980's, Mr. Branch was engaged in a monumental research project whose goal was nothing less than a narrative history of the Civil Rights Movement, focusing on the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and the struggle that transformed America. The first volume of a planned trilogy, *Parting the Waters*,

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

America in the King Years, 1954 to 1963, appeared in 1988 and was met with overwhelming public and critical acclaim, beginning with the Pulitzer prize for history and extending to the Los Angeles Times Book Award and the National Book Critic Circle Award. The same was true for his second volume, *Pillar of Fire, America in the King Years, 1963 to 1965*, which was published in 1998. A magisterial history of one of the most tumultuous periods in post-war America, as one critic described it, *Pillar of Fire* won the Sidney Hillman Book Award, the Imus Book Award and the American Bar Association Silver Gavel Award. Critics have described Mr. Branch's work as inspiring, definitive, one of the greatest achievements in American biography, a tour de force of research and synthesis, the measure of all books to come. He has been the recipient of a McArthur Foundation Fellowship and in 1999 President William J. Clinton awarded him the National Humanities Medal. Currently Mr. Branch is working on the third and final volume of his trilogy, *At Canaan's Edge*. Also in the making is an eight-hour miniseries based on the first two books in the trilogy called *Parting the Waters*, which Mr. Branch is producing with Harry Belafonte and which will be televised by ABC. We are honored to have such a distinguished author as the inaugural speaker in this fall's series on the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. The topic of Mr. Branch's speech tonight is "Equal Souls, Equal Vote, Alabama in the Heart of Civil Rights." Please join me in extending a warm welcome to Mr. Taylor Branch.

Taylor Branch: Thank you very much. I am very happy to be here. I know this is not California. You pay your electric bills because there is plenty of light here. It is quite bright up here so I can't see you but I hope I can hear you from time to time. I am

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

honored to be here at this inaugural event and I'm flattered by all of the things just said about me in the introduction. To undercut it a little bit, I want you to know that the Don Imus award I received was the first and the only Don Imus Award that will ever be awarded. The Awards program died on some snafu or scandal involving Don Imus. And, on a more somber note, the eight-hour miniseries that Harry and I have been trying to make now for ten years is forthcoming, but forthcoming is a very elastic word in television and it is a labor of love to work in this subject but it is not always a labor of love to try to break down racial barriers in Hollywood, I can tell you that. It is a combination of money and reluctance. We do hope, and we have a wonderful script, that we can bring this truly amazing story of American freedom to a larger audience. People are not going to read big history books or come to lecturers at UAH. But, I'm very grateful to be here. I am glad that two institutions are collaborating and cooperating to do this. It is part of the lesson of the movement that if you are not stretching yourself for citizenship you are in danger of losing it. It's always a little stretch. Never expect to get it all right. Never expect to be completely comfortable, if you were you wouldn't be stretching. So, I'm glad that you are doing it. We had some events like that in Baltimore, cross-campus events, and they were stupendously successful but, again, not without stretch marks I guess you would say. So expect those and I hope it goes well and I wish you well. You are going to have some wonderful people here. Many of your speakers are dear friends and colleagues of mine, Diane Nash and Fred Shuttlesworth. He is the only person I know who kind of preaches like an airplane. He will literally get his arms out and say I'm looking for a place to land. So, you're in for a treat with a lot of the

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

speakers that you are going to have here, and I just mentioned two of them. I think Diane Nash is one of the most unsung figures of the whole Freedom Rights Era and she's coming down from Chicago. She does not make that many appearances so I'm really glad you have her and I hope you'll take advantage of it. Before I start, I would like to mention one personal note. The kind introduction began in Westminster when I was a junior in high school, stupefied by the demonstrations in Birmingham. My football classmate from that era is now, it's hard for me to even get this out, the distinguished Dr. Marshall Shreeder here in Huntsville. He was my classmate and it was one of my treats to come here and spend the night last night with Doctor Shreeder and his wife, Lucinda, who also went to the same high school. I see that they are here tonight. I know that a lot of you don't want to meet Dr. Shreeder because he is the cancer doctor but, if you do, it will be a treat even if you have cancer. I tell you, he is a wonderful guy.

I am here to talk to you about the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama and to give you something of an overview about it. Alabama is the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. I am going to talk to you about three miracles that occurred here, a miracle of cars, a miracle of children and a miracle of young citizens. The miracle of cars, of course, occurred in the bus boycott, which was as much about cars as it was about people. At the time, the black citizens in Montgomery resolved not to ride the buses and less than five percent of the black people in Montgomery owned automobiles and there was no alternative form of transportation in a community that was very widely stretched out. Most of the cars that were owned were concentrated in two small Baptist congregations, Dexter Avenue, Dr. King's church, and First Baptist, Ralph Abernathy's church. The

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

people in those two churches by in large didn't speak to one another. The one came out of the other. Abernathy's church was built first, right after the Civil War. It was burned down later and they rebuilt it. It was known as the brick-a-day church because the ex-slaves didn't have any money and everybody was required to go out in the countryside and find one brick a day and bring it to the site and they built the church. They built it up there on the high hill, the same hill where the capital is in Montgomery. But some of the finer members of First Baptist church in the late 19th century were upset by the fact that the door exited out onto the steep side of the hill, I forget which direction that is, toward Rigley Street and they got mud on their shoes coming out and they felt that they were too good for mud and so they withdrew and went down to a slave pen at the foot of the hill and formed Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. And ever thereafter there was a little bit of snootiness between the two churches.

Ralph Abernathy told me once that, he said that in Dr. King's church you couldn't even talk about Jesus. He said, "You could mention Him maybe, but they preferred that you talk about Plato." He said, "Now, at First Baptist, we didn't have any shouting. It was not a shouting congregation. All of the other congregations, where people didn't own any automobiles, were shouting churches." He said you couldn't shout at First Baptist. Other people said that wasn't true, that you really could shout at First Baptist, but Abernathy didn't like to advertise that because he wanted to be as distinguished as Dexter Avenue. He said you couldn't shout, but you could talk about Jesus. He said, "I could preach about Jesus from my pulpit, but not at Dr. King's church." He said, "At Dexter Avenue they didn't even have music in their hymnal. Their hymnal was a book of

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

poetry because to them if you put music there, it was kind of demeaning.” These are the two congregations, one hundred years later, out of slavery, that split over an issue of status and whether you were going to get mud on your feet coming out onto Ripley Avenue in which all the cars were concentrated when they resolved not to ride the buses and 50,000 people have to get to work. Most of them were maids and day laborers without their established form of public transportation, i.e. the bus. That meant they had to get into the cars of the Dexter members and the First Baptist members, who didn’t even want each other in their cars. Their cars were their prize possessions. Vernon Johns, the minister of Dexter Avenue, who preceded Dr. King at Dexter Avenue, said “Do you want a definition of perpetual motion, give the average Negro a Cadillac and tell him to park it on some land he owns.” This is what he said to his own members trying to tweak them about how much money they would spend on their cars. “You wouldn’t even have a house, but you’ve got a car.” These people loved their cars. We all love our cars. Americans love cars. But if it is a rare possession and if 80% of the working population of black Montgomery at the time of the bus boycott are day laborers and maids, and not a single white collar occupation in the whole city is open to you, it is a profound test of a divided society to ride in somebody else’s car to work when you are muddy and dirty and you are a day laborer. To do it for one day is rough. They did it in large part in the beginning for all the reasons that you might think of accumulated degradation and accumulated frustration, but you have to remember that Rosa Parks was not by any means the first person that had been dragged off the buses and arrested. It had happened a number of times and, in fact, it had happened a number of times when they had tried to

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

do something about it. Always, the circumstances weren't right. A person arrested, one of them turned out to be a pregnant teenager. Well, who wants to rally the community around a pregnant teenager, or a divorcee? The significant fact that I want to start with you about, about this miracle, is that it was not what Rosa Parks did that was significant, it was who she was. Rosa Parks had a personality and a persona in Montgomery that transcended all of the little status cleavages that divide us even in our academic departments in a university. Dr. King used to say, "People think black people don't quarrel over status because we don't have any of it, but if you have only a small quantity, you quarrel in all that more minute and finite a degree. Rosa Parks cured all of that. She was a person of great refinement and also a seamstress. She lorded herself over no one and yet she wrote beautiful letters in perfect English for the NAACP, she was the secretary. She sewed for the better members in Dexter Avenue, but went to church in a Lutheran church taught in a little like missionary colony. She was a person who transcended all of the little differences there. The big people liked her because they thought she was refined. The little people liked her because she didn't lord it over anybody. I tried to say in the book, because somebody told me this, that Rosa Parks really makes up for about fifty of society's sociopaths that are let loose. One transcendent personality that everybody likes from every station in life. So, the bus boycott started because of who she was, not that she did something extraordinary or that something extraordinarily bad happened to her, but the combination of this indignity happening to this person made everybody willing to get in the cars. It made everybody willing to submit to that on both sides, to have your car dented, to have your car ticketed,

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

to have your car muddied and, on the other side, to humble yourself and say, “May I ride in your highfalutin car, Dr. Atkin?” It forged community bonds that people never knew existed. Talk about stretching yourself, this is the overlooked part of the Miracle in Montgomery. People stretched themselves everyday to walk miles, to ride miles, to endure the harassment by the police, every kind that you can imagine, including arresting Dr. King, of course, several times. To do that for three hundred days, through two winters, is a true phenomenon of social transformation at a community level about the automobile and about people doing things they didn’t believe they could do. It really meant a lot to Dr. King when old Mother Pollard, you know he tried to get her to take a ride, said some of the older people shouldn’t be doing this. They should take a ride in the car and after a while some people got so devoted to the spirit of the movement, that they would turn down the rides from people, even when they were offered, and Mother Pollard turned down a ride from Dr. King several times and kept saying, “No, I don’t want to ride. My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.” That famous line came from somebody literally walking into town in that whole long year.

People argue about whether the bus boycott was won or lost by the demonstrations or by the lawsuits that ultimately ended the segregation there, but the fact of the matter is that it was the transition within the community itself that happened and made this possible, that laid the groundwork for all the other surprises of people saying, “We can do something about this ourselves if we are willing to stretch across community lines.” Nobody knew it was going to be about the buses anymore than they knew that the next stage was going to be about a lunch counter. This is the kind of accidental surprise

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

that happens once people begin to stretch themselves and try to ask if somebody else from a different walk of life, across a line, if I'm willing to make myself nervous and expose myself to ask if somebody else will do this, the movement says you will be surprised, you will be pleasantly answered and later on people in the movement are risking their lives to do precisely that. It created hope out of no hope, but we have to be harsh historically and honestly.

The bus boycott ended in 1956. Montgomery was never the site of another serious initiative in Civil Rights because as soon as it was over people started quarreling over the success. Rosa Parks was driven out of Montgomery because people resented the fact that she became known as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement and she wasn't from either of the two elite churches. These are harsh facts. The genius and the spirit doesn't last forever and you have to be on guard to figure out where it is going to go. Not only that, it didn't really turn up anywhere else either because seven years later, in 1963, Dr. King really feared that the Civil Rights Movement was going recede from its window in history with segregation still intact. It was still as strong as ever and he believed that the rise of the opposition to the Civil Rights Movements had more momentum than the movement itself by 1962 and he went into Birmingham, the most segregated city and the toughest city, basically as a desperate measure to try to take a risk when he felt he had nothing to lose because the movement otherwise was going to recede.

Now, this is the miracle of children. I want to make clear to what degree Birmingham succeeded, not because of a letter from a Birmingham jail, not because of political mobilization of outside people, not because of the accumulated forces of other

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Civil Rights support groups and not even because of the wearing down of the long weeks of demonstrations in Birmingham. They were on the point of surrender. Nobody was going to publish the letter from Birmingham jail. Nobody paid any attention. It was a long-winded letter, another one of Dr. King's sermons. President Kennedy, after over a month of demonstrations in Birmingham and people going to jail, basically wasn't even asked questions about Birmingham. It wasn't on the screen and Dr. King was preparing to withdraw from Birmingham when James Bevel and his wife Diane, Diane Nash who is coming here, said, "Well, you're going to have to withdraw because you're running out of people who are willing to go to jail because of all of the terrible things that are happening in Bull Connor's jail and what happens when you are in there. Who wants to go?" But we have plenty of people, it's just that they are 18 and 17 and 16, and an argument began to break out in Birmingham behind the scenes. I mean an argument with fistfights among nonviolent people. Those are really serious arguments. "You mean to say that you have come in here to Birmingham and mobilized hatred among whites, they are firing people right and left, the movement is failing and now you are about to withdraw and you want to leave for good measure all of our children with criminal records. You want to put babies in jail?" Bevel was the leader of the team saying, "Why not? They are segregated. They have no future." One of the fistfights broke out when a parent came in and said, "Get this lunatic out of here, Dr. King. Why is he threatening to put my child in jail?" Bevel said, "I want to put your child in jail because he is willing to do what you should have done thirty years ago," and there was almost a fight there. Bevel essentially argued half seriously, because he was always on the borderline of

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

lunacy, that “If Baptists could accept baptism and determine their eternal destiny as early as 6-years-old, how can you tell them they can’t march for freedom?” All of the preachers would say, “Now come on Bevel, we do that in the church but we are building the church membership.”

But the real significant thing about the children’s miracle in Birmingham is the argument that took place in almost every household or, in some cases didn’t take place, because it became younger and younger and younger. The first day they marched, they allowed people as young as twelve to go to jail. The second day, where you got a lot of the Charles Moore photographs, there were kids as young as six and eight years old, mostly girls, and these are the photographs that stupefied me over there in Atlanta while watching them on TV. The significant thing about the miracle is what took place in the households in black Birmingham during this time between parent and child, “Am I going to go to jail, do know what going to jail means, you’re twelve years old, you’re my future, I’m not going to jail, well daddy, you’ll lose your job and I can’t lose a job,” people debating over dinner tables what to do. Most were forbidden to go. Some got permission to go. Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, argued with his family in Birmingham. He was twelve years old. He was the classmate of Denise McNaire, who was later killed in a church bombing. He said it took about two weeks, but his parents tearfully gave him permission to march to jail. He said that it was the hardest thing that he ever did. He was terrified. He said there were awful things that happened in the jail and you have kids crowded up, forty to a cell, a cell for eight people, in with other criminals, being terrorized by the jailers. He was

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

later expelled from the school because he was a ringleader, even at the age of twelve. He said to him the greatest lesson that he has ever had that he's carried on through his career as a black president of a predominately white technical school, a State University. It said it was all more than made up for by what happened when they expelled him. He said the white school superintendent insisted that he be expelled as a lesson. He said, "My principal had no choice but to do it in an all black school and he called a big assembly like this. He said, "The principal did a feat worthy of a poet. He expelled me from school in front of everybody else with the political bosses in the back of the room using language that satisfied them that he was being expelled." "You knew what you were doing wrong, Freeman. You knew that this was a deliberate choice and you are going to pay the price here you are going to pay the price down the road, who knows what will happen to you because of this." He said that principal communicated and expelled him in a way that convinced every kid there that the principal was proud of him for what he was doing, and yet satisfied the people in the back. Now that is walking a fine line. But it happened in Montgomery, in the children's marches, with over two thousand people going to jail the first day and then it just spilled over the whole country. There were over fourteen hundred demonstrations in the net six weeks, President Kennedy throwing up his hands, introducing the Civil Rights Bill, essentially in a desperate plea to try to stop the spread of demonstrations that went out from Birmingham, out from the heart of Alabama, the second great miracle here. It led almost inexorably and very quickly to the third.

Bevel and Nash were celebrated privately within the movement because as much of an orphan as the idea of putting children in jail was before this great miracle, once it

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

spread all over the country, they were geniuses. Nobody really knew that much about the agonizing over strategy, but they knew that putting children in jail had been largely their campaign. So on the night of the Birmingham church bombing when four little girls who, by the way did not take part in those demonstrations, there weren't that many who didn't, but they didn't, were blown up in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Bevel and Nash stayed up all night, they broke furniture, they wailed and they beat on each other. They said, "This has happened because of us, we killed those girls, and before morning we are going to have an answer to it." They debated essentially, the way Diane puts it, and Bevel too; they're estranged now and Bevel is still on the edge of lunacy, living in Chicago. The million-man march was his idea, among many other things. He said, "We are going to have a Malcolm X solution. We know who set that bomb." When we called down to Birmingham, preachers already knew Chandliss and those people did it. That was no secret. He said, "I know people who can kill them, we'll have a vigilante because we know there's not going to be any investigation so we're going to have a vigilante style response because we can't take this any longer." He said, "We know there's not going to be any investigation. We're going to have a vigilante style response because we can't take this any longer." He said, "That's what John Wayne would do." Bevel would say, "Well what would John Wayne do? Would he sit back and wait? Americans like John Wayne don't they, unless he's black." He called people that night. The alternative, they said, was to devise something appropriate to the heinousness of the crime from the tradition they knew, the tradition of nonviolence, and they went back and forth. I think that this is an honest debate but by morning they had typed up this blueprint for a

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

nonviolent answer to the church bomb. They are in North Carolina in another movement. Diane drove all the way to Birmingham where Birmingham was in shock, getting ready for the funeral. Dr. King was there. She fought her way through Fred Shuttlesworth and all the people in the the anteroom and the chaos and presented this plan which was a blueprint for a nonviolent army to march all over Alabama and immobilize the state until black people in Alabama had the right to vote on the theory that if you could secure the right to vote, crimes like the Birmingham church bombing would no longer be trivialized, it would no longer be passed off and sloughed off. For a lot of you, this is historical trivia at the time, but Alabama took far more seriously the fact that Dr. King got a ride in a car from a Justice Department lawyer from Birmingham to Selma trying to stop riots after the Birmingham church bombing than they took the investigation of the bombing itself. They impaneled several grand juries. They said essentially that the federal government, by offering him a ride was subsidizing somebody who was an avowed traitor to the established segregation laws of the State of Alabama and they impaneled grand juries and this was front-page news everywhere. So, getting a ride was a bigger crime than bombing this church. Bevel once said, "Diane, did you ever see the movie Casablanca?" He said, "When Humphrey Bogart got in the river and got those leeches on him, that's the way Diane gets on you." He said, "Diane got on Dr. King about the right to vote movement and that was the origin of the Selma right to vote movement. So this miracle that occurred in Selma was the brain child of two twenty-three-year-old black citizens who could not vote themselves, who in the faith of the church bombings said, "We are not going to wait for somebody else to do something about this. We're not

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

going to wait for the President, we're not going to say somebody else should do it, we're not going to say that Walter Cronkite should do it. We are pledging to ourselves, even if it costs us our marriage, that we are not going to rest until we carry through this plan as citizens because we own this country." They nagged Dr. King until he came to Selma to start the Right to Vote Movement. He took three trips across the Selma Bridge ultimately after these demonstrations, too. They all have their own lives. Finally they got their first martyr, a person killed, Jimmy Lee Jackson killed in a church in Marion, Alabama. When they were locked up in Selma, they marched outside of Selma. In the church, the state troopers came and shot a fellow in the stomach and he died.

Bevel and Nash, this time it was mostly Bevel, had the idea to march from Selma to Montgomery to petition Governor Wallace for the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. It took two more marches to get across that bridge, but by the end of the year you had the Voting Rights Act that added five million new black voters to the role, not just in Alabama, but across the South. This worked out to about 1.25 million new voters per martyr in the Birmingham church bombing. On the whole the martyrs in the Civil Right Movement were relatively few given the scope of the miracle that was wrought.

Again, I want to tell you a sad part about this though. By the time Bevel and Nash's plan was complete, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee denounced the Voting Rights Act as insufficient. They had worked on it for years themselves, but they had grown too tired, too disillusioned, and too angry about the slowness of the federal government. They said, "If Lyndon Johnson proposed it, it can't be good," so they were against it. They turned against government and the other secret about it was

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

that all of a sudden they didn't get along very well internally, black and white, within the movement. That's a big secret, but it's true. They split apart and they couldn't acknowledge the fact because they were holding out in public themselves, as people who were above the race question, but they weren't. Now, in retrospect, it is not surprising that they weren't. The cultures were separate. You have to stretch yourself. You have to expect differences, but they couldn't, and they split apart. The movement disintegrated almost instantly after the Selma Miracle.

These three miracles that occurred here in Alabama, and there were others but I cited three, the Bus Boycott, The Miracle of Children that destroyed segregation and in the course of it lifted up women. Discrimination against women was banned in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by accident. As a last ditch effort, the Southerners in the congress decided to add sex in there, thinking that it would make it ridiculous; the idea of having the same bathrooms and that women could be airline pilots and other things that were manifestly ludicrous. They thought that this would discredit the whole bill and maybe it would go down the tubes but there was so much momentum behind the bill and there were a few women in the congress that stood up and accepted and embraced it. Within a year of that people wrestled with the question, "What does equality mean between the sexes?" You had the first female rabbi in the five thousand-year history of Judaism. The Women's Movement began to rise out of the stretching of the question, "What does equality mean?" These miracles are wonderful miracles. They are seldom studied. In a culture that is obsessed with political strategy, that will analyze a media consultant's strategy for winning a primary, you have a miracle wrought by cars, a miracle wrought

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

by school children, and I argue that it is on par with the plague of the infants in the Bible. Not since Passover have you had the power of relationships of a great power turned on the witness of eight and ten year old children marching in school and changed the whole legal standard of the entire South, which then changed the whole balance of politics in the United States. Within a week of Barry Goldwater announcing that he, the Republican candidate, was going to oppose the Civil Rights Act, the first candidates of the Republican party who had any prospect of success filed for election to congress here in Alabama and five of them were elected. They were elected so fast they didn't even have any party records. They were all Democrats. They shifted overnight. While I was growing up, we didn't have any Republicans in the South. They were like polar bears. They were Yankees and we didn't have them. As soon as Barry Goldwater, for the Republicans in 1964, opposed the Civil Rights Act, that was a fulcrum powerful enough to turn party politics on a dime. It changed things. All of this came about by what school children did. Where are the political textbooks analyzing that you can change the fulcrum of national, and even international politics, if you can devise a strong enough political message through children of that courage? The same is true of Selma, that two kids, in reaction to a heinous crime, could devise a strategy that would lead, within a year and a half, to a law that changed the voting pattern in a whole region of the country is a stupendous deed. We don't study it very much because I think the reaction against this period, because of the Vietnam War and because the movement itself disintegrated and because the resentment of the government that created these miracles has dominated our politics every since. It has kind of bleached it out of our vocabulary.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

These were great miracles in the tradition of American freedom, in the tradition of the revolution, in the tradition of Lincoln and the tradition of all Americans struggling over what the intuition for equal citizenship really means in practice. Throughout our history, usually when you struggle over that, race is somewhere around there. If it's not race, it's immigrants. If it is not immigrants, then it is sex. Who is equal? What does it mean? What does equality mean? It is not an equality of attainment. It's an equality of essence and the language that Dr. King used, you notice I haven't mentioned Dr. King through all of this, because Dr. King was not the heart of the movement. These people, these children, people like Bevel, well there are a thousand Bevels and a thousand Nashs. They are the ones coming up with the tactical innovation. Dr. King was the voice of the movement. The voice is what we miss most today. The objective conditions of America are much, much better than we like to think. These miracles have swept forward. Tiny America in a blink of history, the democratic ideas that the movement used to remake the South in a blank of history has wiped monarchy off the globe from all recorded history. It's been emperors and czars and sultans and people laughed at democracy until it rose up, it wiped slavery off the face of the United States, it enfranchised and transformed the condition of women. Through our national government, the ideals of equal citizenship transformed old age from the most discarded stage of life into now the most secure stage of life. We licked fascism and we licked communism as the iron booted pretended successors to monarchy. We put people on the moon. We licked polio. We reduced the scourge of race. We began to transform ancient war into peacemaking and out of Alabama, the Selma to Montgomery March became a watchword for freedom all around

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

the world, from South Africa to the Berlin Wall to Tianaman Square. There have been rebellions in China for five thousand years, but never one modeled on a city until Tianaman Square, and that lived.

This is our story. If Dr. King could hope and James Bevel and Diane Nash and these children could formulate hopeful plans in an era of lynching and church bombings, then where is our language of hope in an era that cries out to be redeemed from cynicism and sloth? Our objective conditions are good. Our language is paralyzed. Dr. King used the language of equal souls and equal vote in a very special way. I called it paired footings. He put one foot in the scriptures and one foot in the Constitution, one foot in the Hebrew prophets and in the parables of Jesus and the other foot in the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. You can hear it throughout his language. It gives it an enormous sturdiness. We will win our freedom because the Word of God and the cries of freedom are embodied in our echoing demands. One day he wrote a letter from the Birmingham jail. He wrote, "One day the South will know that when the disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters in Birmingham, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and for the most sacred value in our Judeo-Christian Heritage." With only one foot in the scriptures and one foot in the Constitution, equal souls, equal vote, with Rabbi Hashol, a wonderful character I studied in the second book, King used to sit around and talk about the basis for democracy is scriptural. In other words, the idea is equal vote and everybody's vote should count as equal, is born up by the idea of equal souls. Everybody's soul is equal in the sight of God. You should measure, and this was the innovation of a prophet, that you should hold King

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

to the standard of how they treat widows and orphans because that's the morality that upholds the notion that we are all equally precious.

When you have that idea, that everybody's vote is equal because their souls are equal, you can get patriotic language that has the ring of the scriptures. You can get this furnace in King's voice. The furnace in his voice is more distinctive even in the word because it is the hope of that equal soul that the ? and the universities long, but it bends toward justice, colliding with the harsh reality of his time. How hard it was. How much violence and how much hatred there was and when they collide, they come out in that furnace of his voice, equal souls, equal votes. These are the two feet, I think, that we march on and it's the language that is lost in our time when we pretend that our national government has not done anything for us and, in fact, it's bad. The dominant idea since the death of Martin Luther King in American politics is that national government is bad. You cannot look objectively in anything other than the kind of deceptive pride that poisoned our history after the Civil War to the point that I grew up being taught that slavery was good for black people and that reconstruction was a nightmare of unfairness. That kind of fundamental distortion is creeping in again in the history of the 60's and this movement period is a time of license and a time of tyranny on the part of the federal government. When these Acts were passed that liberated the South, the white South, economically, you couldn't even hold a business meeting in the South as long as it was segregated. A month after the Civil Rights Acts had passed, the Milwaukee Braves are running to Atlanta. There wasn't any Sunbelt when it was segregated. That is all the result of this liberation.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

People denounced the Civil Rights Act saying that if it passed, the federal government would have a jackboot in every town and that the white people would not have a chance. They wouldn't be able to survive and that it would be worst than Nazi tyranny. Well, where is that tyranny? This has enlarged freedom. This is a miracle of freedom and unless we understand that, we are going to lose its language and we won't have it when we need it.

The lesson of American history, I submit, is that every generation needs it in some crisis and if you sneer at it long enough you won't have it when it's there to have. Viola Liuzzo was the last martyr of the Selma march. You're going to hear Mary Stanley who wrote a biography about her. What I want to say about her miracle is this, she was killed; she was an ordinary Detroit housewife who was moved by the photographs of the Selma march. She came to Alabama to volunteer and was bushwhacked, just because she was riding in the car. That was J. Edgar Hoover's worst moment. We don't have time to go into that but maybe Mary will. Ladies Home Journal did a survey. Sixty-five percent of American women said she got what she deserved because she should have been home with her children. This was a different time and the great tide of freedom that has rolled forward and is still rolling forward. The people in Alabama are comfortable with a weatherman named Hassad . They are comfortable with people from Pakistan and India.

The movement prepared America morally for the inevitable shrinking of the world where even if you are a mean, cussed, old person, who doesn't care a farting for democracy or religion, you are going to have to be able to get along with people from Thailand and Syria because the world is shrinking. This movement is the moral

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

preparation for survival in a shrinking world. If Viola Liuzzo was a liberated woman before she knew she was a liberated woman and nobody appreciated it, but her witness should remind all of us how much we owe to her. Every white female who goes to a college owes something to Viola Liuzzo because that sacrifice that raised up the question of what are women inherently capable of, just like the question of what are African Americans inherently capable of, transformed this world. I went to a college at Chapel Hill that had no female students, except nursing students. It is a State University, and this is in the sixties. Five percent of the student body was female, now it's seventy percent female, a larger demographic change than you will ever see in race relations, and all of this is a result of a tyranny-free liberation washed forward on the sacrifice of these people, larger than we can appreciate.

The story of America is freedom. It's our only story. We're not a country just of people who speak one language or come from one place. America is the story of an idea. We're the only country like that. If we don't have our story, we have nothing else. Our story marches on two feet, equal souls, equal vote. On these two feet move the principles that make the flag wave, that makes Selma to Montgomery and the Alabama miracles of the Civil Rights Movement, the watchword for democracy's ascendant promise the world over that have inspired every patriot from George Washington to Jimmy Lee Jackson; from Thomas Jefferson to Viola Leouso; from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King. Equal souls, equal vote. On these two feet advance history's struggle for justice that transcends boundaries of race, of nonviolence that tames our inclination to demonize and dehumanize people into enemies, a spiritual kinship that joins all humanities beyond

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

labels of tribe and kind with neither east nor west, male nor female and above the poison of religious contempt. Equal souls, equal vote. On these two feet rides a new prosperity and peace of the Sunbelt South, which are showered, not only upon those who sacrificed, bled and died for them, but also upon those still with blinders on their eyes and blisters on their hearts, against the very changes that have blessed us all. Equal souls, equal vote. On these two feet yet march perhaps the greatest miracle of all for white Southerners of my generation. For that one time, and not necessarily again, there is no reason that it should happen again. This is all of our , but for that one time African Americans, who for centuries had experienced only the boot heel and the whiplash of democratic values, nevertheless, possessed the nonviolent courage, the political genius and the astonishing grace to lift the rest of us toward the true meaning of our own professed values.

May we all keep marching and recover the language of this hope. This is the language of America. Every step, a leap of faith in each other, that we can be self governing, that we can have faith in each other, even as our theoretical elections can turn on the last wino to stumble to the polls as the soul of wisdom in a democratic country and even as we all believe that we are each self-governing. Still a stupendous concept in history that we can be self-governing as individuals and self-governing as a people without external discipline against all the philosophers and all the previous recorded history. When we recover this language, we can march again on the two feet of equal souls and equal vote, in harmony with all means of patriot and patriots of freedom so that we may, like Mother Pollard, say, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.” Thank you.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Mr. Branch will be more than willing to entertain questions at this moment. We now open the floor for questioning.

Mr. Branch: Thank you. I'd love to have questions and they don't have to be on anything I said, or even on Alabama. We really should to stick to Alabama though. When I gave a talk on theology once and the first question was, "Is it true that Dr. King was only 5'6"?" from some student and we really took off from there. We don't have to stick with highfalutin things.

Q: You do have some academic background in economics and I find it curious that you don't tie in the misuse of that along with the sex and race.

A: Well, I do have a background in economics, which I have pretty much shed like an old skin. I talk about class and I write about class, at least in racial politics and history writing. It turns into a shell game because people who say, "it's not class, it's race," or people who say, "it's not race, it's class," are generally trying to avoid the moral imperative of whatever the other side is saying, so it seems to me this gets into another topic. You picked up on something that is right. This talk, the talk that I gave tonight, is more abstract than my writing. My writing is grounded in discipline. I dedicated *Parting the Waters* to Septa McClark because she had the biggest impact of anybody, I know that most of you probably don't know who Septa McClark is, but she's a wonderful lady, but I couldn't write about her to the degree that I felt was fair and that she deserved because I had this rule that I was only going to do storytelling and let the lessons rise from the stories and Septa McClark was always off stage teaching people how to read and write. She had this theory that she could take an illiterate person and teach him to read and write

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

in a week. Not only that, she said that she could also teach them to read and write in a week in a way that one person out of every twenty, she said, another week and she could teach them to teach the next group. She was a remarkable lady but she was always down at Dorchester and she's never kind of in front and center.

My theory is that racial discussion is plagued by too much abstraction and not enough discovery at a very human level, so I try to do storytelling history and it's hard to get into a lot of economic analysis that way. It's also hard to comprehend, as I was telling Attorney Thomas. It's harder than law suits for similar reasons because they don't fit a structure that I think is mandatory. We discuss race and abstractions and we use labels because we're all in the Western tradition, right, where the abstract idea is more powerful than the particular. So we think that if we are using a label about who is militant and who is a racist or who is this or who is radical as opposed to a militant, that that kind of abstract label carries more power than a story. It is my theory that that's fool's gold. We exchange labels across the divides between us that are very human. They are, "Who do you eat with? Who do you know? Who have you taken a risk with? Who do you have a history with?" and that's why I talked about the stretching, the movement is great because it gets precisely into that so I think the general answer to your question is that I don't get into a lot of economic theory because I don't get into a lot of any theory. If I get into much theory at all, it's at that intersection between religion and democratic theory, which is what I was trying to talk about in Equal souls and Equal vote because I think one of the great tragedies about America is that we're the only country

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

UAH - The University of Alabama in Huntsville

founded on freedom as a theory is that we don't teach what that means. What does democratic theory mean and where does it come from? Does it come from the Bible?

A lot of people find that as a heretical idea, that the underpinnings of democratic theory are biblical. Now, to me, if you listen to the Gettysburg address, which is the undercurrent of democratic theory, it sounds like it's out of the Bible and that's the reason it's stirring, but we don't even debate these things. So to that degree, I did get out into abstractions, but the general answer is I don't get a lot into economic theory although I believe it's important and in the third book, of course, Dr. King dies in Memphis with garbage workers. Virtually every one of the people around him didn't want him to be with garbage workers because they didn't like being with garbage workers. This is a very powerful statement about economic issues coming at the end of what is essentially a passion before he is killed, so it will be economic issues there but I don't generally discuss them as a theoretical matter themselves just because of the way I go about my work. It's a matter of craft.