

SEPCHE

Nurturing Student Scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty-Student Undergraduate Research Project

Research Project: MOVEMENT: EARL CALDWELL AND THE RISE OF BLACK POWER

Discipline: HISTORY

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Project Description: As we approach the fortieth anniversary of his assassination, it is hard to believe that any aspect of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remains unexplored. Countless scholars have analyzed his immeasurable contributions to the struggle for black equality, and many have written volumes about his 1968 murder in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1981, Pulitzer Prize winner David J. Garrow published The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr. From “Solo” to Memphis, which traces what the author calls a voyeuristic impulse that was the impetus for the Justice Department surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1961 until his death in 1968. Gerald McKnight poses a similar argument highlighting the desire on the part of government officials to ruin King and the impending 1968 Poor People Campaign March on Washington. In Murder in Memphis: The FBI and the Assassination of Martin Luther King (1993), Mark Lane and Dick Gregory use oral testimonies and archival research to argue that the King assassination was a masterfully orchestrated conspiracy led by the FBI and Memphis police director Frank Holloman. More recently, the third volume of Taylor Branch’s King trilogy, entitled At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968, provides an exhaustive account of the civil rights leader and his efforts in Memphis.

Focusing more specifically on the strike by the Memphis Sanitation Workers, Michael Honey’s Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign and Thomas F. Jackson’s From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice treat King’s involvement in the situation in Memphis as both the conclusion of an ideological and strategic shift in the Civil Rights Movement and the death knell for northern support of the movement. While all of the aforementioned texts broaden our understanding of both the controversial strike in Memphis and King’s unfortunate and untimely death, their top-down approach and focus on the assassination of the civil rights legend overshadow the humanistic grassroots activism on the part of the citizens of this Tennessee city. Moreover, the texts neglect individual Americans’ negative perceptions about the labor uprising, and no scholar has properly analyzed the media’s influence in framing this legitimate labor dispute as a case of “lazy” workers who wanted more pay for less work.

With the assistance of the SEPCHE Undergraduate Research grant, student researcher(s) and Dr. Mace will work collaboratively to study this crucial aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically the undergraduate researcher(s) will focus on the intriguing and indispensable story of Earl Caldwell, the New York Times journalist who covered the 1968 strike. Caldwell’s claims to fame go far beyond being the only journalist to witness the King assassination. In subsequent years,

Caldwell was a central defendant in *Branzburg v. Hayes*, where the Supreme Court ruled that he would have to disclose to the government his sources within the Black Panther Party. Through their summer research, students will test the hypothesis that: in moving to a more militant and Afro-centric stance in his reporting and his professional development, Earl Caldwell's coverage of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement mirrors the ideological and strategic changes in the struggle for black equality. Below are some preliminary focal research questions:

- Why did the New York Times (NYT) send a reporter to Memphis?
- How did the NYT cover the situation in Memphis?
- Why did the NYT send Caldwell?
- Why was Caldwell the only reporter to witness the assassination?
- What events in this country's history led to changes in the way newspapers covered movements like the strike?
- How did the events in Memphis affect Caldwell in later years?

While supervising the summer research, Dr. Mace will help the students to see how their projects fits into the broader picture of the negative reaction to the strike as it was generated by regional and national press coverage. In short, in addition to applying the above questions to other press outlets and other journalists, the broader project will ask the comparative questions:

- Who else was selected to cover the strike and why?
- How did other papers from across the country view the sanitation workers' strike and King's involvement?
- Why did different outlets and different journalists view the same story from different perspectives?
- What were the most important factors influencing the tenor of coverage?

The micro and macro levels of this project will produce innovative research which will broaden our understanding of how Americans viewed the strike, why they came to these conclusions, and the how the struggle for black equality influenced and was affected by the journalist who covered the movement. Furthermore, it will lead to a greater understanding for and appreciation of the impact of transitions in the Civil Rights Movement and the power of the media to influence public opinion.

This research plan will lead to conference presentations and a journal publication. Dr. Mace will sponsor the students during the 2008-2009 academic year, as they submit paper proposals to present at the Phi Alpha Theta (History Honors Society) Regional Conference, SEPCHE Honors Conference, Cabrini Undergraduate Research Symposium, and the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) National Conference. Additionally, after these presentations, student(s) will submit their research for publication in an appropriate undergraduate research journal.

Student Task(s): Student(s) will research Earl Caldwell and his work during and after the Civil Rights Movement; perform textual analyses of newspaper articles dealing with the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, written by Earl Caldwell and others; research the history of the symbiotic relationship between Civil Rights workers and the print media; synthesize this research; and produce strong academic paper(s) for presentation and publication.

Student Time Commitment: While this work does not require regularly scheduled meeting, students will be expected to put in an average of 10 hours per week over a 2 – 2.5 month period. Ideally, the work would begin the second week of June and last through the second week of August.

Student Learning Outcome: Student(s) will demonstrate an ability to synthesize primary and secondary source materials; display an ability to structure a clear and coherent argument; develop oral and written communication skills; gain an understanding of how historical actors shape public perception and public memory; gain an appreciation for the important role the media played in the Civil Rights Movement, and how leaders used the media to disseminate messages from the movement

Expected Student Product: Student(s) will produce an academic paper, which, during the 2008-2009 academic year, they will present at designated conferences and submit for publication in an appropriate journal.

Other Expected Outcomes: If there are 2 students accepted to work with him, Professor Mace may split their work and have one student research Earl Caldwell and the other research Garry Wills (another journalist who is essential to the understanding of the press during this time period. Wills' story is as captivating as Caldwell's, and it would be interesting for the students both to have their own project and to be able to compare their research results.