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# Joseph Lowery and the Resurrection of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

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# JOSEPH LOWERY AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

by

Deric A. Gilliard

Under the Direction of Akinyele Umoja, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

Joseph Echols Lowery, a key founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, led the organization for twenty years. This study explores how Lowery, who took over during an era when many considered the civil rights movement dead, reenergized the SCLC, became a leading black spokesman who challenged Congress, presidents and the Justice Department around issues of voting rights and social justice, while consistently questioning U.S. hegemonic international and domestic policies around jobs and poverty. This research further investigates how Lowery fought for the continuation of affirmative action in the midst of an oftentimes hostile environment and waged campaigns against multi-national companies that discriminated against blacks and minorities. This qualitative empowerment study examines how and why Lowery and the SCLC became the leading non-Muslim influence on the 1995 Million Man March and his role in affirming women leaders and their initiatives

INDEX WORDS: Hegemony, Affirmative Action, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Second Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Social Justice, Nonviolence, Civil Rights, Black Power.

JOSEPH LOWERY AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

by

Deric A. Gilliard

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work first and foremost to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has sustained and loved me through all my blunders and missteps. He is unquestionably my guiding light. Yet, in my human frailty, I have frequently turned my back on him, but he has never, ever, abandoned me.

I also dedicate this work to my loving wife Catherine, who has suffered through more trails and struggles with me already than most endure in a lifetime. Yet, amazingly, she loves me madly, even after more than three decades of marriage. She is the major reason I have undertaken this work. No husband could possibly ask for more. My four children, Adam, Dominique, Veronica and Jamal, are also major factors in my commitment to this work. For their entire lives, I've preached to them that they were placed on this earth to make a difference and that in order to do that, they must be compelled to fully engaged the precious gifts that God has granted them. This work is another step in my life's journey to practice what I preach, which sadly, I have not always done. I also dedicate this work to the millions of nameless, faceless, unsung heroes and 'sheroes' who labored in obscurity, subjected themselves to untold marginalization, shut out of the mainstream, reduced to being "other." And to the mothers, fathers, aunties and grandparents who stayed on their knees, praying that one day their ancestors could live in an America that truly reflected its edict that all men are created equal.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my father, Spencer Lee Gilliard, a true American hero who fought wars on two continents and was subjected to nuclear testing and constant discrimination during a 30-year Army career. He raised two children as a single father, served as a pastor for twenty years, treasured his God and family fiercely, and taught me a love for this country that endures to this day.

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My amazing committee, chaired by Dr. Umoja, stretched me to the ninth degree, challenging me to improve this work more than I could conceive. Dr. Umoja, who recognized the value of where God has strategically placed me, affirmed my work and purpose from Day One and took on a special role as mentor to me. His belief in the worthiness of my research and vision has been both priceless and humbling. Dr. Rouse, who gains little from working with me, insisted that I work harder to detach myself from my subject and strive for greater objectivity in my research, for which NOW I am deeply grateful. Although a member of the history department, she was the first to affirm my work, incorporating my first book into her curriculum well before I considered returning to school. Dr. Dunham, who I did not know very well before we began, brought a much needed and invaluable perspective to my research, even when I resisted. Pushing and prodding, they refused to let me give less than my best. Also Dr. Davis, who accurately promised us in the beginning of her research methods class that the department wasn't doing its job if we were consistently in a state of discomfort as grad students, was true to her word. She was also with me every step of the way as an advisor.

I also acknowledge my son Dominique, who received his first degree from GSU's AAS program and has gone on to do profound things, for urging me to re-enter school. Finally, I thank my first and second year cohorts for patiently assisting their technologically-challenged elder, while setting a good example by enduring 'til the end.

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## 1 Chapter One: Introduction

The Cold War between superpowers the United States of America and the Soviet Union provided a lingering, yet uneasy peace in 1977. The scars of the black power movement of the 1960s, accompanied by riots that ravaged Watts, Detroit and other cities during the late 1960s, were recent memories. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X had been dead for nearly ten years. Affirmative action, which came on the heels of landmark legislation that afforded blacks the right to equal accommodations and the vote, was being challenged and blunted by an increasingly conservative nation and a Congress seeking to curtail legal advances being granted black Americans. Meanwhile, many whites were bitterly complaining that blacks were still pushing for more advances while taking jobs that should have gone to more qualified whites, a dark sign of the nearing end of the Second Reconstruction. And even some key black civil rights leaders, Andrew Young and C. T. Vivian, who had poured their lives into the quest to attain freedom and equality for black Americans, took the position that the modern civil rights movement was over.

In that context and on the heels of Watergate and the disgraceful resignation of President Richard Nixon, Joseph Echols Lowery took over as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the formerly influential organization that had lapsed into virtual irrelevancy. Situated between the waning years of the glorious triumphs of the civil rights movement that brought black people the vote and public accommodations and a movement struggling to redefine itself, Joseph Lowery began to “rebuild the brand” of the SCLC. I will show how Lowery’s twenty-year reign as leader of the SCLC left the organization as a highly respected, financially solvent, force that challenged unjust institutions as a consistent voice for blacks and the oppressed. This academic treatment explores how Lowery endured his own rough start before

learning to use his mastery of the language, a command of key local, national and international issues and a strong ability to engage the media to eventually thrust the moribund SCLC back into the foreground of the civil rights movement.

This qualitative work includes both new interviews of SCLC staff, board members and informed observers, as well as interviews of veteran SCLC leaders and journalists, all conducted by the author. The research will also draw on the definitive studies and foundational work of King historians. The study also includes both personal and organizational papers, as well as historic data from the King Center, Georgia State Library and the Auburn Avenue Research Library. Personal data also includes early SCLC board of director documents from the King Center that detail Lowery's contributions, hard-to-find copies of SCLC national magazines that are part of Georgia State University's holdings and Southern Christian Leadership Conference Women's Organizational Movement for Equality Now -- SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. -- documents included in the Auburn Avenue Research Library's archives. This work also highlights dozens of SCLC press releases, position papers, campaign brochures, public service announcements, articles from a plethora of publications and major news services, as well as other documents that detail Lowery's leadership role with the National Black Leadership Forum.

In this study, my principle focus is on the impact of the leadership of the SCLC's third president, Dr. Joseph Echols Lowery. It examines how his tenure occurred in the midst of a period in American history when the nation was retreating from concessions to minorities and enthralled with the rollbacks of governmental involvement that culminated in the Republican landslide of 1994, sparked by the *Contract with America*.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the first Republican controlled Congress in forty years, Lowery and the SCLC did some of its most important and

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<sup>1</sup> Newt Gingrich, "Republican Contract with America," October 12, 1995, [accessed October 1, 2011], <http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html>

effective work as the voice of the “least of these” and an instrument of conscious and prodding to an often insensitive government. I will demonstrate how Lowery’s command of the issues, his broad-based respect among the black organizations and civil rights advocates and his ability to consistently garner the attention of the media, the Congress and the White House, coupled with his role as the chairman of the Black Leadership Forum, legitimately earned him the title “Dean of the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>2</sup> As such, Lowery was not only able to articulate issues of importance to black and marginalized Americans involving domestic issues, but his forcefulness and insistence on having a voice in interpreting international issues made him a world figure. Consequently, international leaders such as Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Haitian President Aristide, South African President Nelson Mandela and others insisted on collaborating with Lowery, often to the chagrin of the U.S. government. For these compelling reasons, Lowery’s leadership, oratory and personality were witty, well versed, articulate and bold enough to bring the SCLC back to the forefront of the black activist civil rights movement from the mid-1980s through his retirement in 1997.

### **1.1 Significance of Study**

This study is important to the academic community overall and the African-American community in particular, for several reasons: Firstly, no significant scholarly explanation of the tenure of Joseph Lowery’s 20-year leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference has thus far been published or written in an academic setting. Secondly, Lowery’s leadership and legacy are important because he followed perhaps the most honored African-American of

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<sup>2</sup>Melanie Eversley, “Civil rights ‘dean’ Joseph Lowery celebrates 90th birthday,” *USA Today*, October 6, 2011, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-10-05/joseph-lowery-civil-rights/50673254/1>, [accessed November 2, 2011].

the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the individual credited with being the architect of this nation's landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s and the leader of the nation's premiere African-American grassroots civil rights organization. Thirdly, Lowery's contributions to African-American civil rights in America are pivotal because he took over the once-robust SCLC during an era when civil rights organizations were floundering, the nation was beginning to reject affirmative action and non-violent civil disobedience was often viewed as no longer needed. The trend, in fact, continues as "white support for affirmative action policies has remained low through more than two decades of polling,"<sup>3</sup> according to University of California at Berkeley political science chair Takeu Lee. Also, Lowery's place in history was cemented by the fact he brought the benediction following the election of the nation's first African-American president in 2008. Additionally, President Barack Obama, the nation's first black president, honored the SCLC co-founder by presenting him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009.

This qualitative study is important for several additional key reasons: Perhaps most critical is the fact that while King has been chronicled endlessly, few academic accounts of the administrations of succeeding SCLC leaders have been undertaken. Ralph David Abernathy, who followed King in leadership in 1967, shares his challenges and triumphs through the King era and then this own leadership of the SCLC, which concluded in 1977, with his autobiography, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*. Thomas Peake, a historian from King's College in Bristol, Tennessee, is, author of *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the 1980s*. Peake's work is the only one that traces the organization from its genesis through the early years of the Lowery presidency.

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<sup>3</sup> Takeu Lee, "Poling Prejudice: Public Opinion on Race is Often Inconsistent. Does Political Science Have the Tools to Capture all Forms of Racism?," *The American Prospect*, April 2011: A 4-5.

Surprisingly, however, there are no academic treatments that explore the significance or legacy of the Lowery tenure with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a clear and critical gap in the pantheon of African-American literature, particularly since Lowery led one of the nation's premier black grass roots civil rights organizations for 20 years, from 1977-1997. With Lowery approaching his 91st birthday and no biography or research of his leadership currently existing, this researcher has utilized his access to key inner circle associates, leadership peers, staff and board members to construct a critical analysis of his tenure and accomplishments. Years from now, when researchers and young people seek to understand what happened to the SCLC following Dr. King's assassination – and seek to explore the group's mission and impact during the Carter, Reagan and Clinton administrations – this research will provide foundational, primary source evidence. The King Center and the Auburn Avenue African-American Research Library house a significant collections of data from the King period. Neither, however, contains extant insight into Lowery's key campaigns: his confrontations of federal policies, his organization of economic justice pacts; his moves to empower women, his fight for voter empowerment, and his efforts to keep the Voter's Rights Act before the nation. These key issues were major initiatives Lowery and the SCLC were identified with during his tenure. In addition, the SCLC's opposition to redistricting, its responses to cries for justice in cases of police brutality and hate crimes, its role in the Million Man March, its campaign against gun violence and its push to raise the issue of the burning of black churches to a level of national import were other critical causes Lowery and the SCLC tackled. Fighting for these key platforms legitimized the SCLC's existence during the eighties and nineties, while keeping the organization and its mission robust and agile.

The primary challenge for this study is the fact that there are few existing secondary resources on the impact of the Lowery era and the SCLC. The result is a major absence of independent analysis and critique of the SCLC between 1977-1997. Emory University has obtained the Lowery Papers, but they will not be fully available to researchers until 2012. A secondary challenge is that the inner circle of the Lowery era is shrinking fast, with only a few of the key, critical insiders still in position to explore and evaluate the triumphs and shortcomings of his tenure. Key among the missing are longtime executive director E. Randel T. Osburn, SCLC General Counsel Roxanne Gregory, and SCLC historian Dana Swann, each of whom succumbed to cancer. Exacerbated by the loss of institutional knowledge, the dearth of research clearly exposes a gaping hole in the annals of the SCLC.

## **1.2 Chapter Synopsis**

Chapter Two interrogates the background of four Alabama preachers who would play major leadership roles within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the black upsurge of the 1950s and 1960s. It also concludes with an extensive review of the early years of Lowery's life.

Chapter Three is the literature review of the seminal studies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC by David Garrow, Taylor Branch, and Adam Fairclough. The chapter also analyzes the work of Duke University scholar Eugene Walker's interview of Ella Baker from 1974 and Thomas Peake, who penned the first extensive study of the SCLC, the only one that delves into the early tenure of the Lowery presidency. Peake, along with Manning Marable, (*Race, Reform & Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982*), in fact, describe the political and social climates of the country when Lowery took over in 1977. Peake also details several key campaigns, including the Bozeman-Wilder march that began in Pickens

County, Alabama, and ended up in Washington D.C., generating enough publicity along the four-month journey to help fuel the passage of the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act. Peake also explores several Lowery outcries to U.S. - international policy. These protests included the U.S.'s support of South Africa through the purchase of gold Krugerrand and the Southern Company's purchase of coal from South Africa. Peake also details Lowery's ascension to the SCLC presidency, as well as his early disdain of Reagan policies and Jimmy Carter's firing of Andrew Young as U.N. Ambassador. Both Garrow and Branch chronicle the early, uneven years of the SCLC (1957-'59), the mistakes of Albany, the monumental gains of Birmingham and the complications brought on by SNCC and the black power movement. Fairclough explores the inter-relationships of SCLC's lieutenants, as well as the tension that existed between them and external advisers, including Bayard Rustin, Stan Levinson and Harry Watchel.

Chapter Four focuses on Lowery and the SCLC's strong condemnation of the treatment of black, poor and oppressed Americans as determined and influenced by public and social policies of Presidents Carter, Nixon, Reagan and the U.S. Congress. The SCLC's assault on the hegemonic U.S. policy includes demands to the Justice Department to investigate racial confrontations that activists had with the Ku Klux Klan in Decatur, Alabama and Greensboro, North Carolina, as well as calls to the Attorney General to investigate cases of voter intimidation in Alabama.

Chapter Five focuses on campaigns and initiatives spearheaded by Lowery and the SCLC around domestic policy issues. They include Lowery and the Black Leadership Forum's *Covenant for America's Future*, a call for the Republican-dominated 104<sup>th</sup> Congress to enact legislation friendly to families and the poor during its first 100 days. Central to the group's complaint over welfare reform was a call that any new policy "must strive for deliberate inclusion," as well

as encourage work, promotes good parenting and protects the interests of children. This chapter also highlight's Lowery's involvement in the People's Platform, a 1984 call for Congress to be sensitive to the needs and conditions of the poor and middle class.

Regarding international issues, Chapter Six explores how Lowery called for passage of the Anti-Apartheid Act in 1985, led a fact-finding mission to Nicaragua, worked to secure the release of American Eugene Hasenfus and criticized American policy on the issue of bombing Kosovo. He also stood with Haitian immigrants and criticized the U.S. invasion of Granada.

Chapter Seven is centered on the SCLC's commitment to fostering voter registration and voter empowerment. This includes SCLC's efforts to influence congressional redistricting and the case of the "Black Belt Three" from Perry County, Alabama. A major event was the 1982 march that began in Pickens County, Alabama, to highlight the unjust treatment of activists Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman over voting fraud charges. The campaign, which triumphantly ended at the nation's capital just days before Congress reauthorized the Voting Rights Act, encompassed four months and 1,500 miles. The march through key strategic cities and five states generated considerable publicity along the way. Also, the 1995 re-enactment of the Selma to Montgomery March, which stimulated broad media attention, as well as a blistering attack on the Supreme Court's 1995 damaging redistricting decision in *Shaw v. Reno*,<sup>4</sup> were also explored, as well as the *People to People* voter registration tours,<sup>5</sup> a renewal of successful voter boosting campaigns of the 1960s.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Pildes and Richard G. Niemi, "Expressive Harms, 'Bizarre Districts,' and Voting Rights: Evaluating Election District Appearances After *Shaw v. Reno*," *Michigan Law Review*, Volume 92 No. 3 (December 1993) under "Settings," <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1289795> [accessed February 2, 2012].

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Freedom Movement, "Fulfilling the Dream: Forty Years after the most Ambitious Civil Rights Campaign in the North," <http://cfm40.middlebury.edu/node/35?PHPSESSID=3f9e6c39f629d77640af0160acf5f57d> [accessed February 12, 2012].

Chapter Eight focuses on Lowery and the SCLC's highly controversial role as the lead non-Muslim organization in the Million Man March. The chapter details how the SCLC became involved, as well as Lowery's "Three Sunbeams," his stated reasoning for explaining the rationale behind the Christian organization's presence at the Muslim initiated event. It also addresses SCLC's role in promoting the march, how the SCLC leader maintained separation – while at the same time being intricately involved – during the weekend's events, as well as Lowery's address at the march itself.

Chapter Nine inspects the SCLC's work in the fight to maintain affirmative action and the important role it played in the life chances of African-Americans, the poor and other marginalized people, including the Seminole Freedmen. The organization's criticism of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 1984 Hunt Valley decision is examined. In addition, the study will explore the results of the 1984 Task Force on Food Assistance and Lowery's reaction to Attorney General Edwin Meese's<sup>6</sup> interpretation of the findings. The SCLC board of directors' resolution decrying racist AT&T cartoons, as well as allegations of corporate discrimination against a host of companies and local governments, also comprise the chapter.

Chapter Ten scrutinizes Lowery's role in supporting the empowerment of female leaders and the pivotal role of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., organized during the Lowery administration, and its leader, Evelyn Gibson Lowery. Several of the key institutional staple SCLC events, including the annual Drum Major for Justice Awards Banquet, which has featured a plethora of national and international freedom fighters in business, politics, entertainment, education and other areas impacting civil rights and social justice, are explored. The women's organization's erection of monuments honoring both civil rights heroes and 'sheroes', its role in kick-starting the

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<sup>6</sup> Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University, "Edwin Meese III, Distinguished Visiting Fellow" Hoover Institution Stanford University, <http://www.hoover.org/fellows/10057> [ accessed February 20, 2012].

Bozeman-Wilder campaign, as well as its mentoring and computer training programs, are detailed. This chapter also examines the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s role in exposing the epidemic of AIDS in the black community and work in support of South Africa's quest for freedom, as well as President Lowery's support of women in the role as leaders.

Chapter Eleven situates Lowery in the context of his legacy as leader of the SCLC from 1977-'97. It explores his triumphs and controversial positions, his willingness to confront his government over both domestic and international positions and issues he felt compromised both black Americans and people of color across the Diaspora. It also interrogates his willingness to take risks, to provide space for women to exert agency, as well as his ability to provide financial stability to the organization. Finally, the chapter looks at Lowery from the vantage point of his artfulness in utilizing the media to expound the mission and key initiatives of the SCLC and the resulting impact.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The principal research method used in this study includes oral interviews, historic data housed in the archives of the Auburn Avenue Research Library, the Martin Luther King Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Georgia State University and the *Southern Patriot*, the news organ of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). SCLC's historical documents utilized include news releases, position papers, correspondences, organizational magazines, public service announcements, board of director's documents, video footage and campaign brochures. The oral interviews featured former SCLC staff persons, former SCLC executives whose careers spanned the tenure of several SCLC presidents, and key external observers, including journalists who covered the organization. Each contributor had specific insight about the organization and its strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. Interviewed were C.T. Vivian, former di-

rector of chapters and affiliates; Andrew Young, former King confidante and long-time SCLC executive director; Fred D. Taylor, director of chapters and affiliates during much of the Lowery administration; Brenda Davenport, former SCLC Youth Director and Director of Community Outreach; Stephen Muhammad, local leader of the Nation of Islam, Stephanie Parker-Weaver, long-time director of the Mississippi unit of the SCLC, scholar/activist Jo Freeman, former SCLC/SCOPE worker and feminist scholar-activist, and John Blake, former civil rights reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. In addition to foundational literature, the oral interviews are buttressed by newspaper articles from throughout the 20-year period Lowery led the organization, including *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, *Jet*, *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and numerous other periodicals and dozens of electronic media reports.

The study includes data from the Georgia State University's Southern Regional Council (SRC) collection, personal artifacts collected by the author from various activists and campaigns, the Auburn Avenue Research Library and the archives at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Non-Violent Social Change. The study also includes a broad range of primary source evidence from my personal collection developed during my tenure as the SCLC's national communications director and editor of the SCLC National Magazine. These sources include a collection of organizational news releases, public service announcements, photographs, brochures, flyers, public statements by Lowery, position papers and other archival materials.

#### **1.4 Scope of Study**

The scope of this project focused on the impact of the SCLC under Joseph E. Lowery from 1977-1997, with particular emphasis on the second half of his reign. This study contains minimal comparisons between the presidencies of King and Lowery, simply because King was a

seminal figure in American history who achieved both coverage and notoriety that no other world civil rights leader acquired, either before or since. Limited attention was also paid to Ralph David Abernathy, who served a nine-year term as the organization's second president. During the period from 1968 through 1977, the SCLC suffered numerous defections of key staff (Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, James Bevel, C. T. Vivian), as Abernathy struggled to find his own voice as the organization's leader, while keeping the fractured group focused on its central mission, *To Redeem the Soul of America*,<sup>7</sup> in the midst of changing times. This research, however, is principally focused on the Lowery regime and its impact, situated time-wise during an era when the nation and the federal government had largely turned a cold shoulder to the furtherance of opportunities and entitlements for minorities and the poor.

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<sup>7</sup> Hilda Raye Tompkins, "To Redeem the Soul of America: The Leadership Challenges Martin Luther King, Jr., Faced and Managed as Leaders of a Social Movement," (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2009).

## 2 Chapter Two: Background and Early Biography

Joseph Echols Lowery must be viewed in context with the three other key black Alabama ministers central to both the development of Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the elevation of the non-violent black struggle for justice and equality that mushroomed from the mid-1950s through the late 1960s. In many ways, the state where Lowery, King, Abernathy and Shuttlesworth met and bonded was at the heart of the nation's struggle to overcome centuries of Jim Crow practices and de jure segregation. Perhaps more blatantly than any other state, Alabama fought fiercely to maintain the status quo of tripartite oppression on a variety of fronts. For instance, standing where former Confederate President Jefferson Davis stood in the capitol in Montgomery 102 years earlier, Governor George Wallace defiantly declared Alabama as "this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland,"<sup>8</sup> during his 1963 inauguration address. Moments later, he infamously proclaimed "I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny in the door of the school yards and announce segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,"<sup>9</sup> in defiance of federal laws. Alabama was also famous for its various versions of its "sundown" signs that were posted on county roads across the state declaring "Nigger Don't Let the Sun Go Down on You in This Town."<sup>10</sup> The state's marquee city, Birmingham, a bustling steel center, was often referred to as "Bombingham" because of the regularity of explosives bombs set off in black neighborhoods to intimidate its citizens. In open defiance of the U.S. Supreme Court, the city chose to close 38 public

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<sup>8</sup> Matt Okarmus, "Alabama ceremony marks anniversary of Davis inauguration" *USA Today*, February 19, 2009, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-02-19-alabama-davis\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-02-19-alabama-davis_N.htm) [accessed February 18, 2012].

<sup>9</sup> Alabama Department of Archives and History. "The 1963 Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace, January 13, 1963." [http://www.archives.alabama.gov/govs\\_list/inauguralspeech.html](http://www.archives.alabama.gov/govs_list/inauguralspeech.html) [accessed February 18, 2012].

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Dawidoff, "Race in the South in the Age of Obama," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/magazine/28Alabama-t.html?pagewanted=all>, [accessed February 16, 2011].

playgrounds, four golf courses and eight swimming pools instead of sharing the spaces with its black citizens. In 1963, King declared the city “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States.”<sup>11</sup> In Mobile, generally considered less confrontational and openly racist than Birmingham and Montgomery, Ku Klux Klan leader E.C. Barnard challenged racial moderate Joseph Langan in 1957 on the platform “white supremacy now and forever.”<sup>12</sup>

Joseph Echols Lowery was born to Leroy and Dora Lowery in Huntsville, Alabama, on October 6, 1921. Leroy Lowery, whose family hailed from Madison County, was the owner of a sweets shop and dabbled in other businesses. Doris Lowery, also from Alabama, was a teacher. The couple also had a daughter, Dora, three years after the birth of Joseph. Although not the son of a preacher, Lowery, like King, was the scion of privileged parents. Raised in both Huntsville and Chicago, he went on to earn his bachelor’s in sociology at Payne College and his Master’s of Divinity at Payne Theological Seminary, both in Birmingham. He would later return to Payne to teach English, after majoring in sociology. “They couldn’t find anyone else, he chuckled.”<sup>13</sup>

Lowery remembered his first encounter with racism when as a youngster he was called “nigger” by a policeman who hit him in the stomach with a billy club while leaving his father’s sweets shop when he was 12 years old in Huntsville, AL.<sup>14</sup> An upset Lowery ran home to get his father’s gun, only to be met by his father, who “stopped him from doing something very foolish.” The incident, coupled with the hurdles he saw his father endure from a racist system, helped to convince him that his life’s work would involve addressing what W.E. B. DuBois

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<sup>11</sup>S. Mintz, “America in Ferment: The Tumultuous 1960s, Bombingham,” *The New York Times*, 2007, under “Digital History,” [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article\\_display.cfm?HHID=365](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=365)) [accessed February 7, 2011].

<sup>12</sup> University of South Alabama, “Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama,” U.S. Civil Rights Exhibit, <http://www.southalabama.edu/archives/html/exhibit/crm/crmexhibit.htm> [accessed February 18, 2012].

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Lowery, interview by author, April 7, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Kathy Mitchell, “The Lowerys: A Legacy of Love,” *Atlanta Good Life*, November 2003, 12-20

called the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the color line.<sup>15</sup> Intent on becoming a lawyer early on, Lowery instead found himself drawn to the ministry. After early doubts by his father, he eventually gained his blessings.

From 1952-'61, Lowery pastored the Warren Street United Methodist Church in relatively low-key Mobile, where he spearheaded negotiations that led to the peaceful integration of the bus system. Lowery was the oldest of the four Alabama leaders, all of whom were married by 1957 when they helped form the SCLC. Quieter and less gregarious than his colleagues, yet well respected, Lowery served as administrative assistant to Bishop Golden of the United Methodist Church, in Nashville, Tennessee, 1961-64.<sup>16</sup> For the next four years, he served in a variety of leadership capacities with the United Methodist Church in Nashville. Given the option of heading up a special commission on Religion and Race, or move to Atlanta to pastor Central United Methodist Church, he chose the pastorate.<sup>17</sup> Named chairman of the SCLC board of directors in 1967, ten years after the SCLC's founding, Lowery assumed the pulpit at Central two months after King's assassination.

Abernathy, the folksy, southern preacher, grew up the son of a farmer in rural Marengo County, Alabama. Affable and engaging, by 1957 he had led First Baptist Church of Montgomery, one of the largest black churches in the nation, for almost five years. President of the Montgomery Baptist Minister's Alliance when the 1955 bus boycott unfolded, he also summoned the first meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) at King's Dexter

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<sup>15</sup> Maulana Karenga, "Du Bois and the Question of the Color Line: Race and Class in the Age of Globalization," *The Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy Online*, Winter/Spring 2003, 141-160.

<sup>16</sup> "Bishop Charles Golden at United Methodist," *Prescott Courier* (Arizona), April 25, 1975, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=886&dat=19750425&id=ladMAAAAIBAJ&sjid=X1ADAAAIBAJ&pg=7143,5890349> [accessed April 13, 2012].

<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1987), 325.

Avenue Baptist Church.<sup>18</sup> He would go down in history as King's right hand man and best friend.

Born in Alabama's Mount Meigs, Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham was less polished than the others,<sup>19</sup> yet more confrontational than, and perhaps as bold as any of the movement's nonviolent leaders. Pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham since 1953, Shuttlesworth co-founded the Alabama Christian Human Rights Movement (ACHRM) in 1956 following the state's move to outlaw the NAACP. Brazen and defiant, he was the central black activist figure in the city commandeered by Public Safety Commissioner Bull Conner, the nation's poster child for white racism and the tripartite system of oppression.<sup>20</sup> Wading into a mob determined to prevent integration, Shuttlesworth was badly beaten and his wife stabbed while trying to enroll their children in order to desegregate a school in 1957.<sup>21</sup> Shuttlesworth's home was bombed numerous times.

King, a native of Atlanta, was catapulted to international fame as the spokesman of the Montgomery Improvement Association and the 381-day bus boycott inspired by the defiance of NAACP investigator Rosa Parks,<sup>22</sup> who previously had organized what the *Chicago Defender* called "the strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade."<sup>23</sup> The newly minted pas-

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<sup>18</sup> David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Morrow Publisher, 1986), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954- '63*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 187-188.

<sup>20</sup> William Nunnelle, Alabama Department of Archives and History, "T. Eugene 'Bull' Conner" under "Alabama Moments in American History," University of Alabama Press, 70, 1991, [Accessed April 1, 2011], <http://www.alabamamoments.state.al.us/sec62.html>

<sup>21</sup> Sybil C. Mitchell, "For Courage, Few Like Fred Shuttlesworth," *Tri-State Defender*, October 6, 2011 <http://tri-statedefenderonline.com/articlelive/articles/6732/1/For-courage-few-like-Fred-Shuttlesworth/Page1.html> , [accessed February 4, 2012].

<sup>22</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement, from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, (New York: Alfred Knop, 2010) 3-39.

<sup>23</sup> McGuire, *Dark End of the Street*, xvii, 13

tor of silk-stocking Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,<sup>24</sup> King was a newcomer to Montgomery, and the youngest of the four at 26 years of age.

Lowery, speaking at the SCLC's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary convention in Atlanta in 2007, recalled:

Each of us were leading movements that began around bussing. We would meet up about once a month in Montgomery. I'd drive up about four hours from Mobile, at 10 o'clock and get there. Somebody later made the suggestion that we call them the all-south wide meetings. C.K. Steele from Tallahassee, Kelley Miller Smith in Nashville, Simmie Harvey in New Orleans, (and) Shane Hensley, (a) longshoreman, from New Orleans. It was a great fellowship. One of the things that was so strong about the beginning of this organization was that we loved each other. We had a comradeship, we had a friendship; we had a fellowship. I'll tell you who else used to meet with us, Dr. C.G. Gomillion, faculty at Tuskegee.<sup>25</sup> He dropped out because the rest of us were preachers and we'd spend the first two hours of the meeting rehashing our sermons and telling stories about our Sunday crowds. But he was a great intellectual.<sup>26</sup>

Years before the Birmingham, Selma and Albany movements propelled the non-violent, direct action methodology to the forefront of the civil rights movement; the four Alabama preachers began forming an alliance that would change a nation. Others, certainly, were also critical, including Tallahassee's Reverend C.K. Steele, Baton Rouge's Reverend T. J. Jemison, Nashville's Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Atlanta's Reverend Samuel Williams and a trio of Northerners connected to *In Friendship*.<sup>27</sup> The four Alabama preachers, however -- Ralph David Abernathy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth and Joseph Echols Lowery -- were key players in the formation of the south-wide organization that would evolve into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Quite different in style and demeanor, yet knit to-

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<sup>24</sup> Deric Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend: Unsung Heroes and 'Sheroes' who Marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Decatur, GA: Gilliard Communications, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Lowery, address at 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of SCLC, Atlanta, June 4, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> C.G. Gomillion, "Civic Democracy and the Problems of Registration and Voting of Negroes in the South," *HeinOnline*. 18 *Lawyers Guild Review*, 149 (1958)  
<http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/guild18&div=44&id=&page=>  
[accessed April 10, 2012]

<sup>27</sup> D. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 84.

gether in spirit and desire to transform the fortunes and life-chances of black southerners, each served as leader of a protest movement in their respective cities. Each of the four Alabama preachers would remain involved and committed to the pursuit of black equality and also served as president of the SCLC. King and Abernathy died relatively young. Shuttlesworth lived until 2011 and witnessed the swearing in of America's first black president. Lowery, the oldest of the four, survived them all.

Lowery was chairman of the SCLC's board of directors for a decade before the assassination of Dr. King in 1968. It was during this time that the United Methodist preacher earned his reputation as a sound thinker and an effective administrator. Much like Abernathy, however, Lowery rarely, if ever, publicly challenged King. A notable exception, however, occurred when King urged the SCLC to officially oppose the war. "I don't think SCLC is structured to go into this kind of complex, difficult and confusing area," he said.<sup>28</sup> Shuttlesworth, on the other hand, chastised King for the SCLC's slow movement to kick-start its highly anticipated Crusade for Citizenship and openly challenged King over his decision to suspend the boycott in Birmingham.<sup>29</sup>

Nominated by predecessor Abernathy, Lowery was elected the SCLC's third chief executive at the group's 20<sup>th</sup> annual convention, in 1977.<sup>30</sup> His selection came after a negotiated settlement that offered field general Hosea Williams the post of executive director. The appointment allowed Williams to focus on "reinvigorating the direct action role of SCLC,"<sup>31</sup> which he felt the organization had excelled at during the sixties, yet retreated from during the seventies.

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<sup>28</sup> Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens and London: William Morrow, 1987), 272.

<sup>29</sup> D. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 256-257.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1987) 323.

<sup>31</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 324.

Lowery began his administration with a fledgling staff of four -- two of whom were funded by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) – a paltry organizational income of \$100,000 and a debt load of \$20,000.<sup>32</sup> The debut of Lowery, who had chaired the SCLC’s board since 1967, coincided with the early days of the U.S. presidency of Georgian Jimmy Carter, who rather quickly backpedaled on his campaign promises to attack poverty. Lowery’s inauguration also came five years after black nationalists had supplanted integrationists as the dominant black force, according to Marable, who points to the 1972 Northlake conference as evidence.<sup>33</sup>

“We’ve got a claim on you!” thundered Lowery at the Atlanta convention following his 1977 election, in a strong, confident manner that helped dispel thoughts he might be too scholarly and conservative for the job.<sup>34</sup> “We might have to pull out our marchin’ shoes. We’re going to telephone you, Mr. Carter, we’re going to telegraph you, and if (they) don’t reach you, the tramp, tramp, tramp of our feet will reach you! We’ve got a claim on the White House. We’re not going to lose by default.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus began the two-decade tenure of Lowery, during which he would fiercely spar at times with Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr. and Clinton, for the next twenty years to varying degrees as SCLC president, then fiercely challenge President George Walker Bush after he left office. I detail how Lowery and the SCLC harangued Carter over his commitment to reducing poverty, Clinton on his response to the burning of the black churches and Reagan to a myriad of issues (slashing food stamps and families with dependent children, inner city neighborhoods, Compre-

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<sup>32</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 326.

<sup>33</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond, 1945-2006*, (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1984) 137-138.

<sup>34</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 327

<sup>35</sup> IBID

hensive Employment and Training Act jobs, student loans) that signaled a peeling back of some civil rights gains.

After retiring from the helm of the SCLC in 1997, Lowery continued to confront and chastise President George Walker Bush and his compassionate capitalism,<sup>36</sup> even at the funeral of Coretta Scott King, to the chagrin of many.<sup>37</sup> Never one to hold his tongue – nor follow the crowd – Lowery, who left SCLC and took over as chair of the Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda,<sup>38</sup> continued to stay on the national scene. An early supporter of long-shot candidate Barack Obama – unlike Andrew Young and John Lewis, who backed Hillary Clinton -- Lowery went on to be awarded with the honor of providing the benediction at the inauguration of the nation’s first black president in January of 2008.<sup>39</sup> Though presented the prestigious presidential medal in 2010, Lowery, while fully supportive, remained willing to criticize Obama on issues he disagreed on with the first-term president.

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth R. Hoover, 1987. “The Rise of Conservative Capitalism: Ideological Tensions within the Reagan and Thatcher Governments,” *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 2 [April], 245-268.

<sup>37</sup> *MSNBC*, “Lowery Speaks 'Truth to Power' at King Funeral,” February 8, 2006, [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11239857/ns/msnbc\\_tv-the\\_ed\\_show/t/lowery-speaks-truth-power-king-funeral/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11239857/ns/msnbc_tv-the_ed_show/t/lowery-speaks-truth-power-king-funeral/) [accessed February 11, 2011].

<sup>38</sup> Social Action Support Services, “The People's Agenda to Improve the Quality of Governance,” 2012, <http://www.gcpagenda.org/> [accessed February 12, 2011].

<sup>39</sup> Amy Kovak, “Transcript of Rev. Lowery’s Inaugural Benediction,” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2009, under “Inauguration Watch: News and notes from the inauguration of the nation's 44th president” [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/inauguration-watch/2009/01/transcript\\_of\\_rev\\_lowerys\\_inau.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/inauguration-watch/2009/01/transcript_of_rev_lowerys_inau.html) [accessed June 30, 2011].

### 3 Chapter Three: Literature Review

Numerous insightful and expansive books have been written about the development and emergence of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the impact and influence of its iconic founding president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this chapter, I will show that none of the three most respected King historians however, examine Joseph Echols Lowery in any significant capacity beyond that of a co-founder of the organization and a board chairman. One author, Thomas Peake, a historian from King's College in Bristol, Tennessee, does chronicle the early years of the Lowery presidency following his succession of Ralph David Abernathy in 1977. His work, though commendable, ends in the mid-eighties and thus fails to extend to Lowery's finest hours as a tactician, leader, spokesman and guardian of the rights and fortunes of a people.

Both Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-'63*, and David Garrow's epic *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*,<sup>40</sup> were lauded with Pulitzer Prizes for their exhaustive, profound historical perspectives of the King years during the 1960s. However, Adam Fairclough's *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, is seen by many as the most definitive history of the SCLC. His place as the pre-eminent SCLC historian, it would seem, is in part due to the fact that while Garrow and Branch place significant focus on King's personal life and alleged affairs, Fairclough, still focusing on King, rather than the SCLC, does zero in more on the mission and sheds increased light on the strengths of the brilliantly flawed key lieutenants who comprised the organization's brain trust.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> D. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*.

<sup>41</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 165-169.

A professor of American History at East Anglia University in England, Fairclough, much like Garrow and Branch,<sup>42</sup> traces the SCLC's origins to the Montgomery Improvement Association, the 1955 movement that spanned 381 days. For example, Fairclough explains some of the factors that led to a rise in black frustration following long awaited gains. He points to the Truman decision to integrate the military in 1948, Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Commission and the Supreme Court's 1944 decision to end the all-white primary, as well as the *Brown v. Topeka* decision, as precursors to black angst over mistreatment by black soldiers after their return from World War II.<sup>43</sup>

Noting the unique influence of ministers over not only their congregations, but throughout black communities in the South, Fairclough paints the picture of a people and a nation ripe for change when successful boycotts against segregated transportation systems sparked the formation of the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Non-Violent Integration, first convened in Atlanta, January 10-11, 1957.<sup>44</sup> Following a February meeting in New Orleans, the final name change to Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the adoption of the motto *To Redeem the Soul of America*,<sup>45</sup> were both voted on and embraced at the group's initial annual convention, held in Montgomery, in August of 1957.

Fairclough does explore the organization from its formation through the Abernathy years, including what he terms its embryonic, or "fallow years" of 1957-'59; its struggles in the Albany and Chicago campaigns; its breakthrough in Birmingham, its issues with the black power movement, and its efforts to mobilize the poor and disenfranchised. Much like Garrow and

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<sup>42</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 172-205.

<sup>43</sup> The Authentic History Center, "Civil Rights In The Postwar Era: 1946-1953," 2011, <http://www.authentichistory.com/1946-1960/8-civilrights/1946-1953/>, The Authentic History Center, [accessed January 30, 2012].

<sup>44</sup> A, Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 32.

Branch, Fairclough relies on SCLC data, documents from Howard University,<sup>46</sup> including the Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Library of Congress, Martin Luther King Jr., Center for Non-Violent Social Change, FBI documents, Fellowship of Reconciliation Archives and NAACP Papers.<sup>47</sup> He also – clearly more than Garrow and Branch – takes the time and effort to delve more deeply into the minds and lives of King’s lieutenants, including Andrew Young, C.T. Vivian, Jesse Jackson, James Bevel, Hosea Williams, Fred Shuttlesworth and Wyatt Walker. Even still, Fairclough, too, reverts to chronicling the exploits of King on virtually every page of his 516-page account, often at the expense of other key trailblazers.

However, Fairclough does – consistent with Branch and Garrow – make cursory mention of Lowery in his role as leader of the Mobile Movement, noting that he began to meet with King, Abernathy, C.K. Steele, and Shuttlesworth in Montgomery before the official formation of the SCLC.<sup>48</sup> Fairclough also points out that Lowery replaced A.L. Davis as the SCLC’s Second Vice President, as well as his role as a plaintiff in the three-million dollar lawsuit against Abernathy, Lowery, Shuttlesworth and others over the appeal letter in the *New York Times*.<sup>49</sup> He recognizes Lowery as an influential minister in Birmingham who clashed with Fred Shuttlesworth near the end of Shuttlesworth’s tenure as leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHMR). He also notes that as chair of the SCLC board, Lowery -- like most of the SCLC leadership – disagreed with King over his controversial challenge to U.S. involvement in the Viet Nam war. Like Garrow and Branch, Fairclough is primarily a King biographer and a SCLC and African-American historian. Sadly, however, Fairclough joins Garrow and Branch in

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Johnson, interview by John H. Britton, *Stride Toward Freedom*, September 6, 1967.

<sup>47</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 407.

<sup>48</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 33

<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., and the Global Freedom Struggle, “New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254 (1964)” The King Center, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc\\_new\\_york\\_times\\_co\\_v\\_sullivanm\\_376\\_us\\_254\\_1964/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_new_york_times_co_v_sullivanm_376_us_254_1964/) [accessed August 20, 2011].

a failure to assess, explore and critique the climate, path and methodology that Lowery successfully navigated enroute to 20 years as leader of an organization that most had pronounced dead and buried three decades earlier. Contrary to dire predictions and death knells, the SCLC bounced back to be remarkably strong and well-respected, especially during the second half of Lowery's presidency.

In terms of his command of major issues, his mastery of the press and his ability to maintain financial stability during rough times, Lowery's 20-year tenure was much more effective and impactful than Abernathy's, which probably never had a real chance to succeed following his monumental predecessor. There has been, however, limited substantial scholarly literature produced about the tenure of Dr. Ralph David Abernathy. Abernathy, of course, raised his own firestorm of controversy with his autobiography, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*,<sup>50</sup> which portrays King as a flawed, haunted leader during his later years and left Abernathy – in the eyes of many – as a pariah and a turncoat who soiled the reputation of his mentor and friend. According to Henry Hampton, executive producer of *Eyes on the Prize, America's Civil Right Years*, “It is sadly ironic that the disclosures will almost surely do more damage to Mr. Abernathy himself than to the reputation of King.”<sup>51</sup>

Thomas Peake, a professor at Kings College in Tennessee, has written perhaps the only extensive post- Abernathy exploration of the organization, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the 1980s*.<sup>52</sup> Peake's scholarly effort bridges the gap from King, through Abernathy and to the beginning of the leadership reign

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<sup>50</sup> Ralph Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> Henry Hampton, “Dr. King's Best Friend,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/29/books/dr-king-s-best-friend.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> [accessed January 31, 2012].

<sup>52</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 323.

of Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, which, provides a rather thin treatment of the mid-1980s. Surprisingly, beyond Peake's volume, published in 1987, there have been no other substantial scholarly books written about the SCLC and the organization's metamorphosis during the Lowery years of 1977-1997. For that reason, there exists a gaping hole in the literature about one of the nation's most significant African-American grass roots civil rights organizations.

From its founding in 1957, the SCLC struggled to gain traction around its professed galvanizing issue, voter registration. Its initial staff consisted of longtime NAACP official Ella Baker, who came from New York to Atlanta to join the new organization that had neither an office, equipment, or in reality, a viable plan. Frequently patronized and disrespected due to her sex in the midst of the male-dominated preacher circle, Baker nevertheless refused to be silenced. Said Baker, in 1974:

I had no ambition to be (let's call it) executive director. If I had had any, I knew it was not to be. And why do I say that? Two reasons. One, I was a female. The other, I guess, a combination of female and non-minister, plus the kind of personality differences that existed between me and the Rev. Dr. King. I was not a person to be enamored of anyone.<sup>53</sup>

Ella Baker strongly insisted that the SCLC must move toward "developing leaders," facilitate coordinated action by local groups and build a "vital movement of non-violent direct action against discrimination." King himself acknowledged that two and a half years in, "we have not scratched the surface in the all-important area of voting." The resulting pressures to produce from both inside the organization and the media moved King to the decision that he had to leave Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1959 and return to Atlanta to begin to build the SCLC full-time.

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<sup>53</sup> Ella Baker, interviewed by Eugene Walker, *Southern Oral History Program, Interview G-0007*, September 4, 1974.

The group's first broad-based campaign was the overly ambitious Crusade for Citizenship, a plan designed to enroll new voters in more than 20 cities across the South.<sup>54</sup> The SCLC had taken over the citizenship program from the Highlander Folk School and placed it under the direction of Septima Poinsette Clark, a former educator from Charleston. The Crusade -- despite laudable efforts by Baker -- lacked promotion due to a weak infrastructure and the fact the SCLC did not fully grasp the ramifications of the illiteracy of black Southerners. As a result, it proved to be a big disappointment, registering a pittance of the five million voters King mentioned as a goal in the summer of 1957.<sup>55</sup>

In 1960, a team consisting of Lawrence Reddick and Atlantan Samuel Williams, Lowery, Shuttlesworth and Abernathy and King, serving as an ad hoc member, were charged with defining and initiating the group's "*Future Program*."<sup>56</sup> The team was tasked with "developing a vital movement of nonviolent direct mass action against racial discrimination," according to SCLC's first staff person, Ella Baker. The goal was to "jump-start," or regroup, the struggling SCLC. Three of the four, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth and Lowery, were also the targets of a protracted, \$3 million lawsuit filed by the Montgomery Board of Commissioners, *The New York Times v. Sullivan*. The landmark suit, filed against the four signers of the ad and the newspaper, was the result of a March 1960 advertisement entitled *Heed Their Rising Voices*. The advertisement, with the message crafted by Bayard Rustin and entertainer/activist Harry Belafonte,<sup>57</sup> was placed in the *Times* in defense of an Alabama indictment charging King with perjury. Branch details how as a result of the judgments against them four grueling years later, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth and Lo-

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute. "Chapter 10: The Expanding Struggle," Crusade for Citizenship. [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/chapter\\_10\\_the\\_expanding\\_struggle/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/chapter_10_the_expanding_struggle/) [accessed January 20, 2012].

<sup>55</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 50-51.

<sup>57</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 288-289.

wery each had automobiles sold at auction and “Lowery disclosed to his colleagues that he stood to lose between \$150,000 and \$200,000.”<sup>58</sup> Fortunately for the defendants, the verdict was overturned in 1964.

According to Branch’s *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-’63*,<sup>59</sup> King displays the staunch resolve that would serve him well as head of the SCLC when as a 17-year-old, he defied his father’s command to break off his friendship with fellow Morehouse man and budding preacher Larry Williams. The problem? According to Branch, it was Williams’ devotion to the senior King’s arch rival, William Holmes Borders. King also refused to yield to his father’s demands that he reject membership in an interracial alliance of black and white collegians in Atlanta, perhaps a foreshadowing of his extensive reliance on whites to build the organization during its heyday, including fundraisers, advisers, organizers and students. Branch provides mesmerizing insight into the meteoric rise of King and his introductions to and guidance by seasoned pacifist veterans Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levinson and James Lawson.

This reader found captivating Rustin’s brief visit to Montgomery, yet his influential impact on the bus boycott as adviser and strategist. Later he and Levinson’s raised considerable funds, he wrote position papers for the Prayer Pilgrimage<sup>60</sup> and subsequent campaigns, while sparring with President Dwight Eisenhower and massaging egos of other powerful leaders (NAACP President Roy Wilkins).<sup>61</sup> Branch also explains the critical role played by organizing principles Stanley Levison, Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin of *In Friendship*,<sup>62</sup> who conceived of a south-wide organization that became the SCLC while in New York.

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<sup>58</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 579-580.

<sup>59</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 213.

<sup>61</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 95-96.

<sup>62</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 209.

By the late 1950s, conditions were improving race-wise, as some black leaders were becoming more visible to federal leadership, even garnering invitations to the White House. Yet, blatant intimidation and horrific acts still occurred routinely. One such incident was the lynching of Mack Parker, in Mississippi.<sup>63</sup> Accused of raping a pregnant white woman, he was stolen from the jail and hanged, never to receive justice, despite confessions of three perpetrators controlled by 60 FBI agents. The assailants were found not guilty by an all-white jury that would not convict.

Branch's interpretation of the meetings between King, NAACP President Roy Wilkins, and Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters leader A. Phillip Randolph highlights the author's rationale behind Urban League executive Director Lester Granger's presentation to President Eisenhower of a nine-point civil rights plan. Branch also details King's exhortation to the president to respond to the moral imperatives of integration. Most revealing about Branch's telling of the June 1958 meeting, however, was Granger's admonition to the president that Negro bitterness was higher than he'd ever seen it and if Eisenhower continued to call for patience from moderate Negro leaders, more divisive, radical firebrands would soon emerge. Prophetically, the black power movement would soon take center stage.<sup>64</sup>

David Garrow's account of the King years, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, oftentimes parallels Taylor Branch's, including the authors' portrayal of the monumental 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott. Garrow, however, points out that King, in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, which gives his account of

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<sup>63</sup> Patricia Older, "FBI Reopens Mack Charles Parker Lynching," *Picayune Item*, May 9, 2009, <http://picayuneitem.com/local/x2079288107/FBI-re-opens-Mack-Charles-Parker-lynching>, [accessed May 14, 2011].

<sup>64</sup> Borgna Brunner, Elissa Haney, "Civil Rights Timeline: Milestones In the Modern Civil Rights Movement," InfoPlease, <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html>, [accessed November 7, 2011].

the boycott, noted a “crippling factionalism” in the city before the movement and “an appalling lack of unity among the leaders.” Garrow ascertains that the emphasis on Mahatmas Gandhi and non-violence evolved only after the boycott developed (due to Rustin’s influence, according to Taylor), as King said that “in the first days of the protest, none of these expressions were mentioned.”<sup>65</sup> If accurate, this would make Rustin’s long-term influence on the non-violent civil rights movement – especially the SCLC -- even more impressive. In a correspondence following King’s trip to India, white Montgomery activist Virginia Durr<sup>66</sup> shares that L. D. Reddick, one of King’s traveling companions and later his biographer, intimated in a letter that he was pleased with the trip because it made the naïve young leader see that “love alone will not cure poverty and degradation.” This new insight, Durr reasoned, would likely move King to push for increased political activity and participation.

While Branch is a story teller par excellence, Garrow pulls his audience into the thought process of a myriad of key players connected to King and the SCLC. For instance, when Dr. King borrowed a top coat from wealthy advisor Stanley Levison and forgot to return it, Levison asked for it back years later and an embarrassed King, true to his reputation, quickly responded, revealing to this reader the human frailty of the would-be world leader. When King insists on paying Levison for his many hours of strategizing and orchestrating, Levison refused, saying his skills, developed in both a “cloistered academic environment and also a commercial jungle,” were something he always wanted to use for “socially constructive ends. The liberation struggle is the most positive and rewarding area of work anyone could experience,” he said.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Garrow. *Bearing the Cross*, 72-73.

<sup>66</sup> 2000 Alabama Women’s Hall of Fame, “Virginia Foster Durr,” <http://www.awhf.org/durr.htm> [accessed October 21, 2011].

<sup>67</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 116-117.

King was impressed with President Nixon's professed commitment to civil rights and indeed, Nixon invited him in 1959 to speak to the President's Committee on Government Contracts, where the vice-president urged America to recognize that job discrimination was at its heart a "moral problem." Highly critical of Eisenhower's inaction on civil rights, yet pleased with Nixon's projected understanding and empathy, King called Nixon either genuinely sincere, or – ironically, the same thing FBI director Hoover would say about King a few years later -- "the most dangerous man in America."

Garrow, like Branch, carefully explains the early struggles of the SCLC to gain traction, including correspondence from Birmingham leader Fred Shuttlesworth insisting that "flowery speeches" weren't enough to fight the virulent segregationists in Alabama and that if the SCLC didn't get on with "the hard job of getting down and helping people," soon it would be an uphill battle just to justify the organization's existence.<sup>68</sup> The growing pressure helped push King to fire executive director John Tilley, who never left his pulpit in Baltimore to lead the SCLC full-time anyway, and commit more personal time and energy to the fledgling organization. Lam-basted by Ella Baker for what she perceived as a snail's pace movement toward "developing leaders,"<sup>69</sup> facilitating coordinated action by local groups and building a "vital movement of non-violent direct action against discrimination," King himself acknowledged that two and a half years in, "we have not scratched the surface in the all-important area of voting."<sup>70</sup> The resulting pressures to produce moved King to the decision that he had to leave Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1959 and return to Atlanta to co-pastor Ebenezer and begin to build the SCLC full-time.

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<sup>68</sup> *Bearing the Cross*, 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Bearing the Cross*, 120

<sup>70</sup> IBID

As SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) prepared to build a massive campaign in Mississippi, Garrow details growing dissent within the ranks of SNCC over the perception that the SCLC was garnering and keeping funds meant for the young organization. Pressed by new SNCC executive secretary James Forman and Ella Baker for both increased share of the funding raised in Albany and a clarification on SCLC's part regarding efforts it was taking credit for, SNCC left the September meeting in Atlanta less than satisfied.

In the fall of 1962, the SCLC embarked upon Operation Breadbasket,<sup>71</sup> an effort to force companies who benefit from black buyers to show equity in hiring and promotion. This economic empowerment initiative would eventually be seized by Jesse Jackson and provide a platform for him to later leave the SCLC and start his own organization, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. The tactic of selective buying to punish businesses that practiced discrimination against black patrons would become a key component of the campaign to break the back of Jim Crow segregation in Birmingham.

Learning from the failures of Albany, the SCLC in 1963 moved onto "Project C,"<sup>72</sup> or confrontation, in Birmingham, where the black community, red-neck Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor, and perhaps equally important, the Kennedy administration, would be expected to play pivotal roles. Pointing to the prototypical stereotype of a hateful, unmovable Southern segregationist, SCLC Executive Director Wyatt Walker said "we knew that when we came to Birmingham, that if Bull Connor was still in control, he would do something to benefit our movement." The problem was that there was mass confusion – even within the white business community – regarding who was actually in charge in Birmingham, where former Lieutenant

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<sup>71</sup> The Authentic History Center, "Civil Rights In The Postwar Era: 1946-1953," 2011, <http://www.authentichistory.com/1946-1960/8-civilrights/1946-1953/>, [accessed January 30, 2012].

<sup>72</sup> Dennis Simon, "The Civil Rights Movement, 1954-63." 2002. <http://faculty.smu.edu/dsimon/Change-Civ%20Rts.html> [accessed October 22, 2011].

Governor Al Boutwell had just been elected mayor. While many in the city – including a portion of the black community – wanted to wait and see how the moderate Boutwell responded to calls for integration and hiring of blacks, the SCLC nevertheless, pushed forward.

Calling for six specific goals that included dismissal of all previous protest charges, the establishment of a biracial committee to pursue further segregation and equal opportunity for blacks within city government, the campaign began. Due to Conner's unleashing of German Sheppard's and fire hoses on children, and marching tanks down the middle of the city as the nation and the world observed the violence, Wyatt's predictions proved to be right. Near the end of the campaign, Birmingham also proved to be the first time the SCLC had recruited young blacks en masse to leave school in droves to join their protests under the glare of the national spotlight. Utilizing children to pull parents and adults into the fray was a tactic used by Albert Turner and James Orange successfully<sup>73</sup> in Marion, Alabama, in 1965, but was still unproven, and viewed as radical, in 1963. Riding the crest of victories that began to dismantle Jim Crow and segregated restaurants, bus stations, hotels jails and other facilities in a seven-week campaign that eventually led to the passage of the monumental Civil Rights Act of 1964, King and the SCLC, despite numerous mistakes and misjudgments in Birmingham, marched onto Washington and "*I Have a Dream*" immortality.

During the same year, FBI wiretaps of communication between King and Levison convinced President Kennedy to postpone a meeting with King, thereby greasing the wheels for the long anticipated (by Randolph) March of Washington. Years later, in 1966, when non-violence was struggling to remain viable in the midst of the call for Black Power, King declined to sign the statement penned in the *New York Times* by movement leaders Whitney Young, Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins "implicitly condemning black power." Even though the black power

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<sup>73</sup> Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows*, 146.

movement was surging – and racism and white backlash right along with it – King believed it was morally wrong to condemn black power for the declining white support for the non-violent movement. “We are not interested in creating any further divisions between the civil rights organizations,” he said, though he eventually acquiesced when he also stated he “had no differences with” the statement he refused to sign.<sup>74</sup>

In conclusion, the argument is not that scholars and historians deliberately marginalized, or dismissed the post-King SCLC, but that during the 10-12 years following the iconic leader’s assassination, the grass roots organization, tripped, stumbled and fell, yet eventually regrouped and rebounded to once again become a viable force in the social justice landscape. Of those considered the most likely candidates to replace Abernathy and attempt to “right the ship” --Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson were prominently mentioned – few would have named the bespectacled Lowery, who had quietly, yet effectively, served as chairman of the board throughout the previous decade. The story of Lowery’s ascension to power, the fast-changing social and political climates he encountered at the end of the Second Reconstruction in Black America, and his battle to “rebuild the brand” of the SCLC during his 20 years as president (1977-2007), has yet to be told or fully examined.

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<sup>74</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 534.

#### 4 Chapter Four: Joseph Lowery and Domestic Affairs

In this chapter, I will show how Lowery and the SCLC consistently questioned and sought to influence domestic policy while insisting that all decisions, laws and funding should be instituted only following the consideration of how they impacted black America and the down-trodden. A Christian-based organization formed by a group of preachers, the SCLC sought to be Christ-like, paying special attention to the needs of “the least of these.”<sup>75</sup> Lowery also used his dual roles as SCLC president and National Black Leadership Forum chairman to help create and put forth two of the major political platforms aimed at protecting and improving the lives of black people around key presidential elections, the People’s Platform and the Covenant With America.

From its inception in 1909, the NAACP clearly held the role as the leading advocate and face of black progress as the pre-imminent American civil rights organization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the early 1960s, however, other groups, chiefly represented by the “Big Six,” (King, Congress of Racial Equality Founder James Farmer, SNCC President John Lewis, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organizer A. Philip Randolph and National Urban League President Roy Wilkins) began to emerge on the national scene.<sup>76</sup> And though the National Urban League, the Black Panther Party, SNCC and others at times shone brightly, the grass-roots based SCLC and its charismatic leader, Dr. King, in concert with the push for voting and civil rights, moved to the forefront as the dominant black spokesman.

Following King’s 1968 assassination and a lull for the civil rights movement through much of the next decade, Joseph Lowery, who replaced Ralph Abernathy as SCLC president in

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<sup>75</sup> BibleGateway.com “Matthew 25:31-46, NIV,” <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A31-46&version=NIV>, [accessed April 10, 2012].

<sup>76</sup> ABC News, “The Big Six, Other Civil Rights Leaders,” August 28, 2003, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129484> [accessed April 3, 2012].

1977, began to earn broad respect for his ability to evaluate, challenge and respond to the impact of both U.S. domestic and international policy on people of color. Speaking out on issues that ranged from the U.S. bombing of Kosovo, to apartheid in South Africa, to redistricting, affirmative action, hate crimes and disparities in sentencing in the U.S., Lowery met with presidents and pushed Congress, while consistently criticizing public policy. He also and called on the justice department and Supreme Court to act numerous times during his 20 years as SCLC president.

The first major national domestic initiative enacted by the SCLC was the 1968 Poor People's Campaign envisioned by King as a massive gathering a poor white, Chicano, First Nation (native Americans), black and other marginalized communities converging on the nation's capital. It started shortly following the assassination of the SCLC's iconic founding president in Memphis, April 4, 1968. The campaign, originated by Dr. King and fueled by the embattled leader's challenge to the powers-that-be to disengage from the Vietnam War-- kicked off in Marks, Mississippi, by some accounts the poorest city in America, with the Mississippi Mule Train.<sup>77</sup>

Continuing in the rich tradition of the SCLC to "*Redeem the Soul of America*" by challenging oppression and injustice wherever possible, on multiple fronts, Lowery, elected in 1977, fought what he saw as "man's inhumanity to man" on a series of fronts. For instance, Lowery led a march that year in support of the Wilmington 10,<sup>78</sup> in North Carolina.<sup>79</sup> Among the group was Ben Chavis, a student and SCLC youth coordinator at St. Augustine's College in Ra-

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<sup>77</sup> Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend*, 189-207.

<sup>78</sup> Sommer Brokaw, "Remembering the Wilmington 10: 1971 unrest focused world's attention on N.C.," *Charlotte Post*, February 9, 2011, under "news" <http://www.thecharlottepost.com/index.php?src=news&srctype=detail&category=News&refno=3348> [accessed February 26, 2012].

<sup>79</sup> "SCLC Tradition: A Review of the Past 27 Years, 1957-84," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, December/January, 1984-'85, 120-137.

leigh, arrested for arson and conspiracy. The following year, Lowery and the SCLC celebrated the King Holiday in Los Angeles by staging a “*March for Survival*” to bring to attention the struggle for equal education, justice, discrimination within schools and businesses and full employment.<sup>80</sup> The movement was repeated in several cities across the nation. In 1979, Lowery teamed with Rev. Nelson Smith and brother-in-law Rev. Harry Gibson on a fact-finding mission to Guyana following the tragic mass suicide by Jim Jones and his cult of followers, many of whom were African-Americans. As a result, the SCLC joined the National Conference of Black Churchmen to host “*A Consultation on the Implications of Jonestown for the Black Church and the Nation*”<sup>81</sup> in San Francisco, the former hometown of the People’s Temple founder James Jones. In each instance, Lowery stood for the rights and fair treatment of black and marginalized citizens, whether they were under assault domestically, or internationally by at various times demanding attention and investigation by both the media, police and elected officials.

While much of the open, abject vigilante violence of the sixties and earlier had disappeared, periodic, explosive confrontations did erupt, including two memorable ones in 1979. One such galvanizing incident, which launched Lowery into the forefront nationally in his outspoken defense of the poor, black and oppressed, involved R.B. Cottonreader. Perhaps the key member of the field staff during the Lowery years, Richard (R.B.) Cottonreader was dispatched to Decatur, Alabama, in 1979, in response to pleas for help in the case of a young black retarded man, Tommy Lee Hines, who had been accused of raping a white woman. A 26-year-old with the IQ of a seven-year-old, Hines’ capacities were so limited he had never attended public school. His attorney, family and neighbors denied the small, quiet man possessed the capability

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<sup>80</sup> James Henderson, “Angelfire,” Joseph Lowery, 2011, [http://www.angelfire.com/scifi2/jameshenderson3/new\\_page\\_42.htm](http://www.angelfire.com/scifi2/jameshenderson3/new_page_42.htm) [accessed April 8, 2012].

<sup>81</sup> Mary Sawyer, Rebecca Moore, Anthony Pinn, *The Church in People’s Temple, People’s Temple and Black Religion in America*, (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2004) 174-204.

to pull off a rape. Protesting his arrest, the SCLC set up tents in the grass near the courtyard amidst cries of outside agitators, soon to be followed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which burned a cross in front of the town's civic center August 14, further flaming anxiety and tension.<sup>82</sup> As threats and media attention increased, both Klan numbers and SCLC presence swelled, with Lowery calling for a June 9 protest march that drew 1,500 activists, including Congressman Mickey Leland, Congressman Fauntroy, Bishop Phillip R. Cousins, Johnnie Ford, as well as two rows of armed National Guardsmen and about 50 robed members of the KKK. "It was the biggest movement Joe Lowery ever had," Cottonreader, known as "Fearless Cottonreader,"<sup>83</sup> said proudly, after spending four and a half months in jail on the charge of "rioting to resist process," in defense of Hines.

Lowery asked the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division to send FBI agents back in and reopen the case against the KKK for the confrontation in Decatur, Alabama, following new disclosures by Klan members more than four years after the May 26, 1979 battle, in which gunfire was exchanged and two marchers and two Klansmen were injured.<sup>84</sup> Lowery's own wife, Evelyn, who was driving in the demonstration, narrowly missed being shot as two bullets pierced her automobile during the height of the confrontation. No mention was made of the fact that the march, sponsored by the non-violent Southern Christian Leadership Conference, featured an exchange of gunfire between the marchers and the Klan, several of whom later came forward to express an interest in testifying.

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<sup>82</sup> "Nation: Scottsboro Revisited?" *Time Magazine*, October 16, 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,916421,00.html> [accessed October 16, 2011].

<sup>83</sup> Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend*, 133-139.

<sup>84</sup> "Black Leader Urges Inquiry into Klan Disclosures," *The New York Times*, July 5, 1983, under Section A, 11. <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/07/05/us/black-leader-urges-inquiry-into-klan-disclosures.html>, [accessed September 12, 2011].

The Decatur clash was much less tragic than the one that occurred just four months later, which was set off when the white extremists drove through a rally in the Morningside Homes neighborhood in Greensboro, North Carolina, where members of the Communist Workers Party were carrying signs and chanting “Death to the Klan, Death to the Klan.” Five members of the CWP, including four white men and a black woman, were killed in the assault.<sup>85</sup> Lowery, who said those charged would not have committed the crime had they not “thought they could get away with it,”<sup>86</sup> called on the President Jimmy Carter to “personally speak out against the Klan” and order a “major offensive” against the hooded group following the November 3, 1979, KKK shootings.<sup>87</sup>

In 1980, Lowery and the SCLC weathered the disappointment of Congress’ failure to make founding president Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a national holiday. Bouncing back, the organization, primarily on the inspiration of Mrs. Lowery and the newly formed SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. (Women’s Organization Movement for Equality Now), sponsored the first Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Awards Dinner in Atlanta, soon to become annual the Drum Major Awards Dinner, an event that became an annual SCLC marquee event.<sup>88</sup>

A 1982 initiative centered on the renewing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 found Lowery and other leading civil rights leaders threatening a scaled down “Part II” of the 1968 encampment known as Resurrection City. The SCLC chief promised 50-100 protesters would ar-

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<sup>85</sup> Civil Rights Greensboro, “Anger, Shock, Hopelessness, Fear Expressed; Some Distrust Justice,” November 19, 1980, <http://library.uncg.edu/dp/crg/item.aspx?i=1069> [accessed October 13, 2011].

<sup>86</sup> Singe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir : People's History of the Greensboro*, (London and New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002), 250

<sup>87</sup> “Hearings Start for 14 in Klan Rally Killings,” *Tri-City Herald*, November 4, 1979, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1951&dat=19791104&id=5N4qAAAAIBAJ&sjid=JYgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2928,1847071> [accessed June 1, 2012].

<sup>88</sup> Carolyn Young, interview by author, on Evelyn Gibson Lowery and the impact of the *SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.*, April 20, 2011

rive in the nation's capitol June 23 with the express purpose of pitching tents to draw attention to their quest for jobs and justice.<sup>89</sup> Lowery laid out a plan for demonstrators to march through major towns and drive through rural areas all the way from Alabama to Washington. Beginning with a 13-day trek across Alabama, they marched towards Washington, gaining supporters and media attention as they stopped in a series of strategically organized cities along the way. Planning the group's arrival so that it would reach its destination just before Congress cast its vote on renewal of the Voting Rights Act and thus achieve maximum exposure, Lowery said "we will march the last 40 or 50 miles, cross the Potomac and go to the Capitol."<sup>90</sup>

An additional sign of the SCLC's renewal was Lowery's 1982 election as chairman of the Black Leadership Forum, a collection of black advocacy groups that challenged Congress, the president and corporate America on a myriad of issues, including jobs, inner city funding, criminal justice, apartheid, and economic justice for black Americans. Lowery's prominent position as leader of the 18-member association of the nation's biggest black civil rights movements provided increased visibility and opportunities for him, and thus the SCLC.<sup>91</sup> It also provided a ready-made forum from which Lowery championed several SCLC-centered causes.

Preparing for the 1984 election, Lowery would again exercise his gifts as a spokesman and a unifier in an effort designed to uphold the hopes, concerns and interests of black America as part of the debate over resources, jobs, opportunities and services. This time the SCLC president collaborated with a broad-based group of black leaders and organizations called the National Black Coalition as it crafted a comprehensive document known as "The *People's Plat-*

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<sup>89</sup> AP National Desk, "Civil Rights Leaders Plan New Tent City Near White House," *The New York Times*, June 8, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/08/us/civil-rights-leaders-plan-new-tent-city-near-white-house.html?scp=129&sq=Southern+Christian+Leadership+Conference%2C&st=nyt> [accessed October 1, 2011].

<sup>90</sup> IBID

<sup>91</sup> The HistoryMakers, "Reverend Joseph Lowery Biography," 2003. <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=455&category=civicMakers> [accessed October 12, 2011]

form.” The 65-page document boldly addressed an array of both domestic and international issues through a series of policy “recommendations” for the upcoming presidential election.

Working in conjunction with the National Black Leadership Roundtable (NBLR), which was headed by Congressman Walter Fauntroy, Lowery, president of both the Black Leadership Forum and the SCLC, came together to marshal a robust unified front composed of 150 national black organizations representing labor, social, business, political, youth-oriented and fraternal collectives.<sup>92</sup> The Platform was largely written and directed by Francesta E. Farmer,<sup>93</sup> former executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and a Harvard Fellow. The document was composed following a careful assessment of states across the U.S. where blacks formed a considerable part of the voting population. The platform provided blacks across the nation “one standard and one agenda by which to judge all candidates seeking our support at the polls in 1984.” While surely not the first time black Americans had rallied around a political agenda, this represented perhaps their best ever chance to flex collective political muscle as black voting rolls swelled from 9.8 to 12.2 million during the Reagan presidency.<sup>94</sup>

Stressing that the platform was “not for black people only,” while charging the Reagan Administration with working against the progress of Hispanics, Blacks, women and the disadvantaged, the document dripped of “Loweryisms,” witty statements coined by the SCLC presi-

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<sup>92</sup> “People's Platform Calls for New Covenant for America,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, April/May, 1984, 18-21.

<sup>93</sup> Farmer, Francesta, “The People's Platform,” in “Campaign '84: The Harvard Debates,” 1983-'84. 11-15, *Institute of Politics: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University*, [http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp\\_site/storage/fckeditor/file/Proceedings/1983-1984.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/Proceedings/1983-1984.pdf) [accessed February 26, 2012].

<sup>94</sup> Michael Preston, “The 1984 Presidential Campaign: Who Voted for Jesse Jackson and Why?” *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American Politics*, ed. Lucius J. Barker and Ronald W. Walters, *Google Books*, [Champaign, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1989] 129-146, <http://books.google.com/books?id=KahGxEbbT0sC&pg=PA129&lpg=PA129&dq=Michael+Preston,+Jesse+Jackson's+campaign+for+president&source=bl&ots=aRFdgQFghq&sig=tNpZjptmqLJQrXabKHm7g55q7GE&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Ya-LT86ZB8aDtgeC4v2fBA&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Michael%2> [accessed January 3, 2012].

dent, including his pronouncement “we may have come over here in different ships, but we’re all in the same boat now.”<sup>95</sup> The “New Covenant” focused on several key areas, including: 1) The Role of Government: Called for the “cushioning” of the impact of Reaganomics on the downtrodden, particularly in the areas of maternal and child health, women infants and children, nutrition, food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children; 2) Employment: Invoking the federal government to initiate a national manpower skills development policy based on the principle of full employment; 3) The Economy: Calling for restoring human needs spending at a minimum to 1981 levels, while reducing the federal deficit to \$137 million over the next three fiscal years primarily through military cuts and tax reform; 4) Minority Business Development: The incentivization of joint ventures projects and technology transfers aimed at minority businesses; 5) Welfare and Income Security: Promoting the removal of “disincentives” for work, a radical restructuring of public assistance programs, and a heavy dose of increased job training and placement services; 6) Education and Training: Called for an increased role for the Department of Education and for the federal government to aggressively insist on the enforcement of “all civil rights laws and policies,” including the Economic Equity Act of 1983, as well as fair housing, affirmative action, Voting Rights Act enforcement and immigration reform; 7) Defense, Foreign Policy and Nuclear Disarmament: This element called for an immediate end to funding nuclear and strategic weapons systems, a tougher stand with South Africa that would included demands for an end to its occupation of Namibia and its practice of apartheid, as well as a call for non-intervention in Central America and the Caribbean and 8) Urban Policy: A call for a comprehensive urban policy, including a renewal of programs that have proved effective in the past, along with innovative initiatives that focused on capital infusion, enhanced social services and repairing infrastructure. The platform was submitted to seven of the eight Democratic presi-

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<sup>95</sup> “People’s Platform Calls for New Covenant for America,” 1984, 18-21.

dential candidates with a request for a response by March 10, 1984.<sup>96</sup> And while the announcement of the Platform did draw significant public and media attention, the response from the candidates was predictably muted.

Once again – this time from the bully pulpit of his organization’s national gathering -- in his own biting, yet whimsical style, Lowery again sought to galvanize voters and articulate the black struggle as impacted by public policy and the voting booth. This time, he told attendees at the SCLC’ 27th annual convention in Charlotte that in 1984, blacks were shackled with a president (Reagan) whose calling card was “we shall overturn” the hard fought progress of the 1960s. He also challenged black folk to not become splintered by the excitement over the historic presidential campaign of Rev. Jesse Jackson because opposition forces would love to have them “fighting each other,” instead of “them.” Bolstered by a hostile Supreme Court and an economy where blacks still earn 58 percent of the medium income of whites, “everything has changed, but nothing has changed,” said Lowery.<sup>97</sup> “In the 1960s, they were saying, ‘we shall overcome. In the 1980s, the president (Reagan) is saying, we shall overturn.’”<sup>98</sup>

Nearly a decade later, in his capacity as Chairman of the Black Leadership Forum, the umbrella association of African-American civil rights groups, Lowery *announced* “*A Covenant for America’s Future*, Black Leaders Challenge Republicans with Principles of Engagement.”

This time his target wasn’t the executive office, but Congress. Lowery announced:

The fundamental premise of the Covenant for America’ Future is that every American should be afforded the dignity of a decent job, a safe community and an efficient government that affirms our legitimate aspirations. The Covenant for America’s Future embraces the principle that we are one nation which must address its problems by seeking solutions that strengthen families and community

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<sup>96</sup> Michael Preston, “Jesse Jackson’s Campaign for President,” 1989, 129-146

<sup>97</sup> 1984 *UPI*, “Leader of Civil Rights Group Assails Record of President,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1984.

<sup>98</sup> *IBID*

and provides opportunity. Obviously, we felt the need to set forth this covenant and state these principles of engagement in light of the public policy initiative proposed to be enacted in the first 100 days of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>99</sup>

Major issues addressed by the Covenant included: Proposed balanced budget amendment; crime; welfare reform; economic advancement and health care, ironically, one of the major controversial issues tackled by the country's first black president, Barack Obama, via the bitterly contested Affordable Care Act, 27 years later. The Forum decried both the high costs of health care and the lack of access "faced by large segments of our population." The six-point plan, announced jointly in the nation's capital December 28, 1994, focused on "a vision of opportunity, an inclusive economy, strong families centered around wage earners, safe neighborhoods and a heightened sense of community."<sup>100</sup>

1. Fairness. Do proposals reaffirm the basic moral principles of our society, including the protection of civil rights and advancement of equal opportunity?
2. Family Preservation: Do proposals strengthen and keep families together?
3. Economic Empowerment. Do proposals enhance opportunities for economic advancement?
4. Education. Do proposals ensure that young people, and indeed all citizens, get the education and training they need to take advantage of current and future job opportunities?
5. Safety Net. Do proposals ensure the existence of social safety nets for those who are severely disadvantaged?
6. Racial Justice. Do proposals guarantee equal application of the law for all Americans, regardless of race, gender, or class?

Lowery, as chairman of the Black Leadership Forum, which issued its *Covenant for America's Future* in response to Newt Gingrich's GOP Contract with America, gave President Bill Clinton a passing, though not stellar, mark. As he had evaluated the positions of Carter, Reagan and Bush before him, Lowery again showed no hesitancy in grading the former Arkansas

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<sup>99</sup> Joseph Lowery, "Statement Made by Dr. Joseph Lowery, Chairman of The Black Leadership Forum, December 28, 1994," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, January/February, 1995, 19-20

<sup>100</sup> Lowery, 1994, "Statement made by Joseph Lowery, chairman of the Black Leadership Forum."

governor. Congratulating Clinton on his ban on assault weapons -- a key component of his and the SCLC's *Stop the Killing, End the Violence Campaign*<sup>101</sup> – Lowery decided Clinton's position “reaches first base.”<sup>102</sup> Lowery remarked:

He was stout-hearted about the ban on assault weapons, thank the Lord, but faint-hearted on racial justice in transferring power and resources from the federal level to the states. In any accommodating move (center to right), the president must consistently proclaim his unalterable commitment to racial fairness. While his concern with the middle class is understandable, his concern with the poor and excluded doesn't come across as stout-hearted. This administration must not be satisfied with spasmodic drops in unemployment, but concentrate on increasing job training and employment opportunities targeting full employment with adequate wages.<sup>103</sup>

Again seeking to influence public policy while responding to what he termed the “mean-spirited attitude”<sup>104</sup> of GOP lawmakers, SCLC President Lowery said: “We wanted to remind ourselves and our country of the bitter price we paid for the right to vote 30 years ago, as well as the painful cost of failing to exercise the right today. We wanted to precipitate a heightened level of voter activism and revive a political process wounded by disillusionment and disgust,” he noted, following a disappointing November 1995 election.<sup>105</sup>

Although Lowery seemed to be constantly fighting an uphill battle when haranguing against Congress and the president over a phalange of public policy and legislative issues, he did claim to be encouraged by the 1995 response of former Alabama Governor George Wallace. Lowery first sought to meet with the ardently segregationist Wallace shortly following the histor-

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<sup>101</sup> James Brock, “SCLC Bids an End to Urban Violence,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 14, 1992, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1992-04-14/news/1992105164\\_1\\_racism-lowery-baltimore](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1992-04-14/news/1992105164_1_racism-lowery-baltimore) [accessed March 3, 2012]

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Echols Lowery, “President's Address Reaches First Base; Leaner Not Meaner Could Score,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, March/April, 1995, 10

<sup>103</sup> IBID

<sup>104</sup> AP, “SCLC Head Warns U.S. in Peril,” *SCLC Magazine*, 1995, March/April, 19

<sup>105</sup> Joseph Lowery, “The Arc of Justice,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1995, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-03-27/news/1995086162\\_1\\_george-wallace-selma-alabama-governor](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-03-27/news/1995086162_1_george-wallace-selma-alabama-governor) [accessed March 3, 2012].

ic 1965 Selma to Montgomery March. The two met again, 20 years later while the previously staunch segregationist was still in a wheelchair as a result of an assassin's bullet while Wallace campaigned for the presidency in 1972.<sup>106</sup> This time, when Wallace met the activists at St. Jude High School in Montgomery at the conclusion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative march, he apologized to Lowery and said he had been on the wrong side of justice in the 1960s.<sup>107</sup>

“He admitted he was wrong in the sixties and we prayed for his suffering,” said Lowery, who, uncharacteristically, gave the one-time staunch segregationist governor the benefit of the doubt, an unusual allowance for the seasoned activist.<sup>108</sup>

#### 4.1 Summary

Whether serving as a healer by convening families and church leaders in San Francisco following the Jamestown Massacre, or galvanizing constituencies to ensure that black and poor were accounted for in terms of policy and funding (The People Platform, 1984; A Covenant with America's Future, 1994), Lowery consistently sought to shape and influence domestic policy. In the process, he served as the key spokesman for two of the major black political initiatives of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though frequently rebuffed and marginalized, Lowery, as leader of the SCLC and the Black Leadership Forum, continued to confront what he deemed unfair public policy. He also defended poor blacks with little voice (Tommy Lee Hines, Wilmington 10), while pushing the Justice Department to investigate hate crimes (Greensboro Massacre, James Byrd). He was also not reticent to criticize what he called “mean-spirited Republicans,” or warn

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<sup>106</sup> “William Gredier, “Wallace is Shot, Legs Paralyzed; Suspect Seized at Laurel Rally,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 1972, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/sept98/wallace051672.htm> date accessed: April 10, 2012)

<sup>107</sup> J. E. Lowery, “The Arc of Justice,” 1995

<sup>108</sup> “A Man of Contradictions,” *Deseret News*, Salt Lake City, Utah, September 15, 1998.

blacks about the dangers of splitting their votes. While not always successful, Lowery ensured that the voice of black and marginalized America was represented on the national scene.

## 5 Chapter Five: Joseph Lowery and International Affairs

The SCLC's most infamous early entry into the international policy arena came in April 4, 1967, when founding president Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., challenged the nation and President Lyndon Baines Johnson, his Great Society and America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Dr. King, who saw his popularity wane and many of his supporters and allies break ranks with him over his insistence on speaking out to criticize the President and the nation on what he saw as an immoral war in Asia, nevertheless stood his ground, even over the clamoring objections that he was "out of his lane" and had no business weighing in on issues such as war and international policy. While King felt a moral imperative to chastise U.S. involvement of the war, much of his board, including Lowery, disagreed.

Five years later, Ralph David Abernathy, King's successor, chastised both South African apartheid and American discrimination during a tour to Scandinavia, Europe and Ireland in late 1972 and early 1973, "bearing another witness to the oppression and repression of people."<sup>109</sup> Two years later, this time as part of "Politics '72," the SCLC participated in the largest anti-war protest this nation has ever witnessed. Sponsored by the National Peace Action Coalition,<sup>110</sup> the April 24 event, the seventh major anti-war rally in the nation's capitol since 1965, drew 175,000 mostly young people. While Coretta Scott King, a featured speaker at the event, called the war "inhumane and insane,"<sup>111</sup> Abernathy criticized the disproportional level of black casualties in the war and called it "blight against the poor and needy of the nation."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 283.

<sup>110</sup> Workers Vanguard, "The Vietnam Antiwar Movement and the National Peace Action Coalition," International Communist League Fourth International. 2008. <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/920/ysp-npac.html> [accessed March 7, 2012].

<sup>111</sup> Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive*, 279.

<sup>112</sup> IBID, 279;

Always prodding and in keeping with the tradition of his predecessors, this chapter explores how Lowery and the SCLC were consistently at the leading edge of black civil rights organizations challenging and pushing the U.S. government to resist militaristic options as a method of problem solving. The SCLC president took this position because of a foundational SCLC belief in seeking non-violent solutions in every instance and a historic commitment to the six principles of non-violence.<sup>113</sup> Lowery also decried economic exploitation of developing nations, as well as U.S. support of governments that exercised military dominance, practiced apartheid, discrimination and inhumane treatment of the poor and oppressed across the Diaspora. Among the risks were a long-standing trust and relationship between the SCLC and the Jewish community that dated back to the early years of the organization, which Lowery was reminded of years after his 1997 retirement. Said Lowery:

“I went to speak in Toronto back in about 2000 at the request of a former staff member who had a church up there,” recalled Lowery.<sup>114</sup> “He told me then – that many years later – that Jewish businessmen told him they wouldn’t support the visit because of my meeting with Arafat.”<sup>115</sup> One example was Lowery’s willingness to risk (Jewish) support by defying federal policy occurred early in his presidency. Appointed by President Carter, former SCLC executive Andrew Jackson Young, by far the most outspoken black cabinet member of the peanut farmer’s administration, was forced to resign August 19, 1979, for negotiating with the Palestinian Liberation Organization against U.S. policy. And while the Jewish community and leading GOP operatives called for Young’s ouster and Lowery criticized his dismissal, former SCLC execu-

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<sup>113</sup> The King Center, “Non-Violent Procedures to Inter-Racial Harmony, New York,” October 16, 1956. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/list?keys=six+principles+of+nonviolence&=Apply> [accessed April 9, 2012].

<sup>114</sup> J. Lowery interviewed by author, April 8, 2012

<sup>115</sup> Vernon E. Jordan, *Make it Plain: Standing Up and Speaking Out*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 75-78. [http://books.google.com/books?id=N\\_DYBIc6f48C&pg=PA77&lpg=PA77&dq=lowery's+meeting+with+Arafat&source=bl&ots=bKFvu3wwAg&sig=Nl7dC7kOQk-gxuNZK4ErLS7HM7Y&hl=en&sa=X&ei=E8OHT7-fBoHk9ASI9pTcCQ&sqi=2&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=lowery's%20meeting%20with%20Arafat&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=N_DYBIc6f48C&pg=PA77&lpg=PA77&dq=lowery's+meeting+with+Arafat&source=bl&ots=bKFvu3wwAg&sig=Nl7dC7kOQk-gxuNZK4ErLS7HM7Y&hl=en&sa=X&ei=E8OHT7-fBoHk9ASI9pTcCQ&sqi=2&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=lowery's%20meeting%20with%20Arafat&f=false) [accessed April 13, 2012].

tive staffer Rev. Al Sampson said Young's initiative was righteous and fully understandable.

Sampson, formerly director of chapters and affiliates for the SCLC, recalled:

Andy, being a minister, was trying to do mediation between the Palestinians brothers and sisters and the Jewish brothers and sisters of Israel. As a result of that, we went to New York, Walter Fauntroy was there, Wyatt Walker; there was a whole group of us that went to New York. We first met with Ambassador (Zehdi Labib) Terzi,<sup>116</sup> Based on Carter's firing of Young, the group went to President Lowery and requested he finish the work of negotiating with the PLO that Young had begun.<sup>117</sup>

Noting that the SCLC president urged the PLO to recognize Israel as a sovereign nation during their August 20 meeting, Sampson continued:

I'll never forget what Dr. Lowery said to Ambassador of Israel.<sup>118</sup> He said to Terzi, 'we want you to stop aiding and abetting against the brothers and sisters in South Africa,' because he was supplying intelligence to the people fighting against the ANC (African National Congress.) 'The other thing we want you to do is be a little more upright in dealing with the Palestinians.' Ambassador Terzi said to (Lowery) him, 'we're not going to do much over there in South Africa while the blacks are fighting the apartheid issue.' Dr. Lowery asked him, 'do you have any daughters?' He (Terzi) said, 'yes I do.' Dr Lowery said, 'what would you say if your daughter came home and said she was a little bit pregnant?' And ambassador Terzi fell out and said, 'I get the message.'<sup>119</sup>

The criticism for engaging the Palestinians against Lowery and Young – both accused of being betrayers to their Judea-Christian faith -- continued, even costing the SCLC financial supporters and advertisers. Said Sampson:

<sup>116</sup> Ian Williams, "Zehid Terzi, First PLO Representative to the UN," *The Independent*, March 7. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/zehdi-terzi-468889.html> ,[accessed April 11, 2012].

<sup>117</sup> Rev. Albert Sampson, interviewed by author, November 11, 2011

<sup>118</sup> Bartlett C. Jones, "Flawed Triumphs: Andy Young at the United Nations," *Google Books*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1996), 148-151. Accessed November 13, 2011 [http://books.google.com/books?id=N7X1BXC-HSQC&pg=PA148&lpg=PA148&dq=Lowery's+meeting+with+Terzi&source=bl&ots=ju43wm2B3f&sig=2VgBka aL\\_-bA5NFbJU1XXqVQZTE4&hl=en&ei=m4fATuO7CsLqtgeMsa2GCw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&sqi=2&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage](http://books.google.com/books?id=N7X1BXC-HSQC&pg=PA148&lpg=PA148&dq=Lowery's+meeting+with+Terzi&source=bl&ots=ju43wm2B3f&sig=2VgBka aL_-bA5NFbJU1XXqVQZTE4&hl=en&ei=m4fATuO7CsLqtgeMsa2GCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&sqi=2&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage) )

<sup>119</sup> Al Sampson, interviewed by author, 2011

So it was the wisdom of Dr. Lowery was what we embraced as staff people. And the courage of Dr. Lowery because when went into New York there were a lot of Jewish groups and some black folk who did not want us to try to be that bridge over troubled waters.<sup>120</sup>

The SCLC and Lowery lined up on the side of the outcast again in October of 1984 when they joined three other human rights groups to file a “friend of the court” brief against the U.S. government’s right to incarcerate Haitian refugees. Charging the U.S. Immigration service with racism against the Haitians because they had been jailed without recourse since seeking admission to the U.S. three years earlier, the litigants insisted the refugees were subjected to “a profound and tragic irony.”<sup>121</sup> The brief read:

Having come in quest for freedom, they were incarcerated in prisons and detention camps because of their race and national origin, The holding that the federal government can deprive these people of the most basic freedom – physical liberty – by application of the criterion most condemned by our history and values – invidious race and national origin discrimination – without the slightest degree of constitutional scrutiny, is too unprecedented, its rationale at odds with our basic values and its consequences too great to be sanctioned by this Court.<sup>122</sup>

Joining the SCLC in the brief were the NAACP, the National conference of Black Lawyers and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Members of Congress who signed on included Fauntroy, chair of the Haitian Refugee Task Force, Rep. Julian C. Dixon, Rep. George W. Crocket, Major T. R. Jownens, Rep. Edolphus Towns, Mervyn M. Dymally, chairman of the Caribbean Task Force of the Black Caucus, Mickey Leland, chair of the Black Caucus and Robert Garcia of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Al Sampson, interviewed by author , 2011

<sup>121</sup> “SCLC Joins Suit Supporting Haitian Refugees,” *SCLC Magazine*, February/March 1985, 117

<sup>122</sup> Preston, “Jesse Jackson's Campaign for President,” 1989

<sup>123</sup> *Open Jurist*, 2012. “Haitian Refugee Center v. Steven Gracey,” February 25, 2012 <http://openjurist.org/809/f2d/794/haitian-refugee-center-v-s-gracey> [accessed April 8, 2012].

On November 26 of 1984, Lowery and Democrat Congressman Charles Hayes of Illinois were both arrested for refusing to leave the South African Embassy in the nation's capital. His condemnation of U.S. policy abroad that tilted against the interests of black people had become a familiar refrain. The pair, working in concert with TransAfrica, insisted on first meeting with South African Ambassador Bernard Flourie over the country's restrictive and oppressive apartheid policies.<sup>124</sup> The protests, begun 12 days earlier, were also an effort to pressure the U.S. to level economic restrictions on the white minority government at Pretoria by calling out the negative impact of dealers selling South Africa's gold Krugerrand.<sup>125</sup> Following years of unrelenting scorn, South Africa finally abandoned apartheid a decade later.

South African blacks are "victims of a physical, political and economic holocaust," said Lowery, who charged the government with allowing slave wages and the denial of the right to vote or hold office, which he said not only violated the human rights of its citizens, but always created economic peril. The SCLC leader also noted reports of a spike in arrests in South Africa following President Reagan's re-election as an indication that "the white minority rulers feel comfortable that U.S. policy will accommodate escalation of oppressive measures."<sup>126</sup> The demonstration was in conjunction with the recently formed Free South Africa Movement.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Lewis Baldwin, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Press, 1992), 229-230

<sup>125</sup> Gerald Boyd, "South Africa Demonstrators to Fight Sale of Krugerrands," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/10/us/south-africa-demonstrators-to-fight-sale-of-krugerrands.html?scp=141&sq=Southern+Christian+Leadership+Conference%2C&st=nyt> [accessed June 11, 2011].

<sup>126</sup> "Lowery Released from D.C. Jail as SCLC and TransAfrica Escalate South African Protests," *SCLC Magazine*, December/January, 1984-'85, 14-15.

<sup>127</sup> James Parks, "Free South Africa Movement, African Activist Archive," December, 2009, <http://africanactivist.msu.edu/organization.php?name=Free%20South%20Africa%20Movement> [accessed February 16, 2011]

Apartheid would only crumble with intentionality and applied pressure, insisted Lowery, calling not for a military invasion – such as the U.S. enacted upon the black nation of Grenada<sup>128</sup> – but a symbolic invasion of South Africa armed with “moral indignation and economic sanctions. We (American business) account for about fifteen or twenty percent of South African imports and exports,” said Lowery. “Without us, they can hardly have a stable economy. We think we ought to use that economic power to call for morality in the economy in our own financial relationship.”<sup>129</sup>

While Lowery rarely shied away from condemning inappropriate or racist behavior, he also confidently stepped onto the national stage to applaud, such as in 1984, when Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to overturn apartheid. Lowery noted:

I think it’s a powerful statement made by the Nobel Prize Committee as to what they think of apartheid and how the world community is condemning the racist, oppressive, materialistic, imperialistic regime of South Africa. I think that it (Tutu’s selection) was a noble choice for a noble person who’s given a life of service and witness with great courage, because he had risked his life time and time again in oppressive South Africa, where people disappear overnight for voicing any opposition to the government.<sup>130</sup>

The following year, targeting a corporate giant, Lowery and the SCLC picketed the powerful Southern Company’s stockholder meeting in Biloxi, Mississippi, in a move designed to call to task the energy titan’s commitment to purchase tons of low-sulfur coal from the ardently apartheid South African regime. Beginning with a May 21, 1985, rally at St. Paul’s

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<sup>128</sup> *British Broadcasting Corporation*, “U.S. Troops Invades Granada, *BBC On This Day*, October 25, 2008.” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/25/newsid\\_3207000/3207509.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/25/newsid_3207000/3207509.stm) [accessed October 25, 2011].

<sup>129</sup> “Lowery Released from D.C. Jail as SCLC and TransAfrica Escalate South African Protests,” *SCLC Magazine*, December/January 1984-85, 14-15

<sup>130</sup> J. Lowery, “Statement by Dr. Lowery on Bishop Desmond Tutu Receiving the Nobel Peace Prize,” *Southern Christian Leadership National Magazine*, December/January 1984-’85, 21

United Methodist Church, the gathering included the powerful voice of Charles L. Fuller, the auditor and staff coordinator of the Coal Miners Political Action Committee and the United Mine Workers of America.<sup>131</sup> Referring to his personal appearance before the Southern Company board as a fruitful step in “consciousness raising,” Lowery had 125 SCLC staffers and supporters, chanting and picketing outside. Meanwhile, he delivered his message inside that increased public outcry over American corporate deal-making with South Africa would strongly influence the Southern Company to end its contract with the racist government when it expired in March of 1987.<sup>132</sup>

Toting signs like “Black South African Coal Lynches South African Blacks and Stockholders vote not to Buy Slave Labor South African Coal,” the non-violent protesters forced the board members to walk past them to attend their meeting. By purchasing 800,000 tons of coal from the South African regime annually to supply its subsidiaries Georgia Power, Alabama Power Mississippi Power and Florida’s Gulf Coast Power, Lowery asserted that “American corporations that do business with South African are implicated in the affirmation of that racist government. It makes us part of that oppressive system.” Highlighting an obvious flaw in a capitalistic society that expects allegiance from poor and oppressed peoples and communities, Lowery gave the stockholders moral, political and economic reason for divesting themselves from ties to South Africa. It was a theme he would repeat years later when defending Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas of Nicaragua. Noting that American mis-investments not only undermine the na-

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<sup>131</sup> Lee Rambo, “SCLC Protest Leads Southern Company to Re-Examine South African Coal Contract,” *SCLC Magazine*, August/September 1985, 22-23

<sup>132</sup> Rambo, “SCLC Protest Leads Southern Company to Re-Examine South African Coal Contract,” *SCLC Magazine*, August/September 1985

tion's moral position, but also threaten the U.S. economy by making it tougher for out-of-work miners in Alabama to get work, Lowery said:

We are driving black Africans to seek help from forces that contradict us. If we are anti-Communist, we ought not to create a situation that makes black Africans vulnerable to Communism. This coal that they're buying represents the hunger of American miners, as well as the blood of black South Africans.<sup>133</sup>

One week earlier, on May 15, 1985, Lowery had framed the issue of U.S. involvement with South Africa as perhaps only he could, as he called for passage of the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1985.<sup>134</sup> Situating the U.S. government and its erstwhile president (Reagan) yet again on the wrong side of history, Lowery announced:

The legislation is a moral imperative. The presence of our economic support in South Africa is more shameful than a visit to Bitburg<sup>135</sup>; and this legislation is more than an embargo on Central America. South Africa must be placed under moral quarantine by the civilized world. This legislation offers America the opportunity to do what is morally right, politically astute and economically in the best interest of our own nation.<sup>136</sup>

HR 1460/S, a set of four relatively moderate, yet significant restrictions on American trade with South Africa, included: 1) prohibition of new investment in South Africa; 2) a ban against new American bank loans to South Africa's public sector; 3) a ban on American computer sales in South Africa and 4) a ban on the sale of Krugerrand in the U.S. Proposed in direct contradiction to Reagan administration policy – bolstered by a blistering public relations cam-

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<sup>133</sup> Rambo, "SCLC Protest Leads Southern Company to Re-Examine South African Coal Contract," *SCLC Magazine*, August/September 1985

<sup>134</sup> United States Congress, 1986. "Summary of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act," <http://actrav.itcilo.org/actrav-english/telearn/global/ilo/guide/antia.htm>, [accessed January 12, 2012].

<sup>135</sup> George Weinraub, "Reagan Joins Kohl in Brief Memorial at Bitburg Graves," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/06/international/europe/06REAG.html?pagewanted=al> [accessed March 2, 2012].

<sup>136</sup> "SCLC Urges Support of Anti-Apartheid Act of 1985," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, August/September 1985, 26-27.

paign, including Senator Ted Kennedy's public stance<sup>137</sup> with South African human rights leader Winnie Mandela, whose husband, Nelson, had been imprisoned by the racist South African government for 22 years -- the bill was passed by the U.S. House June 5, 1985, by a vote of 295 to 127.<sup>138</sup> Affirming the decision, fourteen colleges and universities moved to divest holdings that bolstered the South Africa government and economy, which brought the total of U.S. higher education divestment since 1977 to more than \$200 million, including \$57 million in 1984-85 academic year.<sup>139</sup>

Venturing beyond the U.S. borders, Lowery, joined by Mrs. Lowery and several staff, led and initiated the first-ever Black and Hispanic delegation to Nicaragua in December of 1983 for a fact-finding tour.<sup>140</sup> Later, in 1985, Lowery hosted Ortega at the SCLC after a scheduling conflict prompted him to decline the Central American leader's request to join him at his address before the United Nations. Ortega, head of the Sandinista government, reiterated his claim that the Pentagon and the CIA were complicit in stirring up trouble between his country and Costa Rica and that Nicaragua continued to be in primal danger of being invaded. He also expressed a deep affinity with the struggle for black equality being waged in the U.S. "The struggle that was waged here by Martin Luther King, Jr., was quite linked to the struggle of the Nicaraguan people," said Ortega, after laying a wreath at King's tomb.<sup>141</sup> Deflecting complaints that the Sandinistas were in bed with U.S. enemies, Lowery said Nicaragua's focus was on eradicating

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<sup>137</sup> Ken Regan, photo of Senator Ted Kennedy and human rights activist Winnie Mandela, *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Magazine*. August/September 1985, 35.

<sup>138</sup> Gregory E. Treverton, Pamela Varle, 1985. "The United States and South Africa: The 1985 Sanctions Debate," *Institute for the Study of Diplomacy: School of Foreign Service*  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~bsimpson/Hist%20725%20Summer%202006/US%20and%20S%20Africa%20the%201985%20sanctions%20debate.pdf> [accessed January 20, 2012]

<sup>139</sup> "Student Protest Sparks South African-Related Divestment," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, August/September, 1985, 36.

<sup>140</sup> Quentin Bradford, "SCLC Host Nicaraguan Leader Daniel Ortega in Atlanta," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, December-January. 1984-85,34-37.

<sup>141</sup> *Associated Press*, "SCLC Welcomes Ortega to Atlanta," *Google News, The News & Courier*, October 10, 1984

hunger, homelessness and poverty, while figuring out how to determine its own dreams. “We are Nicaragua’s neighbors,” Lowery explained. “If we are concerned about foreign powers influencing Nicaragua, we have to be concerned that a foreign power has been able to come all this way and be more sympathetic than we are to our own neighbors.”<sup>142</sup>

Lowery also interjected himself into the effort to gain freedom for American air cargo handler Eugene Hasenfus, whose arms-filled plane was shot down over Nicaragua in November of 1986. Hasenfus was the only survivor. The case was further complicated by tensions between Honduras and Nicaragua.<sup>143</sup> Hasenfus was charged with aiding terrorism by supplying arms to the Contras and convicted to serve 30 years in a highly political, controversial case, due to the fact that Southern Air Transport, whose plane Hasenfus was on, was previously owned by the CIA. Lowery, invited to witness the Hasenfus trial by the Nicaraguan government and President Daniel Ortega, also met with all the principles involved with the case. Due to his efforts, as well as those of Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, Senator Anthony Earl of Hasenfus’ home state, Wisconsin and the Roman Catholic bishops of Washington and Boston, the American was released.<sup>144</sup>

## 5.1 Summary

Based in the country seen as the freest nation in the world and a successor of King and the movement that sparked a worldwide push for freedom, Lowery and the SCLC were well positioned to serve as a significant champion for the oppressed across the Diaspora. As he began to

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<sup>142</sup> Quentin Bradford, “SCLC Host Nicaraguan Leader Daniel Ortega in Atlanta,” *SCLC Magazine*, December/January, 1984-85, 37.

<sup>143</sup> *Associated Press*, “Hasenfus to Meet with White House Staff,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 28, 1987. Accessed: March 3, 2012: <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1499&dat=19870128&id=U2EaAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=ASsEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=5372,3367397>

<sup>144</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Hasenfus is Freed by Nicaraguans and Heads Home,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 1986. Accessed: July 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/18/world/hasenfus-is-freed-by-nicaraguans-and-heads-home.html>

gain his own voice as SCLC spokesman while emerging from the position he had held as chair for the previous decade, Lowery spoke out sharply and clearly regarding a number of international issues, including apartheid in South Africa, the treatment of Haitian immigrants, the U.S. invasion of Panama, the bombing of Kosovo and U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. Lowery's growing presence as a global leader for the downtrodden and people of color across the Diaspora became apparent when global leaders who visited the U.S. made a point of meeting with Lowery at the SCLC (Mandela, Ortega) and inviting him abroad (Muammar Gaddafi and PLO leader Yasser Arafat). And while he was the target of harsh criticism by those who believed he had no right to inject himself into foreign policy, he did so anyway throughout his tenure at SCLC, and beyond.

Whether arguing against apartheid and the exploitation of Georgia Power and the empowerment of the Krugerrand in South Africa, standing up for self determination of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, or targeting racist U.S. immigration policies that treated Haitians different from Europeans seeking U.S. asylum, Lowery and the SCLC decried what they saw as unjust policy at every turn. He even criticized President Carter for the firing of Andrew Young and President Reagan for his failure to pass the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1985. Lowery routinely shrugged off the criticism that went along with his positions back home, but was honored and embraced by leaders of developing nations and used a keen grasp of international issues and policy to ensure his voice was heard.

## 6 Chapter Six: Voter Registration and Empowerment

Following its 1957 inception around the issue of busing, the SCLC next sought to convince the nation that black Americans should have the right to vote. Lowery, in fact, served as King's designee to deliver the petition to Alabama Governor George Wallace requesting an end to Jim Crow practices in the state at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery march.<sup>145</sup> The 25,000-strong march was largely credited with leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I will show in this chapter how Lowery and the SCLC continued the push for increased voter registration and political empowerment through local and national campaigns, fights for redistricting, commemorative marches, extensive coalition building and movements against efforts to restrict voting.

Nearly 20 years after a night of revelry, an emotional zenith and Dr. King's poignant "How Long?"<sup>146</sup> speech at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March, President Lowery, his wife Evelyn and Georgia Congressman John Lewis<sup>147</sup> led several thousand marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the way to their 180-mile trek from Carrollton to Montgomery. And while the SCLC-initiated campaign – Voting Rights – *Finishing the Unfinished Task* – drew nowhere near the 20,000 revelers that basked in the shadows of the cradle of the confederacy in Montgomery March 25, 1965, the throng was still an impressive witness for 1982. During the initiative, Lowery and the SCLC called on Congress to fortify the Voting Rights Act by centering proof for discrimination on its "effect on the aggrieved, not intent."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Roy Reed, "25,000 Go to Alabama's Capitol; Wallace Rebuffs Petitioners; White Rights Worker is Slain," *The New York Times*, March 25, 1965. Accessed: April 4, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0325.html#article>

<sup>146</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "How Long? Not Long, (AKA Our God is Marching On)," March 25, 1965. Accessed: March 3, 2012, <http://www.mlkonline.net/ourgod.html>

<sup>147</sup> "Six Years of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, SNCC 1960-'66." *The SNCC Project Group*, 1960-'66, Accessed: March 9, 2012, <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/lewis.html>

<sup>148</sup> AP, "Voting Rights Demonstrators Journey," *Boca Raton News*, April 19, 1982

“Blacks hold less than two percent of the elective offices in this nation and face an intensifying resistance to political advancement,” said Lowery, whose wife Evelyn and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. initiated the campaign with a meeting and a fact sheet entitled *The Coalition to Free Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and Save the Voting Rights Act*.<sup>149</sup> Quick on the scene, Lowery and the SCLC vowed to protest at the court house in Carrollton, Alabama, until Wilder and Bozeman were granted justice.<sup>150</sup>

This time around, the challenge wasn't winning the right to vote for millions of black disenfranchised voters, but the starkly unbalanced persecution of two black women, Maggie Bozeman and Julia Wilder. Convicted in 1979 and imprisoned January 11, 1982 and charged with three counts of voting fraud in Pickens County, Alabama, Wilder, 69, and Bozeman, 51, were given five and four-year sentences, respectively. Found guilty of marking ballots for illiterate and elderly blacks in the Democratic run-off, the two were given the maximum sentence by an all-white jury. No doubt, the women's long-time activism played a role in their sentences, as Wilder was the president of the Pickens County Voter League and Bozeman was president of the local NAACP. Despite years of struggle, although blacks comprised 40 percent of the population in the county, not one had ever been elected.<sup>151</sup> In a byzantine contrast to their stiff sentences, a 1979 federal grand jury in Randolph County indicted 16 whites for voting rights violations in a sheriff's election. Seven of the 16 pled guilty of a host of charges, including conspiracy, vote buying, casting false ballots, soliciting illegal absentee ballots, and voting more than one time by an individual. The seven were fined \$250 - \$500 and given suspended sentences, while

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<sup>149</sup> SCLC/W.O.M.E.N brochure, “Coalition to Free Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and Save the Voting Rights Act,” 1982

<sup>150</sup> Eileen Hansen, “Justice Comes Slowly for Activists,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 16, 1982, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2205&dat=19821116&id=3tAmAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=xAIGAAAAIIBAJ&pg=4546,3158338>, accessed: October 12, 2011

<sup>151</sup> Michael Cheers, “Alabama Rights Workers Convicted of Voter Fraud,” *Jet Magazine*, December 20, 1979

Randolph County Sheriff Will Thompson was convicted on seven counts of conspiracy and buying votes, yet was only fined \$1,000 and sentenced to three months in jail.<sup>152</sup>

After beginning by retracing the steps of the Selma to Montgomery March, the sojourners – using the injustice of the Bozeman and Wilder case to campaign for the extension of the Voting Rights Act – Lowery and the SCLC turned the pilgrimage into a five-state journey through the Black belt that traversed 1,500 miles that drew support from some 30 organizations along the way. A movement that began in a snowstorm in Carrollton and at times dwindled to only 17 marchers, finally – strategically -- arriving in the nation’s capitol June 23 – the day Congress renewed the Voting Rights Act -- their highly publicized quest achieved its desired end.<sup>153</sup>

According to at least one observer, New York *Times* reporter Reginald Stuart, the 1982 Carrollton to Montgomery march to promote the cause for the renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act not only proved to be a show of strength for the moribund movement that many had characterized as on life support, as best, but also a clear turning point for the new leader of the SCLC.<sup>154</sup> Seemingly moving in quick sand in comparison to the frequent electrifying and rousing moments of the King era of the 1960s, Lowery, like Abernathy before him, had struggled to make his voice heard. Calling for a “revival of consciousness,” Lowery expressed confidence that the activist spirit of earlier times had survived. The current challenge, he explained, was to help people better understand the goals and mission of the SCLC, in the context of the new, more hostile social and economic conditions. Exhorting his burgeoning audience and energized by the cases of Bozeman and Wilder and the quest for renewal of the Voting Rights Act, Lowery, then

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<sup>152</sup> Kelly Dowe, “Paying the Price in Pickens County,” *Southern Changes*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 13-14, 1982

<sup>153</sup> Eileen Hansen, “Justice Comes Slowly for Activists,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 16, 1982

<sup>154</sup> Reginald Stuart, “Reporter’s Notebook: Rights’ Marchers’ Pride,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1982

57 and in his fifth year at the helm of the SCLC, latched onto the campaign, seized the moment, and seemed to suddenly hit his stride.<sup>155</sup> Said Lowery:

Tokenism has robbed us of our militancy, Lowery warned the cheering crowd in Pickens County, Alabama on the eve of the start of the march that would eventually take them all the way to Washington, challenging the oppression of voting rights activism every step of the way. “There is not salvation for any of us, unless there is salvation for all of us.”<sup>156</sup>

Rev. Fred Taylor, who passed out leaflets during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, then began working at SCLC in 1969, following a stint as a student leader at Alabama State, recalls the campaign as one of Lowery’s finest moments. Taylor, who was attacked and beaten by a mob in Wrightsville, Georgia, in 1980,<sup>157</sup> has the perspective of someone who was an SCLC staff person from ’69-2007. He recalled:

That campaign, which began in the sleet on a cold day in Pickens County, Alabama and took us all the way to Washington, D.C., that began in defense of Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and led to the renewal of the (1965) Voting Rights Act, That was one of my most meaningful, impactful experiences at SCLC. We were on the road from April to October of 1982, which ultimately led to the extension of the Voting Rights Act. We would walk five to 10 miles a day. That was one of the most significant things I was a part of.<sup>158</sup>

Others, however, acknowledged that key issues and attitudes of the day also influenced the resurgence. “All organizations decline when the issues are not prevalent,” said Rev. James E. Palmer, head of the SCLC host chapter in Charlotte. “But now, the Ku Klux Klan is on the upswing, we’ve got Reagan, (U.S. Senator Jesse) Helms, and (Moral Majority head Jerry) Falwell.

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<sup>155</sup> Reginald Stewart, “Reporter’s Notebook: Rights’ Marchers’ Pride,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1982

<sup>156</sup> R. Stuart, “Reporter’s Notebook”

<sup>157</sup> Donald Grant, *The Way it was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 307, 367, 449-450

<sup>158</sup> Frederick Douglass Taylor interview by author, October 11, 2011

We can't relax."<sup>159</sup> Lowery, in his own, inimitable style, used the bully pulpit at the convention to warn delegates and the world of the critical nature of the upcoming election, because "we're half past the dark in America, and a quarter to the light.... We've come too far and lost too many, not to vote."<sup>160</sup>

In another important, but perhaps less celebrated case, the "Black Belt Three" were exonerated of all counts of altering absentee ballots in a September 1984 Democratic Party primary in Perry County, Alabama. The trio, Albert Turner, Evelyn Turner and Spencer Hogue, Jr., of the Perry County Civic League (PCCL),<sup>161</sup> were acquitted following a 15-day trial which Hogue said only went to deliberation because the Justice department believed "I stand in the way of the white power structure."<sup>162</sup> And while the "Black Belt Three" went free, similar cases throughout the corridor known as the Alabama Black Belt, including that of Greene County SCLC President Spiver Gordon – indicted on 37 counts of mail fraud, conspiracy, furnishing false information and voting multiple times – moved forward.

Lowery, while expressing gratitude over the "Black Belt Three" verdict, said:

I think it's a shameful waste of tax payer money (and) the Justice Department out to be using its resources to pursue real criminals, such as dope pushers and users. The whole act (Black Belt investigation) was an effort to retard black political process and intimidate voters in the Black Belt. I'm confident that the impact (of the trial) will not deter the voting process.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Tom Minehart, "King's Organization Back in the Limelight," *SCLC Magazine*, April/May/June 1984, 48-49

<sup>160</sup> "SCLC Convention Pushes Black Voter Registration," *Jet Magazine*, September 3, 1984. Accessed: October 28, 2011, [http://books.google.com/books?id=zbADAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA6&lpg=PA6&dq=sclc+national+convention,+charlotte&source=bl&ots=-30tF6mZMO&sig=cXqfUD4mRkoFkLpuez\\_d39aXAe0&hl=en&ei=RhmrTu3uDIjagQeT6s3XDw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CFIQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q](http://books.google.com/books?id=zbADAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA6&lpg=PA6&dq=sclc+national+convention,+charlotte&source=bl&ots=-30tF6mZMO&sig=cXqfUD4mRkoFkLpuez_d39aXAe0&hl=en&ei=RhmrTu3uDIjagQeT6s3XDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CFIQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q)

<sup>161</sup> Randall Williams, "Crackdown in the Black Belt: Onto Greene County, Southern Changes," *The Journal of the South Regional Council*, Vol. 3, No. 3 2-5, 1978-2009. Accessed: March 3, 2012, [http://beck.library.emory.edu/southernchanges/article.php?id=sc07-3\\_018](http://beck.library.emory.edu/southernchanges/article.php?id=sc07-3_018)

<sup>162</sup> Q. Bradford, "Federal Jury Says "Black Belt Three" Not Guilty of Voting Fraud 1985," *SCLC Magazine*, 12-13

<sup>163</sup> Q. Bradford, "Black Belt Three," 1985

Lowery followed up his disdain for what he considered a Justice Department witch-hunt soon after, when, addressing a Republican Study Committee in Washington. He called on the feds to cease-and-desist persecution of black voters in the five-county Alabama Black Belt. At the same time, he emphatically denied that blacks were unilaterally supporting the Democrats.

Lowery said that “In those five counties, the FBI is conducting an intensive investigation that has resulted in elderly blacks being rousted out of their beds in the middle of the night, (including) eight indictments of black leaders and raid on the offices of black elected officials,” Lowery complained to the committee.<sup>164</sup> Deflecting criticism by several members of the Committee grouching about the lack of black support, Lowery charged that it was obvious blacks were being targeted because “there are no investigations going on in the five counties of the Black Belt still controlled by whites, even though blacks make up sixty to eighty percent of their populations.”<sup>165</sup>

In the summer of 1984, Lowery asked the Justice Department to investigate charges of voter investigation in the mayoral race in Selma, Alabama. Longtime segregationist Mayor Joseph Smitherman, who stymied civil rights activist Fred Reese’s attempt to become the historic city’s first black mayor by a 3-2 margin, had, during the 1960s, frequently referred to Dr. King as “Martin Luther Coon.”<sup>166</sup> Lowery reported to the DOJ that he had received numerous calls from both local black leaders and Selma SCLC officials of incidents of harassment, misleading information and absentee ballot fraud connected to the election of the six-term mayor.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Q. Bradford, “Lowery Tells Republicans, Voting Fraud Cases Against Alabama Blacks Unfair,” *SCLC Magazine*, August/September 1985, 15

<sup>165</sup> IBID

<sup>166</sup> *Eyes on the Prize*, Part 6: Bridge to Freedom, 1965

<sup>167</sup> AP, “Justice Department is Asked to Investigate Selma Election,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1984. Accessed: August 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/14/us/justice-department-is-asked-to-investigate-selma-election.html?scp=115&sq=Southern+Christian+Leadership+Conference%2C&st=nyt>

Lowery and the SCLC also ardently fought the confirmation of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Nominee Robert Bork in 1987. Weaving together a southern web of defense that would have made a spider proud, the Alliance for Justice,<sup>168</sup> used the threat of Bork “turning back the clock,” the coordinated defense enlisted a cavalcade of southern senators, who couldn’t help but respect the growing clout of black voter muscle. Lowery presented Georgia Senator Sam Nunn a petition of listing 11,000 names decrying the nomination of Bork, which proved to be a slap in the face to the burgeoning presidency of Ronald Reagan, who had swept to a landslide victory months earlier, despite strong black voter opposition. Alabama Senator Shelby acknowledged, in fact, that he had been approached with strong opposition to the Bork nomination from two groups in particular: blacks and women. Andy Young, former King confidante and then-mayor of the new black capitol of the South, Atlanta, said southern white Democratic leadership had little choice but to be responsive to the southern black vote. Said Young, pointing out that Reagan’s call for the republican senate to confirm his appointees and rubber stamp his programs proved to be a rallying cry for Southern blacks:

It was the black vote all across the country that essentially elected a Democratic Senate. It was the (black) rejection of Reagan in '86 that led to the rejection of Bork in '87.<sup>169</sup>

Lowery joined Georgia Congressman John Lewis and the Congressional Black Caucus in the nation’s capital February 8, 1995, to announce plans for a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary re-enactment of the Selma to Montgomery March to commemorate the 1965 Voting Rights Campaign. The ’65 campaign, which included the murder by police of Army veteran Jimmie Lee Jackson, was sparked by the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge that came to be known as “Bloody Sun-

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<sup>168</sup> Alliance for Justice: Fighting for A Fairer America, October 8, 2010, accessed: November 11, 2011.  
<http://www.afj.org/>

<sup>169</sup> Robin Toner, “Saying No to Bork, Southern Democrats Echo Black Voters,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1987

day” because of the police brutality against unarmed men, women and children. The marchers, following several aborted attempts, completed the 57-mile Selma to Montgomery March, culminating in Dr. King’s stirring “*How Long?*” speech. The commemorative 30-year anniversary march, while nowhere near as dangerous or significant, nevertheless allowed Lowery and the SCLC to refocus the media and the nation on the importance of voting rights.

On the King Holiday in 1996, the SCLC registered over 1,000 potential voters in an exercise aimed at honoring the martyred leader as a part of *Voter Action: The ’96 Offensive*.<sup>170</sup> The drive involved a variety of ecumenical, social service and commercial registration sites, including the CNN Center, the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women, Southwest Hospital and Medical Center, AID Atlanta and the Church of the Redeemer. Reminiscent of the organization’s ongoing goal to engage and empower young people, students from Morris Brown College, Spelman, Morehouse, Clark College, Atlanta University, Georgia Tech and Georgia State University worked out of the SCLC national office tabulating registrants after roving the streets, clip boards in hands, signing up potential voters, thanks to the new Georgia Voter law.<sup>171</sup> Meanwhile, as this effort was going on in Atlanta and being duplicated by chapters across the nation, SCLC President Lowery was in New York City keynoting the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Interfaith Celebration of the Life of Dr. King.<sup>172</sup>

In October of 1996, a tired, but energized Lowery returned from a seven-state, get-out-the-vote “*People to People*” bus tour. Speaking the Sunday of his return at Trinity African

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<sup>170</sup> Deric Gilliard, “SCLC Volunteers Register 1,014 Potential Voters on King’s Birthday,” *SCLC National Magazine*, March/April/May, 1996, 35-38

<sup>171</sup> The NVRA, commonly called the Motor Voter Law, builds upon the gains made by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which dismantled many government-sponsored barriers to voter registration. The NVRA embodies the principle that government has an affirmative obligation to enroll the eligible electorate. Though confronted by broad claims of voter fraud from conservatives, the law resulted in adding over 1 million Georgians to the rolls in 1996 alone.

<sup>172</sup> Deric A. Gilliard, “SCLC Volunteers Register 1,014 Potential Voters on King’s Birthday,” *SCLC Magazine*, March/April/May 1996, 35-38.

Baptist Church in Atlanta at a revival, Lowery had urged dozens of crowds in Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina and California in the SCLC's ongoing effort to increase voter registration and energy in anticipation of the 1996 presidential elections.

Pointing to an article in the *SCLC Magazine* entitled "Shaping America's Political Arena: the Current Assault on Black Voter Strength," a reaction to the Supreme Court decision in *Shaw v. Reno*, SCLC Legal Counsel Roxanne Gregory continued the blistering attack on the June 29, 1995 decision, which resulted in the dismantling of recently created black majority districts.

Gregory said:

The Supreme Court continued its assault on Black political strength by striking down Georgia's 11<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, represented by Cynthia McKinney," wrote Gregory in "*Empowering Racism: the Supreme Court's Attack on Black Political Strength*":

Ironically, instead of utilizing the tenants of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to protect African-Americans, as was the original intent, the Court used the clause to protect and insure the interest of White America. The Reagan/Bush Supreme Court, beginning with its decision in *Shaw v. Reno*, and now in its decision in *Johnson v. Miller*, has apparently decided to nullify the Voting Rights Act on 1965 as an effective means of achieving racial parity in America's election process.<sup>173</sup>

Noting that in Texas (*Vera v. Richards*), while the court struck down District 30, a black-majority district, it allowed District 6, which is 89 percent white, 82 miles long and – much like District 30 – "bizarrely shaped." The difference, however, contended Gregory, was that District 6 "was created to protect a Republican, Joe Baton. Thanks to the Reagan/Bush Supreme Court, it is now open season on all majority Black congressional districts."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> R. Gregory, "Empowering Racism: The Supreme Court's Attack on Black Political Strength," *SCLC Magazine*, July/August/September 1995, 78-79

<sup>174</sup> IBID

While much of the SCLC's focus was on registering and energizing voters both nationally and regionally, Lowery also learned to master the art of coalition building. On August 31, 1995, in fact, following a meeting with the black state senators and representatives<sup>175</sup> at the Georgia capitol, Lowery convened the NAACP, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and the Concerned Black Clergy of Metro Atlanta for a press conference to decry what the activists saw as a perverted drawing of the congressional district lines that ran counter to the needs and demographics of the state's African-American populations and hopes for just representation. The redistricting controversy erupted as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court's questionable decision disallowing the parameters of Georgia's 11<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, deciding not to rule against race-based factors in drawing a district, but instead, only against their preponderance.

"We are at least one-third of the population of Georgia and anything less than three majority (black) districts would be reminiscent of taxation without representation," said Lowery. He was joined in decrying the decision by Walter Butler, president of the Georgia NAACP, Nelson B. Rivers III, NAACP Southeast Region Director, Joe Beasley, regional director of Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and Gerald Durley of the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta. This practice of combining forces to cast a broader shadow, which oftentimes included a significant contingent from Minister Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and sometimes Markel Hutchins' National Youth Network,<sup>176</sup> became a staple item of a Lowery-driven, SCLC event.

## 6.1 Summary

Utilizing the newly gained full power of being an American citizen and a civil rights leader, Lowery on several occasions involved the Justice Department (Black Belt Three, Selma

<sup>175</sup> Gilliard, "Leaders of Four Civil Rights Groups Hold Press Conference on Redistricting on Capitol Steps After Meeting with Black Reps," SCLC press release, August 30, 1995

<sup>176</sup> Maynard Eaton, "Non-Violence Still Packs a Punch, Atlanta's Rev. Markel Hutchens Proves MLK's Philosophy Still in Effect," *Black Press USA.com*, June 28, 2007, Accessed: March 3, 2012, <http://www.blackpressusa.com/news/Article.asp?SID=3&Title=National+News&NewsID=13565>)

mayoral race) to investigate voting irregularities, galvanized a voting block to bitterly fight the confirmation of Supreme Court Bork, and focused both the press and the eyes of the nation on voting rights by commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March and pushing for the renewal of the VRA in 1982 around the Pickens-Wilder campaign. As a result, while helping to register hundreds of thousands of voters through chapters and *People to People* tours, he served as one of the leading figures in demanding that the nation honor the heavy price paid to achieve the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Some battles, such as the fight to keep prevent the confirmation of Bork, were successful. Others, such as the request that went all the way to the Supreme Court to protect Georgia's 11<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, then held by black Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, were unsuccessful, despite the fact the court upheld a similarly drawn Republican district in Texas (6), while requiring the redrawing of a comparable majority black district (*Vera v. Richards*), were not. Lowery's argument -- that while Georgia was a state with one-third of the population was African-American, black representation was not protected in the drawing of the 11<sup>th</sup> District -- denoted a troubling trend that extended to numerous places across the nation.

## 7 Chapter Seven: Million Man March

Faced with the challenge of abandoning his principles and rejecting a movement designed to bring unity and accountability to black men because it was conceived and led by a divisive and controversial leader, Lowery instead took the road less traveled. Risking his organization's financial support and moral authority as a Christ-centered activist organization, Lowery chose to take the gamble by signing on as the first major non-Muslim civil rights organization committed to Minister Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March. This chapter will detail how and why the decision was made, as well as its impact.

In the summer of 1995, Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan faced a dilemma. After proclaiming the need for black men to unite from across the nation in a triumphant, unified march – somewhat reminiscent of the 1963 March on Washington – Farrakhan was having difficulty achieving buy-in from the established, traditional civil rights organizations. Quietly, unannounced, Farrakhan slipped into Atlanta in August of 1995 to pitch his initiative to Lowery and his SCLC executive staff at the SCLC headquarters on Auburn Avenue. The meeting had been brokered by Farrakhan's Atlanta leader, Stephen Muhammad and SCLC Executive Director Rev. E. Randel T. Osburn. The meeting was not, however, the first between the organizational heads. In 1983, Farrakhan, intent on “humanizing” the controversial NOI while building bridges with established civil rights organizations, dropped by the SCLC headquarters and met with Lowery. Said Muhammad: “Minister Farrakhan had decided after his speech in New York that wherever he went, he wanted to meet with the civil rights leader of that town,” explained Muhammad, co-chair of the Atlanta Million Man March Committee, along with First Iconium

Baptist Church Pastor Timothy McDonald. “Dr. Lowery was both a major national leader and the leader in Atlanta and Atlanta was the last city to come on board.”<sup>177</sup>

While at the SCLC headquarters on Auburn Avenue, Farrakhan took out a \$500 lifetime membership and began laying the foundation for a long-term relationship. Years later, in the early 1990s, when speaking to a group of 15,000 in at the Jacob Javitts Center in New York, Farrakhan boldly pronounced a plan to bring a million men to the nation’s capitol. Following an hour meeting during which the Islamic spiritual leader passionately explained why the SCLC’s presence was vital to the march, Farrakhan left and the SCLC brain trust went into deliberation. Days later, after serious discussions and prayer over the issue, Lowery announced the SCLC would participate – despite a flurry of objections – for three main reasons: Timing, the fact that the march was black male-centered and because it was spiritually based. “The proposed march has struck a responsive chord in a black community hurting from assaults from without and frustration within,” said Lowery, proclaiming that the time had come to send a message of “defiance of oppression, resistance to assault and initiation towards self determination and renewal.”<sup>178</sup>

Pointing to the high rate of black young males either incarcerated or on probation, with blacks six times more likely to be imprisoned, Lowery lamented the rate of black unemployment and underemployment, as well as the fact that for the first time in a century, black male life expectancy had actually decreased. Lowery continued:

While countering the assault from within, there is an obvious need for black males to become steady stewards of their talents; faithful fathers to their children; honest husband to their wives; majestic

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<sup>177</sup> Stephen Muhammad interviewed by author, March 8, 2011

<sup>178</sup> J. Lowery, “Three Sunbeams from Million Man March,” September 22, 1995

masters of their resources; stable servants of their communities and careful keepers of the dream. This march is a call to manhood.<sup>179</sup>

The final key reason for SCLC to play a key role in the MMM was the fact that it came from a spiritual foundation. Said Lowery:

While all of our major marches have grown out of faith in the triumph of righteousness, and most have been preacher led... we nevertheless put social and political goals in the top of the agenda,” said Lowery, realizing that joining a Nation of Islam-inspired event was sure to bring out critics from the Christian community. “This march sets forth theological and biblical and spiritual bases for our gathering and dwelling together. This march points the participant, the government and the nation to God. It calls the community of conscience to new levels of atonement. It calls us all to reconciliation with God, ourselves and each other. At-one-ment calls us to seek at-one with God, with self and with each other: black and black, black and white; rich and poor; gentiles and Jews; east and west; young and old!<sup>180</sup>

With that proclamation, not only did the SCLC become the first and virtually only main-line civil rights organization to join the Million Man March, but also one of the events most ardent supporters and promoters. In the process, the SCLC spent the next 90 days as the principle non-Muslim promoters of the upcoming march. Lowery went onto do numerous radio, television and print interviews to discuss the merits of the march, while refusing to acknowledge support for Farrakhan’s controversial positions,<sup>181</sup> which many saw as hateful and anti-Semitic. Mary Frances Berry, then chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, was certainly one of the MMM’s critics, primarily because of Farrakhan’s leadership. Calling the NOI leader “despicable, homophobic, racist sexist and anti-Semitic,” she refused to endorse the march.

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<sup>179</sup> J. Lowery, “Three Sunbeams from Million Man March,” September 22, 1995

<sup>180</sup> IBID

<sup>181</sup> Lee Chottiner, “Farrakhan to Appear at AWC Despite Anti-Semitic Record,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, February 2011, Accessed: October 31, 2011, [http://thejewishchronicle.net/view/full\\_story/11577654/article-Farrakhan-to-appear-at-AWC-despite-anti-Semitic-record](http://thejewishchronicle.net/view/full_story/11577654/article-Farrakhan-to-appear-at-AWC-despite-anti-Semitic-record))

However, on the other hand, Berry did describe it as “importance for black men as a positive, affirming activity.”<sup>182</sup>

According to the *Baltimore Sun*, the biggest fear incited by the Million Man March was the possibility that the event would launch Farrakhan into the status as the unchallenged leader of black America.<sup>183</sup> And while the B’Nai B’Rith and others who had felt Farrakhan’s sting were uneasy about the possibility of bringing legions of black men to the capitol for a march, an ABC-Washington Post poll<sup>184</sup> showed that blacks who were surveyed “overwhelmingly supported” the event. March proponents included Congressional Black Caucus Chair Donald Payne, and even white Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell.

One way that Lowery did separate himself from Farrakhan and his message, however, was that he did not participate in the Million Man March Pre-March Prayer and Praise Rally for all People, which took place Sunday, the day before the march, at the Washington Convention Center.<sup>185</sup> That event featured speeches by Farrakhan, D. C. Mayor Marion Barry, Jr., Rev. Ben Chavis, Rev. Willie Wilson, Rev. Al Sampson, Rev. Beecher Hicks, Rev. C. L. Long, Rev. Walter Fauntroy and music by the Union Temple Baptist Church Men’s Chorus. Instead of participating in that event, Lowery and the SCLC gathered at Union Temple Baptist Church, where he delivered the message as the SCLC’s kick-off to the Million Man March festivities.<sup>186</sup> By then not unaccustomed to his role as contrarian, Lowery, who said that despite what others thought or

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<sup>182</sup> Carolyn Lockhead, “Washington – Civil Rights Leaders Won’t Support March/Chairwoman of U.S. Commission Assails Organizers,” *SFGate.com*, October 11, 1995, [http://articles.sfgate.com/1995-10-11/news/17816994\\_1\\_mr-farrakhan-million-man-march-louis-farrakhan](http://articles.sfgate.com/1995-10-11/news/17816994_1_mr-farrakhan-million-man-march-louis-farrakhan)), [accessed: October 31, 2011]

<sup>183</sup> “Mfume Before Farrakhan, Black Leadership: The Million Man March Didn’t Anoint Anyone,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 13, 1995, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-12-13/news/1995347074\\_1\\_mfume-farrakhan-man-march](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-12-13/news/1995347074_1_mfume-farrakhan-man-march)), [accessed: April 5, 2012]

<sup>184</sup> Joseph P. McCormick, II, *The Messages and Messengers: Opinions from the Million Men Who Marched, Race and Representation*, ed. Georgia Ann Persons, [New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1989], 142-164.

<sup>185</sup> Million Man March Committee, “Million Man March Pre-March Prayer and Praise Rally,” Nation of Islam, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1995

<sup>186</sup> Gilliard, “SCLC President Lowery Preaches at Union Temple Baptist Church Sunday to Kick-off Million Man March Weekend,” *SCLC Communications* news release, October 13, 1995

said, he had to pursue what “thus saith the Lord.”<sup>187</sup> “It wasn’t just a matter of being worried about losing support from (longstanding) Jewish supporters, said Lowery. “I was also being attacked by other black leaders.”

The following day, October 16<sup>th</sup>, Lowery seemed to be a little nervous as he and his key staff, attorney Roxanne, Gregory, executive director Osburn, director of chapters and affiliates Rev. Taylor, youth director Brenda Davenport, photographer Larry Lewis and communications director Deric Gilliard, waited for his turn to speak backstage. Taking the stage before what some say was a throng a million-strong, yet others insist was considerably smaller, Lowery strongly proclaimed that “If my house is on fire, I don’t care who brings the water,”<sup>188</sup> explaining why he and the SCLC joined forces with Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam to make the march a more broad-based coalition. Clearly a bit nervous – very unusual for the 75-year-old leader who had been at the helm of the SCLC for 18 years – Lowery, with perhaps more at stake than everyone at the march except Farrakhan, looked out on the largest crowd of his venerable career.

Introduced by emcee Rasul Muhammad...ringed by a legion sun-glass adorned, blue-suited clad Fruit of Islam....”At this time, with great honor, and in great memory of that march in 1963, we have the successor to that seat, represented in the president of the SCLC. Will you please receive our brother, who’s been fighting a long time, our brother Reverend Dr. Joseph Lowery?” Dressed in his traditional blue-jean jacket, wearing a royal-blue clergy-collared shirt, Lowery took to the protected, glass-covered podium. Lowery began:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves  
and pray and seek my face, turn from their wicked ways, I will

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<sup>187</sup> Lowery interview with author, April 7, 2012

<sup>188</sup> Houston Baker, Jr., “America’s War on Decency and a Call to the Mall: Black Men, Symbolic Politics, and the Million Man March,” *BlackCulturalStudies.org*, October 17, 1995, <http://www.blackculturalstudies.org/baker/march.html>), [accessed: October 31, 2011],

hear from heaven, forgive them and heal their land.<sup>189</sup> God bless you for coming today, to turn toward God, to humble ourselves, and to receive healing.

Lowery continued:

A reporter asked me yesterday, before I preached for Brother Willie Wilson, at Union Temple, ‘why are you here? He thought that was a tough question. The tough question would have been had me come to Atlanta, and caught me sitting at my desk, where Martin Luther King sat, and had to ask me, ‘why are you not in Washington?’ That would have been the tough question. It’s easy for me to answer why I’m here.<sup>190</sup>

“I’m here because I feel the pain and anguish of the black community. I’m here because I feel the pain from the assault from without and our fault within. I’m here because one of three black males in their twenties is in trouble. I’m here because our house is on fire and my children are in the house. And I come to help put out the fire and I don’t care who else is bringing the water, I join with them to put out the fire in the black community! (applause) I’m here because I know that by the grace of God, a new wave of black solidarity is sweeping this nation, a new height of moral integrity, a new depth of spirituality. By the grace of God, we must leave this place with distinctions on one hand, but solidarity on the other. Solidarity when it comes to embracing liberation lifestyles, o that makes us free at last, in this life. Free to love ourselves, free to love our communities, free from addiction to drugs, free from the addictions to abuse of our sexuality.

Lowery continued:

Free to seek economic empowerment, and teach our dollars some sense. Let us go home from this place, my brothers, renewed, regenerated, resurrected from the grave of violence and self destruction, to the resurrection of discipline and responsibility. Let’s go home energized and energizing our churches, our organizations, free at last to support our businesses, to pool our resources, to walk together, vote together, invest together, free to become new creatures. To call our women beside us to share leadership, to share power, to send a message to those who think the election last year was a mandate for malice: we have a message for them. We’re not going back! We’re not going to let anybody turn back the clock. We’ve marched too long, prayed too hard, wept to bitterly, bled

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<sup>189</sup> J. Lowery, “Joseph Lowery’s Million Man March Address,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, January/February, 1996.

<sup>190</sup> IBID

too profusely and died too young to let anybody turn back the clock on our journey to justice.

Lowery concluded:

God bless you my brothers! Let us go home, now. Let us go home now and work for that day when justice rolls down like water, and black will not be asked to get back. Brown can stick around, yellow will be mellow, the red man can get ahead and white will be alright. God bless you, you beautiful black men!<sup>191</sup>

In certainly one of the quickest major addresses of his career, Lowery capsulized his reasons for taking part in the polarizing event, insisting that the opportunity to help black men coalesce around family and community and move towards being more responsible husbands, brothers and fathers was too critical to pass up. Imploring black men to embrace the freedom to love humanity and God, Lowery reminded the throng that they owed the willingness to change not only to themselves, but their ancestors who paid a precious price for their freedom.

## 7.1 Summary

Lowery, who broke ranks with mainstream civil rights leaders frequently over the years, still managed to separate himself and the SCLC from the most controversial positions and rhetoric of the Million Man March and its polarizing leader, Farrakhan, while calling for unity and self love before the largest public gathering of his long career. Participants at the march promised that “from this day forward, I will strive to love my brother as I love myself. I from this day forward, will strive to improve myself spiritually, morally, socially, politically and economically, for the benefit of myself, my family and my people.”<sup>192</sup>

Million Man March members returned home renewed and recommitted to improve their homes and communities. The SCLC drew new-found attention, both positive and negative. Hun-

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<sup>191</sup> J. Lowery, “Joseph Lowery’s Million Man March Address,” 1995

<sup>192</sup> Joseph P. McCormick II, “The Messages and Messengers,” 142-164

dreds of new members joined the organization and several new volunteers plugged into the headquarters at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Fort Street. Detractors wrote hate mail and some long-standing donors quit giving. In some cities, Million Man March Committees remained active and committed for years following the event. Thus, Lowery's decision to step out and participate in a controversial event –despite widespread criticism -- must be considered a success, even though his commitment to participate would haunt him for decades.

## 8 Chapter Eight: Affirmative Action and the Struggle on Behalf of “The Least of These”

Affirmative action, long considered by civil rights activists and social progressives as a necessary tool in terms of opening doors for less well educated citizens, while ensuring that minorities were represented in all strata of the society, was signed into law by President John F. Kennedy in 1961.<sup>193</sup> As the legal barriers to equality began to fall with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and blacks began to move further into the mainstream, a conservative element of the nation increasingly began to resist what they viewed as entitlements. This conundrum was compounded when white women increasingly lined up as beneficiaries, moving the SCLC to vehemently argue in the 1980s and ‘90s that white women were the “biggest beneficiaries of so-called minority preferences.”<sup>194</sup> In this chapter, we will examine how Lowery fought to fortify the need for affirmative action while pushing the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the Justice Department to stand strong on enforcing affirmative action. He and the SCLC did so while chastising corporations that stigmatized and discriminated against blacks. I will also explain how Lowery and the SCLC’s battles reached beyond the purvey of black Americans only, extending to efforts to secure justice for Native Americans of African descent and adequate food for the nation’s poor, as well.

Pulling an about face, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights inextricably reversed its policy laid out by its former members and refuted affirmative action as an “unjustified discrimination” that creates a “new class of victims” at its January 12, 1984, Hunt Valley, Maryland, meeting, by a vote of 6-2. Commission chairman Charles Pendleton, Jr., insisted the commission’s move was a bold move to “declare our independence,” but Commissioner Mary Frances

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<sup>193</sup> Dale Froomkin, “Affirmative Action Under Attack: *Washington Post* Special Report, “ *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/affirm/affirm.htm> [accessed: April 4, 2012].

<sup>194</sup> “The Real Affirmative Action Babies: Why White Women Are the Real Winners in Affirmative Action, “ *The Root*, August 3, 2009, <http://www.theroot.com/views/real-affirmative-action-babies> [accessed: April 12, 2012]

Berry, appointed before the restructuring of the committee, criticized the group's new majority, calling them "White House puppets."<sup>195</sup>

SCLC President Lowery, reacting to the lopsided vote in favor of negating quotas, brazenly called on Congress to disband the commission, which he charged with becoming "an adversary of civil rights, rather than an advocate." Writing key Congress persons, Lowery insisted the commission's "usefulness has expired" and if left to its own devices, "will make a mockery of civil rights."<sup>196</sup> The anti-quota resolution of the commission was prompted by a Detroit case<sup>197</sup> that mandated that sergeants were promoted to lieutenants alternately from a list of whites and blacks until 50 percent of the pool of lieutenants was black, a decision the U.S. Supreme Court refused to contradict.

Similarly, Lowery lashed back at Reagan's nomination of Edwin Meese to succeed William French Smith as attorney general, changing the president with "putting yet another foe of civil rights in charge of the agency responsible for protecting minorities against denials of equal protection of the law." Under Smith, the Justice Department "totally ignores the heavy burden than past discrimination places on Blacks, and dares condemn effort to relieve that burden," said Lowery in early 1984. Lowery contended:

The justice department totally ignores the heavy burden that past discrimination places on blacks, and dares condemn efforts to relieve that burden. The posture of the justice department is like unto a man who slays my mother, then punishes me for being a motherless child. Now, the nomination of Meese is a further case of this administration taking the role of government from "protector to prosecutor, from advocate to adversary."<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> "Civil Rights Panel Calls Quotas 'Unjustified Discrimination,'" *SCLC Magazine*, SCLC April/May, 1984

<sup>196</sup> Michael Preston, "The 1984 Campaign for President: Who Voted for Jesse Jackson and Why?" 129-146, in *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American*, ed. Lucius Jefferson Barker, (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press), 1989

<sup>197</sup> "Race - Affirmative Action & Quotas," AELE LAW LIBRARY OF CASE SUMMARIES: Employment & Labor Law for Public Safety Agencies, January 9, 1984, <http://www.aele.org/law/Digests/empl168.html> , [accessed: February 12, 2012]

<sup>198</sup> J. Lowery, "SCLC Denounces Meese as Head of Justice Department," *SCLC Magazine* April/May 1984, 33

Lowery, in fact, orchestrated an affirmative action covenant with Shoney's in 1989 following charges of discrimination by the fast-food restaurant against black employees at one of its restaurants. The \$90-million dollar agreement committed Shoney's to both train and promote blacks as managers at its 700 stores. It also required Shoney's, the owner of Big Boy Restaurants and Lee's Chicken, to establish black owned franchises throughout its holdings, increase community responsibility and insure increased purchasing from black firms.<sup>199</sup>

While the Reagan Administration publicly opposed two bedrock civil rights pillars, bus-ing and hiring quotas – not to mention a virtual slowdown in prosecution of education and hous-ing discrimination cases,<sup>200</sup> black resiliency and a more level political field did yield some tang-ible gains. From June of 1982 to July 1983, the number of black elected officials rose nationwide by a robust 8.6 percent. Marking a spike in black political activity, as well as an increase in black registered voters of 600,000 from 1980-82, the number of black elected officials soared to 5,606, including 21 members of Congress, up from 18. Also, of 1,223 black elected officials – 22 percent – were women.<sup>201</sup> The gains were the largest since 1976. And while it was signifi-cant progress since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – when an estimated 300 black elected officials served in the U.S., the new high still represented only a paltry 1.1 percent of all elected officials in the country, according to the Joint Center for Political Studies, who's presi-dent, Eddie N. Williams, still called the figures “encouraging.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> “Shoney's Signs Pact...The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “ *Orlando Sentinel* , August 20, 1989, [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1989-08-20/news/8908202642\\_1\\_pact-shoney-captain-d](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1989-08-20/news/8908202642_1_pact-shoney-captain-d) , [accessed: August 11, 2012]

<sup>200</sup> Marian Wright Edleman, “Does a ‘Different Focus ‘ for Civil Rights Mean No Civil Rights?,” *SCLC Magazine*, April/May 1984, 78-79,

<sup>201</sup> “Number of Black Elected Officials Up 8.6 Percent in 1983,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Magazine*, April/May, 1984, 80-84

<sup>202</sup> IBID

Speaking about the November 1994 elections, Lowery told the participants at the Rainbow Coalition March that “we believe the American people want an end to the gridlock in government, but not a headlock on the well-being of the poor. “We call for a strengthening of international efforts (affirmative action) to include the excluded and remedy inequities in the workforce and the marketplace,” Lowery said May 22, 1995. Urging the leadership in both the legislative and executive branches to step up the fight to eliminate poverty, create jobs and job training and demand livable wages, Lowery, known as the “Dean of the Civil Rights Movement,” thundered to the crowd as he closed with one of his trademark rallying cries:

With malice toward none, but a message for all, we declare in no uncertain terms that there will be no turning back!” “We’ve come too far, marched too long, prayed too hard, wept too bitterly, bled too profusely and died too young to let anybody turn back the clock on our journey to justice!<sup>203</sup>

Showing that he could be above partisan politics, Lowery and the SCLC spearheaded an affirmative action town hall meeting at his church, Central United Methodist in downtown Atlanta, featuring Art Fletcher, April 6, 1995.<sup>204</sup> Fletcher, a black Republican from the Reagan Administration often credited with being the “father of affirmative action and equal opportunity laws,”<sup>205</sup> was also the architect of the Philadelphia Plan. Joining Lowery and the SCLC as co-hosts were the Teresa Jeter Chappell, vice-chair of the Georgia Black Republicans, Vickie McLennan, executive director of the National Organization for Women’s Georgia Chapter, and Rodney Strong, former director of contract compliance for the city of Atlanta. Lowery mod-

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<sup>203</sup> J. E. Lowery, “Statement by SCLC President Joseph E. Lowery, Rainbow Coalition March,” May 22, 1995, *SCLC Magazine*, July/August/September, 1995, 22.

<sup>204</sup> Gilliard, “Newest Presidential Contender Art Fletcher Headlines SCLC Affirmative Action Town Hall Meeting at Central United Methodist Church”, April 5, 1995, *SCLC Communications*, news release.

<sup>205</sup> David Postman, “GOP Aide Arthur Fletcher, who Pushed Affirmative Action, Dies”, *Seattle Times*, July 14, 2005, [accessed: November 20, 2011].

<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20050714&slug=fletcherobit14m>

erated the panel, which focused on whether the playing field was level and whether white males were the victims of reverse discrimination.

Meeting in April of 1995, the SCLC's National Board of Director's introduced a resolution supporting affirmative action, partially in response to instances of racist cartoons and maps published by AT&T.<sup>206</sup> The global communications giant printed and distributed internal maps showing customers on each continent. The map depicting the African customer was a monkey.<sup>207</sup> Thus the SCLC understood the need for AT&T officials – who obviously saw black people as “Other,”<sup>208</sup> or less than human – to employ affirmative action in the workplace. Meanwhile, the SCLC's had also received over 125 unsolicited complaints alleging discriminatory hiring, firing and promotion practices against the communications giant. In addition, the SCLC fielded over 50 complaints alleging discrimination in hiring, firing and promotion against The Gwinnett (GA) County Department of Public Utilities, the Atlanta Gas Light Company and other local and national companies. The resulting resolution called for the SCLC and the Black Leadership Forum to establish a national panel on affirmative action in Washington and hold town hall meetings to expose and explore abuse and discriminatory practices that supported the need for affirmative action. Other glaring data listed in the resolution included the fact that the median income for blacks was less than 60 percent that of whites and the fact that blacks, though 12 percent of the population, held fewer than five percent of the senior management position in

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<sup>206</sup> R. Gregory, “SCLC Board of Directors Passes Two Resolutions at its 1995 Spring Board Meeting,” *SCLC Magazine*, July/August/September, 1995, 30-34.

<sup>207</sup> “AT&T Apologizes for its ‘Racist’ Cartoon Depicting African Caller as a Monkey,” *Jet Magazine*, October 14, 1993, 4-5,

[http://books.google.com/books?id=YsEDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA4&dq=%E2%80%9CAT%26T+Apologizes+for+its+%E2%80%98Racist%E2%80%99+Cartoon+Depicting+African+Caller+as+a+Monkey,%E2%80%9D&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4OfLT5-rNIaw8ASst\\_j2Dg&ved=0CDQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CAT%26T%20Apologizes%20for%20its%20%E2%80%98Racist%E2%80%99%20Cartoon%20Depicting%20African%20Caller%20as%20a%20Monkey%2C%E2%80%9D&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=YsEDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA4&dq=%E2%80%9CAT%26T+Apologizes+for+its+%E2%80%98Racist%E2%80%99+Cartoon+Depicting+African+Caller+as+a+Monkey,%E2%80%9D&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4OfLT5-rNIaw8ASst_j2Dg&ved=0CDQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CAT%26T%20Apologizes%20for%20its%20%E2%80%98Racist%E2%80%99%20Cartoon%20Depicting%20African%20Caller%20as%20a%20Monkey%2C%E2%80%9D&f=false), [Accessed: March 15, 2011].

<sup>208</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1989) 88-108

Fortune 500 companies, while the few that were at that level, were frequently paid less. That same summer, Vice-President Al Gore, keynoting the SCLC national convention in New Orleans, reaffirmed President Bill Clinton's commitment to affirmative action:

Speaking to the almost exclusively black crowd, Gore said: "Anybody who denies that racism still exists is less than honest about the true state of America today," he said, noting that in 1995 blacks still earned only 60 percent of what whites earn. "Affirmative action can and must continue to play a role in our society."<sup>209</sup>

Pointing to the Georgia legislature's plan at redistricting announced in the summer of 1995, Lowery, author of a joint statement signed by the Concerned Black Clergy, the Georgia Conference of the NAACP, the regional NAACP, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and the SCLC, blasted the announced plan as "racist and absurd." Critiquing a controversial 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned the parameters' of Georgia's 11<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, while allowing race-based factors, yet denying their predominance, the Joint Statement for the Preservation of African-American Voting Rights raked both parties over the coals.

Lowery said:

The Congressional plan adopted by the Senate is racist and absurd. It represents an abandonment and emasculation of the voting rights of African-Americans by both Democrats and Republicans. Republican candidate Pete Wilson and Democrat Mark Taylor must have read from the same racist script. We (Georgia) urge the General Assembly to utilize the plan proposed by the House as a point of beginning in working for final passage of reapportionment. It provides for two majority black districts and one heavily influenced district. We will vigorously oppose any plan that dilutes black voting strength. If the plans are adopted over our opposition, we will ask the Department of Justice to file an objection under sec-

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<sup>209</sup> "Vice-President Al Gore Gives Keynote Speech at SCLC Convention," *Jet Magazine*, September 18, 1995, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1355/is\\_n19\\_v88/ai\\_17445371/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1355/is_n19_v88/ai_17445371/), [Accessed: April 10, 2012].

tion 5 of the Voting Rights Act. We will also consider litigation under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.<sup>210</sup>

While much of the economic justice focus has been nationally and internationally focused, Lowery and the SCLC in 1995 also took on local business the Prior Tire Company, which sued the Atlanta Public Schools System's minority and female set-aside programs.<sup>211</sup> Spurred on by the conservative Southeastern Legal Foundation, Prior Tire sued because Quick Fleet Tire, a minority firm owned by African-Americans, was awarded the city school system's contract, despite the fact that Quick Fleet's bid was \$6,000 higher than Prior's. When the school system allegedly adjusted Prior's bid downward by \$16,000 in order to "level the playing field," and move towards its goal of 35 percent of its contracts filled by African-Americans and women, the SLF and Prior filed suit. Lowery, who called together the Atlanta Business League, NAACP, Rainbow/PUSH and others to walk the picket line and call on residents to spend their money elsewhere, was adamant about the need for a protest. Lowery stated:

We are wounded and infuriated by the action of this business because for three generations, they have enjoyed the generous support and patronage of the black community. They have been awarded contracts by the Board of Education, as we understand it, several times. And now because they did not get all the contracts, at least one has gone to a minority contractor – they would destroy the entire program and deprive black entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs the opportunity to do business with our Board of Education.<sup>212</sup>

Tyrone Brooks, president of the Georgia Association of Black Elected Officials (GA-BEO), wholeheartedly agreed. "I think it's particularly critical that we take on a business here that has benefited from the black community and made millions of dollars from it." Prior Chair-

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<sup>210</sup> J. Lowery, "Joint Statement for the Preservation of African-American Voting Rights," *SCLC Communications*, August 31, 1995.

<sup>211</sup> Herbert Denmark, "Prior Tire Lawsuit Challenges APS Minority Policy," *Atlanta Voice*, May 26, 1995.

<sup>212</sup> Gilliard, "Lowery Criticizes Prior Tire and SEF over City of Atlanta Contract," SCLC news release, May 23, 1995

man Leon Goldman, on the other hand, defended the lawsuit as an objection to only a part of affirmative action, not the principle. “I understand that affirmative action is a gut issue in the black community,” said Goldstein. “I don’t oppose the goals of affirmative action. But there are parts of affirmative action that need to be challenged and looked at from a cost/benefit standpoint.”<sup>213</sup>

Ninety-three percent of Atlanta’s public school students were black, yet black and women businesses were only awarded two percent of APS contracts in 1991 before the new 35 percent goal was established. Sadly, like in most places across the country, in June of 2001, the SLF successfully led the fight to end the APS’ set-aside program by court order,<sup>214</sup> along with programs associated with school systems in Nashville, Tennessee, Jacksonville, Florida and DeKalb County, Georgia.

## 8.1 Black Seminole Freedom

Also, at the same April 1995 board of directors’ meeting, Lowery and the SCLC passed a resolution aimed at President Clinton expressing organization support of the Seminole Freedmen’s quest for economic justice and recognition for the Dosar-Barkas and Bruner Bands of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. African or mixed African and of Native American descent, the Freedmen were excluded from the 1976 Judgment Fund Act, which awarded the Seminole Nation \$52 million (\$16 million plus interest accrued since 1823) to compensate for land stolen by the U.S. government in 1823 and 1832.<sup>215</sup> Their exclusion occurred despite the fact that land was taken from both African and Native Americans Seminoles displaced along with the full-

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<sup>213</sup> Gilliard, “Lowery Criticizes Prior Tire and SEF over City of Atlanta Contract,” SCLC news release, May 23, 1995

<sup>214</sup> Southeastern Legal Foundation, “Reverse Discrimination,” (2011), <http://www.southeasternlegal.org/reverse-discrimination/>, accessed: [March 12, 2012]

<sup>215</sup> R. Gregory, “SCLC Board of Directors Passes Two Resolutions at its 1995 Spring Board Meeting,” *SCLC Magazine*, July/August/September, 1995, 30-34

blooded Seminoles. The decision to exclude the black Seminoles was based on the 1906 Blood Seminole Rolls, even though reps from both groups took part in the decisions to determine the distributions of the funds. The overtly racist portion of the 1906 agreement was the fact that if a Seminole was on half Indian and one-half black, he was placed on the Freedman Roll, thereby losing all blood Seminole identity and right to be included in the tribal rolls and correspondent settlement. Conversely, if a Seminole was one quarter Indian and three quarters white, he was placed on the Blood Seminole list and thereby, eligible for the settlement and other restitutions.<sup>216</sup>

Because the Seminole Freedmen had used every available administrative tribal remedy to seek justice and redress through the tribe, the SCLC resolution next called on a similar path through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The SCLC resolution also asked President Clinton and the BIA to intervene on behalf of the Freedmen and 1) Issue a mandate that the Freedmen be entitled to share equally in Judgment Fund benefits; 2) Set aside \$7.5, “the Freedmen’s proportional share, from the fund and hold it in trust for Freedmen members” and 3) Require a full accounting of the monies already spent as part of the Judgment Fund. The resolution went on to point out that the Seminole Freedmen had been struggling with this “blatant form of discrimination” since 1988 and that the SCLC and BLF would continue to communicate with Freedmen Attorney John Velie, while offering to convene a meeting with BIA officials, as well as hold a press conference to shed light on the plight of the Freedmen in an effort to gain public support.

## 8.2 Hunger

Since its inception in 1957, Lowery and the SCLC have held fast to a long-standing commitment to the fight against hunger and poverty, which has consistently led the organization

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<sup>216</sup> Martha Melaku, *Seeking Acceptance: Are the Black Seminoles Native Americans?* Sylvia Davis v. the United States of America,” *American Indian Law Review*, 539 (2003)

to push presidents and Congress to consider the plight of the poor within its legislation. That position once again collided with federal policy in 1985. As attorney general, Meese famously denied that there was extensive hunger in America, saying that many who went to food kitchens did so because the food was free and stories of hunger were largely “anecdotal.” Meese and Reagan’s position was loosely backed up by the findings of a four-month, \$320-million, 13-member Task Force on Food Assistance, which, following a three-month study, proposed a net increase of \$200 million in spending on food for the poor.<sup>217</sup> The problem was, at the same time the largely conservative task force did its work, Reagan was proposing a \$636 million cut of food assistance programs for fiscal year 1985. The publication reported that in Los Angeles County, for instance, 1.3 million people lived below the poverty line, nearly half of whom needed help getting food, while in Texas, one in four people was classified as needing help obtaining food.<sup>218</sup> “The same gentleman who sees no hunger, will probably see no injustice as attorney general,” Lowery continued. “Putting Meese in charge of the Department of Justice is analogous to putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.”<sup>219</sup>

### 8.3 Summary

Critiquing government appointed commissions that deny the need for affirmative action and help for the poor, Lowery and the SCLC consistently fought for the rights of the underdog. Whether it was Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, whose majority black district was being redrawn, or demonstrating how racist advertising at AT&T demonstrated the need for affirmative action, Lowery doggedly called out what he saw as repressive and exclusionary laws and oppressive private industry practices. Lowery also called the nation to task for its discriminatory

<sup>217</sup> “From Hunger,” *Time Magazine*, January 24, 1984

<sup>218</sup> The Eighties Club: The Politics and Pop Culture of the 1980s, “Task Force Can’t Find Widespread Hunger in America,” January, 1984. Accessed: September 27, 2011 (<http://eightiesclub.tripod.com/id411.htm>)

<sup>219</sup> Lowery statement, “SCLC President Criticizes Nomination of Edwin Meese as Attorney General,” SCLC press release, February 13, 1984

treatment of the black Seminole Freedmen and stood up for black and Hispanic produce pickers in Florida and California. He also personally picketed a local firm that sued to overturn the city of Atlanta's affirmative action program, while chastising what he considered an impotent U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. At every turn, Lowery ardently fought to maintain the ground gained by affirmative action on the 1960s and 1970s while consistently using anecdotal evidence to make his case, thus keeping the issue alive before moderates and liberal thinking Americans, while ensuring social conservatives their policies were being patrolled. Oftentimes, the efforts fell on deaf ears. But Lowery and the SCLC did improve the rights and benefits of migrant workers, increased black ownership, management numbers and vendors at Shoney's restaurant holdings, and may have been influential in Carter administration legislation that increased food assistance funding.

## 9 Chapter Nine: Recognizing the Gifts of Women

The SCLC – as have most mainline civil rights organizations – has long been seen as a male-dominated, preacher-centered organization. And while that phenomenon largely remained in place during Lowery's 20-year run as president, I will show how he incorporated and relied upon women in several key positions. Not only did Lowery support the elevation of the status of women by placing them over finance, youth development, the organization's foundation, and its high profile legal department, he also rallied behind the election and efforts of several key women as chapter presidents. I will show how Lowery's support of his wife, Evelyn Gibson Lowery, gave her space to express her agency, which led to the development and proliferation of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. I will also explain how his support of the women's arm of the organization, founded two years after Lowery's election, led to the development of one of the events the SCLC is most well known for today, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Annual Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner, which has honored a plethora of national and international luminaries. I will also detail how the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. initiated the SCLC's involvement in the Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman voting rights case and how the erection of permanent historic markers throughout Alabama will memorialize the contributions of valiant sacrifices for generations to come.

Lowery and the SCLC did highlight and support both the work of women on staff and key feminist and womanist issues throughout the years. While Chairman of the SCLC board of Directors during Abernathy's administration, Lowery and the SCLC stood in the gap for Joan Little, a young black woman accused of murder in 1975. Golden Frinks, the SCLC's North Carolina field secretary, served as the group's field staff lead on the case. Little was charged with killing prison guard James Alligood by stabbing him 11 times with an ice pick when she said

was sexually assaulting her in 1974, while she served time in prison for robbery. Only twenty at the time, Little escaped and Alligood was discovered dead the next morning, naked from the waist down with semen on his leg.<sup>220</sup> The SCLC picketed at her 1975 trial in Washington, North Carolina, on behalf of Little. The group also joined the coalition of National Organization of Women (NOW), the Women's Legal Defense Fund, the Southern Poverty Law Center and others who fought for her acquittal.<sup>221</sup> Following international attention on the case, which centered on whether blacks and women were treated fairly by the criminal justice system in the south, Little, who became a cause célèbre and a hero for women's rights, was acquitted of the crime and returned to jail.

Though primarily male and ministerial --- much like in the 1960s – the SCLC's board of directors comprised nine women and 40 men in 1995. The women included Mrs. Johnnie Carr, MIA president, Mrs. King and Mrs. Lowery as well as Ms. Evelyn Occhino, western regional vice president. Several key members of the SCLC executive staff were women, including: General Counsel Roxanne Gregory; business manager Gwen Brinson, Youth Director Brenda J. Davenport; SLC Foundation Director Betty Brooks and Stop the Killing/End the Violence Coordinator Gayle Watts-Wiggins. In addition, Olivia Carter served as the SCLC/Baltimore president. Stephanie Parker-Weaver, who has led the Jackson, Mississippi chapter of the SCLC since the mid 1990s, said Lowery had a history of being strongly supportive of women leadership that extended beyond his support of Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. Said Parker-Weaver:

There has not been one time that I have called upon Dr. Lowery to lend his powerful voice to a cause to empower the community or seek justice for the least of these that I've led in Mississippi from

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<sup>220</sup> Wendy Segars, "Power to the Ice Pick: Remembering the Joan Little Murder Trial," University of North Carolina-Ashville, Fall 2006. [http://toto.lib.unca.edu/sr\\_papers/history\\_sr/srhistory\\_2006/segars\\_wendy.pdf](http://toto.lib.unca.edu/sr_papers/history_sr/srhistory_2006/segars_wendy.pdf), [accessed: March 1, 2012].

<sup>221</sup> James Reston, Jr., *The Innocence of Joan Little: A Southern Mystery*, [Lincoln: Times Books, 1977], 47-62, 104, <http://www.amazon.com/The-Innocence-Joan-Little-Southern/dp/0595153232>, [accessed: April 1, 2012]

May, 1995-to the present, that he was not more than willing to accommodate me.<sup>222</sup>

Parker-Weaver pointed to a campaign that lasted from 1995-'98, when the Jackson chapter called on Lowery to help defeat privatization efforts by “a group of white property owners” following the election of a black mayor and a majority city council. Lowery also joined the effort to bring justice following the January 26, 1998, bombing of Mississippi’s oldest black-owned newspaper, the Jackson *Advocate*. Even after his retirement, Lowery joined Parker-Weaver and the chapter’s fight against the state’s 1999 decision to invoke eminent domain on behalf of Nissan North American in order to take the land of a group of poor black landowners near Canton. “At the time Dr. Lowery hired me as executive director/field secretary for the Jackson Chapter of SCLC, I was barely 30-years old,” said Parker-Weaver, pointing to Lowery’s “unwavering support.”<sup>223</sup>

Perhaps most notably, Lowery put his seal of approval on the establishment of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., initiated by his wife, Evelyn Gibson Lowery. Twenty-two years after the formation of the nation’s premier African-American grass-roots civil rights group, Evelyn Gibson Lowery emerged as the first enduring female leader of a significant arm of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Certainly, other women had led admirably within the group, notably Ella Baker, who served as the group’s first, short-lived executive director, and Dorothy Cotton, who was appointed as the SCLC’s Citizenship Education Director in 1963.<sup>224</sup> None, however, working under the banner of the SCLC, came close to establishing the footprint of Evelyn Gibson Lowery, who marshaled a tiny group of women and built them into a formidable force both within the SCLC and the civil rights community at large. Not only did Mrs. Lowery

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<sup>222</sup> Stephanie-Parker Weaver interviewed by author, January 22, 2012

<sup>223</sup> Stephanie-Parker Weaver, January 22, 2012

<sup>224</sup> Freedom Awards Recipient Dr. Dorothy Cotton, National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, 2012, [http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/?page\\_id=580](http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/?page_id=580), [accessed: March 1, 2012]

have the foresight to establish the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. as a separate – though related, organization, but she also aggressively developed programs and initiatives, including an annual golf tournament, the civil rights tour and the highly successful Martin Luther King, Jr., Drum Major Awards Program, that provided income streams for the group. In the process, Mrs. Lowery also built strong personal relationships with corporate giants who supported her initiatives, including Coca-Cola, Delta and Georgia Power. At times, according to Dr. Lowery, Mrs. Lowery's success and strong will sometimes created problems with the SCLC Board of Directors. Joseph Lowery stated:

The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. became an independent voice on their own and I never tried to control them. They (SCLC female staff executives and Mrs. Lowery) had freedom to be creative and to do their thing. I was pleased with that. The crazy men on that board couldn't stand strong women and they tried to destroy her as soon as I left. I was pleased with the women's role. Remember, we were the first civil rights organization to have a female executive director (Ella Baker), though it didn't last long. I was pleased with what both Evelyn and the women on my staff were able to accomplish as we worked together. I trusted them.<sup>225</sup>

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded in 1957 by a group of primarily southern Baptist male ministers who sought to build a network of defense and advocacy for African-Americans in the face of entrenched and frequently institutionalized racism and degradation, especially in the South. Only one woman was among the 60-some leaders from ten states who gathered to form the group, though most were supported and encouraged by strong and resourceful women. Mrs. Coretta Scott King, wife of the founding president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mrs. Abernathy, wife of Dr. Ralph D. Abernathy, who succeeded King following his assassination, were highly effective leaders in their own rights, yet did not head organizations during their husbands' tenures as president. However, in 1977, Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, a Methodist minister from Mobile, Alabama, won a closely contested battle over Rev. Ho-

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<sup>225</sup> Joseph E. Lowery, interview by author, April 7, 2012

sea Williams to become the third president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Two years later, Lowery's wife, Mrs. Evelyn Gibson Lowery, gathered a group of women in her living room to share her vision for an organization that would "offer intergenerational programs designed to empower women, girls and families as they relate to human rights, social action, economic self-sufficiency, reduction of health disparities, and leadership to build strong families and communities."<sup>226</sup> Evelyn Lowery said:

Having been a part of the movement throughout the years, as a woman, and seeing the involvement of other unsung female contributors, I felt that it was time for women to come to the forefront of leadership – as well as follow-ship and put into action their abilities and talents in ways as never before. In 1979, after a peaceful intended demonstration in Decatur, Alabama, in defense of a mentally retarded young man, Tommy Lee Hines, I was shot at two times in my car, narrowly escaping death. Afterwards, I felt that my life must have been spared for some reason.<sup>227</sup>

The group that met in the Lowery home in southwest Atlanta including Mattie Jones, Ms. Gwendolyn Campbell, Sue Ross, and Janice Alexander and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N, Inc., was born. Based on Auburn Avenue right next to the SCLC's national headquarters, 32 years later and still going strong – Evelyn Lowery and the *SCLC/Women's Organizational Movement for Equality Now, Inc.*, (SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., Inc.) have made impressive, even historic strides, in a broad array of arenas. Prolific in terms of establishing programs, honoring trailblazing ancestors and mentoring youth and training adults, Evelyn Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have been much less open and effective in terms of sharing their thought processes, management style, vision and inner workings, especially when it comes to the Academy. Closed and guarded, she has doggedly protected both her husband and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s organization like a momma bear protects its cubs. As a result, there have been precious few extensive historical

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<sup>226</sup> Evelyn Lowery, interviewed by author, April 18, 2011

<sup>227</sup> Evelyn Lowery, 2011

interviews of Mrs. Lowery to be gleaned from academic circles. Other than the 2004 interview by the *HistoryMakers*,<sup>228</sup> there is limited scholarly work of note detailing the contributions of Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., beyond a cursory mention connected to her husband, in either JSTOR or EBSCO. Emory University, which was acquired much of both Joseph E. Lowery's papers and those of Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. in 2010, will begin to those records to researcher in 2012. The dearth of information, frankly, is a baffling sin of omission for a 34-year-old organization and its leader that has made significant marks within the civil rights community, and has substantial records to prove it.

Although written records sold to Emory will prove immensely helpful, as will the *HistoryMakers* interview, Lowery has, in my opinion, sadly missed the opportunity to be questioned and analyzed by other interested and trained researchers and will likely take significant parts of her story and her priceless insights to the grave with her, as Rev. Hosea Williams, Rev. James Orange, and many other marvelous leaders have because they were either unwilling, or too worried about others benefiting from their work, to adequately document their stories through academics and others. Felecia Davis, who has worked with Mr. and Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. extensively since the mid 1990s, said Mrs. Lowery and others from the sixties have developed an elitist attitude.<sup>229</sup>

Born in 1927 in Memphis to activists Dr. Harry and Evelyn Gibson and approaching her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, it is this researcher's position that Lowery and the organization should be planning for a successor and ensuring that the world and the civil rights community have clear, primary source accounting of the marvelous journey Lowery and the organization have undertaken. Da-

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<sup>228</sup> *The HistoryMakers*, Evelyn Gibson Lowery, September 21, 2004, [http://www.thehistorymakers.com/programs/dvl/files/Lowery\\_Evelynf.html](http://www.thehistorymakers.com/programs/dvl/files/Lowery_Evelynf.html), [accessed: March 3, 2012]

<sup>229</sup> Felecia Davis, former SCLC staffer, interviewed by author, April 14, 2011

vis also noted that Mrs. Lowery had alienated young activists who she could have mentored and whom could have learned much from her because she shut them out, instead of including them. For that reason Davis and some others from the “next generation” of activists, while applauding her many accomplishments, expressed the belief that the time has passed for Mrs. Lowery to retire and pass on the reigns of leadership,<sup>230</sup> though few will say so openly. Still, despite obvious access issues, Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have created space for her vision and in the process, made invaluable – even historic – contributions on a number of fronts, including:

### 9.1 HIV/AIDS

In 1986, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. became one of the first black organizations in the nation to host conferences focused on the issues of HIV/AIDS.<sup>231</sup> The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. continue to participate in and sponsors various local activities in order to educate women and citizens at-large on the crippling effects of HIV/ AIDS, especially in the African-American community, including a major program it sponsors every December 1, World AIDS Day.

Evelyn Lowery explained:

Seeing the epidemic grow month by month and year by year, and the need for more understanding and information – we called together a conference of health officials across the country to discuss the impending problem – including the Surgeon General, who lived in Atlanta at the time. There was much denial and many myths regarding HIV/AIDS. If the epidemic continued to grow in that year, we decided to have a second conference in Washington, DC at Howard University. Afterwards, we sought a grant from CDC to conduct and discuss HIV/AIDS in several cities in Georgia – Macon, Albany, Savannah, Augusta – and then a national campaign in five cities across the country, including Detroit, MI, Kansas City, MO, Dayton, OH, Tuscaloosa, AL and Atlanta, GA.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Felecia Davis, interviewed by author, April 14, 2011

<sup>231</sup> SCLC/Women’s Organization for Equality Now, Inc., “World AIDS Day,” 2011 <http://www.sclcwomeninc.org/worldaidsday.html> , [accessed: April 12, 2012]

<sup>232</sup> Lowery, convener, SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. 2011 , History, <http://www.sclcwomeninc.org/#> , [accessed: May 6, 2011]

According to Emory archivist Quigley, the records for the National AIDS Program form the majority of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s embargoed archives, and shed light on some very early efforts at AIDS education in the African-American community. Documents include completed AIDS knowledge surveys, which were conducted as part of the program's outreach activity. The surveys provide critical epidemiological insight into popular attitudes toward HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the black community – and black women specifically, with another being infected with HIV every 35 minutes – makes the fact that the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. were among the first to sound the alarm even more impressive.<sup>233</sup>

## 9.2 Mentoring Program

Considered by Mrs. Lowery's "one of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s three greatest accomplishments," the group crafted a girls' mentoring program entitled "*Bridging the Gap: From Girls to Womanhood*," that has shaped and molded hundreds of girls aged 8-18 from throughout metropolitan Atlanta. Program components include a one-on-one coupling of an experienced mentor and a new girl in what the group calls "sister pairing." *Growing to Womanhood*, group activities focused on cultural and historic field trips, spiritual awareness, and entrepreneurial skills are components of the mentoring plan that served as many as 300 girls in 1999. In addition, a tutoring program, designed to enhance school performance and increase the likelihood of completing school, is another key facet. The program connected young girls in the community starving for role models with women like Courtney N. Aiken, a 2007 honors graduate of Spelman College. While at Spelman, Aiken was involved in a number of activities, including the S.C.L.C./W.O.M.E.N.'s Bridging the Gap Mentorship Program, through which the South Caroli-

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<sup>233</sup> Black Women's Health Imperative, <http://www.blackwomenshealth.org/issues-and-resources/black-women-and-hiv-aids/>, (2012), [accessed: April 16, 2012]

na native was a mentor for young girls, and served as vice-president of the Political Science Society.<sup>234</sup> In 2010, Aiken established FAVOR Business Consulting, a Business and Non-Profit Development firm.<sup>235</sup>

The group also utilizes its headquarters to host a Women's Empowerment Training Center, which empowered hundreds of women five days per week by teaching computer skills and personal development skills to adults, teen parents, and the homeless. That arm of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. began in 1988 as a GED/basic computer skills program. The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have also positively impacted families and children in several concrete ways. Each year, for instance, Mrs. Lowery hosts a huge, Christmas party for hundreds of seniors in the Atlanta community. The women also sponsor a big Christmas party for hundreds of metro Atlanta's less fortunate youth, usually at the Atlanta Civic Center, where they all go home with gifts.

Carolyn Young, wife of King confidante and former U.N. Ambassador Andy Young, has worked as a friend and member of Mrs. Lowery's board since 1982.<sup>236</sup> She believes the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have made an immeasurable impact on the South and the civil rights landscape.

Said Young:

She's just a wonderful person and she has inspired me and many young women and older ones alike to pass on the blessings that they have received. She still does a dinner and when I met her she was doing a Christmas party for the victims (Atlanta's missing and murdered families). Then after several years of that, she continued to give the Christmas party, but for less fortunate children of the

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<sup>234</sup> Courtney Aiken, "About Finding Eve," *Finding Eve Sou Cafe*. 2011, <http://www.findingevesoulcafe.com/#!about-us/vstc2=the-team>, [accessed April 28, 2011].

<sup>235</sup> IBID

<sup>236</sup> Carolyn Young, interview by author, on Evelyn Gibson Lowery and the impact of the *SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.*, April 20, 2011

city. She had partners such as Wal-Mart and the Parks and Recreations Department of the City of Atlanta, in addition to funds she had (independently) collected. But she didn't have the bigger gifts like she did with the families of the missing and murdered children, but every child got a gift and every child got a fruit basket. Then the following day she gives a dinner for about 1,500 seniors and she continues to do that with little or no budget and with just asking for donations and giving people the gift of in-kind services and she also gives them (partners) gifts.<sup>237</sup>

### 9.3 Other Activities

Not simply a local force, the 501c non-profit organization also involves itself in national and regional issues, including in 2001, when they sent a supply of baby supplies to the Princeville<sup>238</sup>, North Carolina community, which had been ravaged by unprecedented flooding that resulted in coffins popping up out of the ground. Earlier still, in the 1980s, they encouraged and celebrated the lives of Atlanta's Missing and Murdered Children<sup>239</sup> through events and a memorial quilt, which included photos of each of the victims. A contributor in many ways, Mrs. Lowery was presented in 1997 with the Social Responsibility Award for her lifetime commitment to support in the community at the SCLC's 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Labor Management, Government and Social Responsibility Awards Breakfast January 18<sup>th</sup> at the Atlanta Hilton.<sup>240</sup>

Among her innovative ideas, Mrs. Lowery was the originator of the "toy gun exchange," a creative idea that promoted the encouragement of children to turn in toy guns<sup>241</sup> -- an effort to discourage violence -- for safer, less symbolic toys. A December 16, 1994 event, co-sponsored by BP (British Petroleum) Gas, A&P and the Cajun Crab House, resulted in Mrs. Lowery col-

<sup>237</sup> Carolyn Young, interview by author, on Evelyn Gibson Lowery and the impact of the *SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.*, April 20, 2011

<sup>238</sup> Frank Dexter Brown, "The Destruction of Princeville, the nation's oldest black-Governed Community." *EarthAfrica News Service, SeeingBlack.com*, April 9, 2001, <http://www.seeingblack.com/x040901/princeville.shtml> [accessed April 20, 2011]

<sup>239</sup> Phil Skinner, "Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children's Cases," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 12, 1982

<sup>240</sup> D. Gilliard, "SCLC 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention Highlights," *SCLC Magazine*, 17-27, October/November/December, 1996

<sup>241</sup> Mary Welch, "Civil Rights Warrior Still in the Battle," *Atlanta Woman*, 2008, 38-40

lecting two boxes of tow guns at First Step School, Inc., a kindergarten through sixth grade school in Atlanta. The “Give the Gift of Life” Gun Buy-Back , which also included the collection of toy guns, was also supported by the Fulton County and Atlanta Federal Penitentiary inmates.<sup>242</sup>

In 1996, at the 39<sup>th</sup> annual SCLC National Convention in Detroit, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. honored Detroit chapter leaders Betty McGuire and Gertrude Power.<sup>243</sup> “They were very faithful and noble women always fighting for the cause of positive change for issues affecting women of color,” said Lowery. Then-Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, herself a child of the movement, was the keynote speaker for the annual women’s luncheon. Mavis Staple of the Staple Singers provided the entertainment. The luncheon, typical of each annual affair hosted by the women, also included a “*Woman’s Call*” designed to engage women in responding with assistance and prayers to the church burnings that had ravaged the black community for the previous two years. In addition, the group announced its winners for the annual \$10,000 is scholarships and prized for its national oratorical context, “*Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Developing Spiritual Foundations for Peace with Justice and Equity.*” The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. also used the forum to unveil the Detroit section of their “*Stop the Killing – End the Violence*” Memorial Quilt, which utilized photos on a quilt to memorialize those who died senselessly from acts of violence.

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<sup>242</sup> Larry Lewis, *SCLC Magazine*, March/April 1995, 40-41

<sup>243</sup> Gilliard, “SCLC President Lowery Preaches at Union Temple Baptist Church Sunday to Kick-off Million Man March Weekend,” *SCLC Communications* news release, October 12, 1995

#### 9.4 International Affairs

The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. in 1990 hosted a *Salute to South African Women*, honoring Winnie Mandela, at the Marriott Marquis in downtown Atlanta.<sup>244</sup> The grand event featured both Winnie and Nelson Mandela and included a luncheon presided over by Dr. Maya Angelou, with music by Shirley Caesar, and included greetings from Mrs. Elizabeth Harris, wife of Governor Joe Frank Harris, Mrs. Valerie Jackson, wife of Mayor Maynard Jackson and closing remarks by Mrs. Coretta Scott King. Speaking to the power of the SCLC and its distaff component, corporate sponsors included Anheuser-Busch, Inc. the Black McDonald's Operators, Emory University, Georgia Power, IMB and Turner Broadcasting. As one highlight of the event, in unison, Mrs. Lowery led the *Litany to the Women of South Africa*, as three thousand attendees joined in: Lowery said:

We pay tribute to the women of South Africa for their Sensitivity, their Inspiration, their Serenity, their Tenacity, their External vigilance, their Resourcefulness and their Strength -- SISTERS in the struggle, who, as Langston Hughes said, have "gone where there aint' been no light, but who are "still climbing" though "life aint been no crystal stair. People: "In sisterhood, your struggle is our struggle."<sup>245</sup>

Although primarily a force in Atlanta and the South, Evelyn Lowery has – following the lead of her husband – prompted the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. to also engage in legislative affairs, international affairs and peace initiatives.<sup>246</sup> The WOMAN POWER flyer promotes the issues of (Education) student loan cuts, quality education and heritage identity. Regarding political Justice, the flyer promotes voter registration and voter education. Economic justice issues include

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<sup>244</sup> SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. Programme, "A Salute to South African Women," Atlanta, June 23, 1990, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Jean Young Collection

<sup>245</sup> IBID

<sup>246</sup> SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., "WOMAN POWER " brochure, 1981, *SCLC Communications*, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Jean Young Collection

seeking consumer power, the quest for jobs, black businesses, equal pay, sexual equality, welfare rights and quality merchandise in oppressed communities. Regarding legislative affairs, the group lobbies for issues affecting children, families and the aged, while also fighting for proper nutrition, income maintenance and health care for all, as well as women's issues. In the international front, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. called for divestment from South Africa, peace with justice in Central America, the Middle East and the Caribbean, support for refugees and the battle to fight world hunger. Standing for peace, the women's arm of the SCLC called for a stop to the bombing, a ban on the testing of nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament and the reductions of military spending.

Clearly unable to substantively impact most of these issues, the group nonetheless insisted its voice be heard, standing for the voiceless and the powerless. Because her husband, Dr. Lowery, was a veracious reader blessed with a quick wit and a ready grasp of a broad range of economic, political, racial and ethnic, judicial and criminal justice issues, Mrs. Lowery, less publicly self-confident and less eloquent, was not forced to master a myriad of issues. Her genius, however, was found in her creativity and ability to galvanize broad support for her projects and initiatives.

In January of 1982, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. produced a fact sheet and promoted a campaign called the *Coalition to Free Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and Save the Voting Rights Act*.<sup>247</sup> The movement included a galvanizing letter writing campaign to national organizations

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<sup>247</sup> SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., Flyer, "Coalition to Free Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and Save the Voting Rights Act," *SCLC Communications*, 1982

on behalf of the Pickens County, Alabama, activists. A march from Carrollton, Alabama to Montgomery, February 6-18, resulted in an impressive a show of support.<sup>248</sup>

## 9.5 Survival of the Black Families in the 80s

On April 3, 1983, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., as part of its annual commemoration of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., hosted *Survival of the Black Family in the Eighties: 1983: the Black Teenager*.<sup>249</sup> The co-keynoters for the event, Dr. Leotta Tucker and Dr. Robert Tucker of Hartford, CT, spoke on *Adolescent Sexuality: Refrain or be Responsible*. Workshops included: *The Destructive Aspects of Getting High* (substance abuse), *Coping with Stress* (homicide/suicide) and *Public Policy for and Against the Black Teenager*. The second day of the event included a co-keynote by noted black studies antecedent Dr. Nathan Hare and Julie Hare of San Francisco entitled *Black Male/Female Interpersonal Relationships*. Breakout sessions included *Body and Soul* (physical and mental), *Obtaining and Maintaining Employment* (unemployment and job skills) and *Teen Pregnancies/Parenting*.<sup>250</sup>

Still early in their history, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s event was hosted by historic West Hunter Street Baptist Church, with Clark College, site of the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner. The group was only a few years away from the event becoming a major gala annually staged at one of Atlanta's magnificent hotels. Two years earlier, April 3-4, in 1981, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. sponsored *Survival of the Black Family in the Eighties: The Black Child Agenda*.<sup>251</sup> This event featured workshops sessions on *Building Quality Schools in Low Income Neighborhoods*, *the Impact of Integration*, and *the Problems of*

<sup>248</sup> Stuart, "Rights March Under Way," *Google News*, February 7, 1982, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1915&dat=19820207&id=Ji1SAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=EDYNAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1377,1045649>, [accessed: April 10, 2011]

<sup>249</sup> "Survival of the Black Family in the Eighties: 1983: the Black Teenager," *SCLC Magazine*, June/July 1983

<sup>250</sup> IBID

<sup>251</sup> "Survival of the Black Family in the Eighties: The Black Child Agenda," *SCLC Magazine*, June/July, 1983

*Educational Testing* under the category of Improving Educational Opportunities. Under the category of Protecting Health and Welfare, workshops included *Crime in Our Society* and its Psychological Effects, *Child Abuse: Everybody's Problem and Resources for Families: Support for Child Rearing*. Panelists for the event including Atlanta Police Chief George Napper, child psychologist Dr. Ted Smith, and co-chairpersons Camille Bell and Willie Mae Mathis of the *Committee to Stop Children's Murders*. In addition to the International year of the Child report by Mrs. Jean Young and a report on Legislation Affecting Children by Pamela Moore of the Children's Defense Fund, noted psychologist Dr. Anne Ashmore Poussaint and her husband, Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, presented on *Effective Parenting and Developing Positive Self Concepts*. While a listing of these events may seem mundane today, I can find nowhere else in the Academy where the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. are credited for creating this forum, which, in my opinion, make this chronicle important.

## **9.6 Crown Jewels**

Perhaps most significant, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have been trailblazers in three high profile initiatives: 1) They annually sponsor the Evelyn G. Lowery Civil Rights Tour, which takes several bus loads of curious and committed sojourners throughout the key Alabama cities of the civil rights movement and end up in Selma, for the annual commemoration of "Bloody Sunday" and the crossing on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the first Sunday in March; 2) The organization and Mrs. Lowery are also the brainchild behind the annual *Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner*, a grand event that has honored everyone from Tiger Woods and Oprah Winfrey, to Nelson Mandela, Shirley Sherrod and Butterfly McQueen and 3); the dedication and erection of 13 civil rights memorial monuments honoring legendary activists across the South, including 'she-roes' Viola Liuzzo, Marie Foster and Amelia Boynton intended to remind Americans for gen-

erations to come of the sacrifices of the least of these. In addition, the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., 22 years younger than its parent organization, managed to buy and build its own building in 1998, ten years before the SCLC achieved the feat.

### **9.7 Civil Rights Heritage Tour**

The Ninth SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s Annual Civil Rights Heritage Tour,<sup>252</sup> not unlike those that continue still, featured a historic, six-city tour that began with a swing through Birmingham, where during the 1960s, Sheriff "Bull" Conner unleashed dogs and fire hoses on children. Next, the group of three buses journeyed to Anniston, where the KKK bombed a busload of Freedom Riders in 1961. From there, they continued to Montgomery, the cradle of the confederacy, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. In route to Marion, Alabama, where civil rights worker and Army veteran Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed protecting his aged grandmother, a trigger for the historic Selma to Montgomery March, the group stopped along Highway 80 to commemorate the life of white activist Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit housewife slain by the Klan there in 1965. From there they proceed to Selma and Brown's Chapel AME, from where the marchers took off only to be brutalized on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on what became known as "Bloody Sunday" in 1965.

"It has been a joy to see the expression on the faces of our young people, as well as those who weren't here in the South (at that time), to share in the struggle for equality," said Lowery. "To go and see some of these great people and the actual sites where they changed the course of history has been the thrill of a lifetime."<sup>253</sup> Said Carolyn Young:

She goes all throughout Alabama pointing out to students and to adults what happened in those historic places. And that's when she

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<sup>252</sup> Gilliard, "SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. Sponsor 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Civil Rights Heritage Tour," news release, February 28, 1996 SCLC Communications

<sup>253</sup> Evelyn Lowery, 2011

decided – around the third year doing that – ‘I need to put up monuments of where these people were killed and we can tell them about them.’ She rides one bus and she has trained all of us to tell the story as we travel around the highway.<sup>254</sup>

Felecia Davis said Lowery has made an indelible mark on the education of many, especially the young. Davis said:

The value of the placement of monuments and the Bloody Sunday trip to Alabama is vastly under-estimated. For young and old alike, the EGL Civil Rights tour provides an opportunity to experience history, learn first-hand from civil rights veterans, and make their own personal pilgrimage crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. She was the first to come up with a concept that has been replicated successfully by many others, including Congressman John Lewis.<sup>255</sup>

Gwenne Campbell, a longtime director of the Atlanta Federal Executive Board, an umbrella organization of the federal government in the Southeast, was one of the handfuls of women with Mrs. Lowery at the founding of the organization and has seen the bulk of the highs and lows. Noting that the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have done numerous notable things, Campbell pointed out she is most moved by the fact that the group fills a critical education gap for young people. She remarked:

While I am very proud of the work that SCLC/WOMEN does in promoting women and girls, a lot of organizations have this as a part of their mission. What I am most proud of is that fact that Mrs. Lowery and SCLC/WOMEN have been able to create permanent memorials to the work of a number of great leaders and causes by erecting historical markers through the Heritage Tour to educate generations who did not have first hand participation in a movement that changed America. She is providing what school history books do not.<sup>256</sup>

For generations untold who never knew the bombastic Williams, the bravery of Amelia Boynton, or the sacrifice of Viola Liuzzo,

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<sup>254</sup> Carolyn Young, 2011

<sup>255</sup> Felecia Davis interview with author, April 25, 2011

<sup>256</sup> Gwenne Campbell, interview by author, October 5, 2011

the markers tell a narrative in the very environment that those memorialized made history.

## 9.8 Drum Major for Justice Award

Young, who sees Mrs. Lowery as vastly underappreciated, says she has been a visionary in terms of who she has honored at the Drum Major awards. Young said:

She is really a diamond in the rough. She has done pretty much more than most people, most women in enlightening people of the civil rights movement. She was involved in it in the 1960s but since 1988, I think her third award recipient was Camille Cosby. Since that time she has consistently reminded us of what we need to do, what has been done. Through her dinner she has honored people. She was the first person in this city to honor Tiger Woods when he was 10 years old. She was the first one to honor Oprah Winfrey in 1990. She has a list of all the outstanding people she has honored and she finds the most unusual honorees that people don't know about. They emerge and become very great. But she kind of identifies them before their greatness comes.<sup>257</sup>

A visionary, Evelyn Lowery was able to point out and pay homage to high achieving people of color before most recognized their greatness.

Davis, who also applauds Lowery's influence on youth, added:

I can say really quickly how moved I was when Mrs. Lowery selected the Georgia Kids Against Pollution, and my daughter Illai Kenney, one of the founders, for a Drum Major for Justice Award.<sup>258</sup> I didn't know that she was even aware of their work but the honor provided not only an opportunity to recognize youth activism, the Drum Major for Justice event contributed so much to their development just in the experience-a first black-tie event. Many of the KAP kids had been on Mrs. Lowery's tour to Alabama and they view her as a leader that really cares. When she honored them as high school students, each one stood a little taller. They realized that their efforts were noticed and important. All of them graduated from high school and went on to college. Mrs. Lowery has a huge impact upon the lives of youth.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> C. Young, 2011

<sup>258</sup> Illai Kenney, *Huffington Post*, Ac, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/illai-kenney> [accessed: April 1, 2011]

<sup>259</sup> Davis, 2011

## 9.9 Historical Monuments

In many minds the crown jewel of her many impressive accomplishments, Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have erected a powerful array of 13 historic monuments across Alabama that honor and memorialize those who fundamentally changed the state, the South and the nation. Honorees include Liuzzo, Coretta Scott King, Hosea Williams, Amelia Boynton Robinson, Marie Foster, John Lewis, Albert Turner, Sr., Jimmie Lee Jackson, Earl T. Shinholster, James Reeb, James Orange and Rosa Louise Parks. Young put Lowery's contributions into perspective: "More important than the building, are the programs," insisted Young.

According to Dr. Barbara Jean Emerson, former vice-president for Program Development at Queens College and the daughter of civil rights legend Rev. Hosea Williams the significance of these five-foot tall upright slabs of polished black granite goes beyond being testimonials to the people and events that changed American history. Said Emerson:

The accessible ground-level placement of each marker and the life-like two dimensional, laser-cut replication of a photograph of the hero and heroine that it honors, evoke and enable a personal relationship for the visitor, By tracing the facial features of the subject and taking pictures standing side-by-side with his or her image and description of historic contributions, today's visually oriented youth can more readily identify with these subjects. Therefore, they might imagine themselves to be capable of involvement in future social change because they have had a physical, as well as an intellectual, experience of agents of past social change.<sup>260</sup>

Emerson, an activist since childhood, continued:

Evelyn Lowery's foresight in the design and insight in the erection of these markers ensures permanent and accurate recognition of true history makers on the actual spots where that history occurred. An example of Lowery's vision is the placement of the first markers at the foot of Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, where the attack on marchers was so vicious that March 7, 1965 became known as "Bloody Sunday. Newsweek editor Jon Meacham<sup>261</sup> declared the

<sup>260</sup> Barbara Jean Emerson ,interview by author, April 18, 2011

<sup>261</sup> John Meachum, "Obama's American Dream," *Newsweek*, January 24, 2009

Edmund Pettus Bridge, not Appomattox, as the site of the end of the Civil War.(1) Further, President Obama remarked on the significance of the Edmund Pettus Bridge episode during his victory speech, Inaugural and State of the Union addresses, and health care bill signing ceremony. Many Americans know of SNCC representative John Lewis' presence at the head of the march but Lowery was aware that Lewis arrived in Selma just before the march and chose to first honor "The Other Guy on the Edmund Pettus Bridge,"(2) co-leader and march organizer Hosea Williams, and Amelia Boynton, the long-time, leading female activist in Selma.<sup>262</sup>

### 9.10 Summary

Joseph Lowery's willingness to work alongside women – on his staff, as leaders of chapters and affiliates, and through the support and endorsement of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. – is a critical, yet often overlooked aspect of the Lowery Legacy. This factor is made even more significant when Lowery is compared to his predecessors and the roles women played in their administration, even given the nature of the times. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Evelyn Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have established a firm footprint on the civil rights landscape of the deep South in general, and the Atlanta metropolitan area in particular, during its 31 years in existence. Along the way, the organization has mentored thousands of girls and empowered thousands of women and by teaching them basic computer skills and increasing their life chances by helping them to pass the GED. The group has also provided a semblance of a traditional Christmas celebration for throngs of young people annually, while celebrating our aging population with a festive meal. In addition, it has educated throngs via its annual bus tours through Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma and Marion, Alabama that trace what in many ways is the genesis of the modern civil rights movement. Thirteen monuments to stellar civil rights leaders stand as a testament to not only their individual commitment to freedom and justice for all, but also to the commitment of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. to preserve their legacy. The women have also branded

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<sup>262</sup> Emerson interview, 2011

one of Atlanta's most celebrated and significant annual traditions, the town-and-gown celebration known as the Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner, annually drawing thousands. Supported by business stalwarts such as Coca-Cola, Delta, Georgia Power, UPS and others, it is the world's premier event to honor the legacy of Atlanta's own Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps most remarkable, is that these events have happened under the virtual exclusive leadership of one woman within the male dominated civil rights arena: Mrs. Evelyn Gibson Lowery. Despite challenges by SCLC Board President Claud Young and then-President Martin Luther King, Jr.,<sup>263</sup> over control of the organization in 2005, Mrs. Lowery has never stopped administering her programs, sponsoring the dinner.

In conclusion, Mrs. Lowery and the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. should be commended for carving out a bright path that has empowered and lifted thousands of young women and girls, while educating and bringing much needed joy and attention to a multitude of seniors and youth. The group's work with the annual civil rights tour and the Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner have become institutions unto themselves, while I know of no other civil rights group that has memorialized its heroes and 'sheroes' as the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. have. Simply superb as a planner, facilitator, administrator and even a visionary, Mrs. Lowery – deliberate, even halting and monotone of speech – is the workhorse, next to her witty, glib and eloquent husband, the show horse. While history will look kindly on Mrs. Lowery for her outstanding leadership, there will always be questions – especially within the academy --- as to why there are not more primary source research papers, interviews and documentaries focused on her life, her accomplishments and her leadership. The answer is primarily that Mrs. Lowery would not allow it because she

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<sup>263</sup> Associated Press, "SCLC Board Sues Co-Founder Joseph Lowery, Wife Evelyn." *The Charleston Chronicle*, April 16, 2004, <http://v2010.accessnorthga.com/detail.php?n=171196> [accessed February 5, 2012]

guarded her work, her methods, her domain and her leadership process fiercely, both from friend and foe alike. A leader by example, Lowery has been exceptionally successful, clawing and scratching to preserve her space in a male-dominated world.

## 10 Chapter Ten: Conclusion

While certainly not beyond criticism, Joseph Echols Lowery proved to be a risk taker, an effective administrator, an skilled spokesman and statesman and a worthy “keeper of the flame” during his 20 years at the helm of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In terms of risks, Lowery took major gambles by meeting with Palestinian Liberation Organization Leader (PLO) Yasser Arafat against U. S. government wishes. He later lashed out at President Carter for the 1979 firing of United Nations Ambassador and former SCLC executive director Andy Young, also over the issue of “negotiating with terrorists.”<sup>264</sup> Lowery took and lost the gamble of reluctantly supporting Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, nominated in 1991 by President George H. W. Bush. “I deplore the fact that President Bush's campaign used Willie Horton to turn whites against blacks, and the nomination of Clarence Thomas is probably designed to turn us against each other within the African-American community,” said Lowery.<sup>265</sup>

Later, in his own inimitable style, Lowery said that Thomas had fooled both he and the black community into believing he would be sensitive to their issues. “I have told [Thomas] I am ashamed of him, because he is becoming to the black community what Benedict Arnold was to the nation he deserted; and what Judas Iscariot was to Jesus: a *traitor*; and what Brutus was to Caesar: an *assassin*,” said Lowery.<sup>266</sup> Lowery also risked the ire of the federal government by pushing for the release of downed airline pilot Eugene Hasenfus, shot down over Nicaragua while flying a plane once connected to the CIA, against the wishes of the White House. Later, in

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<sup>264</sup> Jake C. Miller, “Black Viewpoints on the Mid-East Conflict,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, “Special Issue: American Blacks on Palestine,” (Winter, 1981), 37-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i323172>, [accessed January 3, 2012]

<sup>250</sup> Peter Applebome, “Dr. King’s Rights Group Backs Court Nominee,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/27/us/dr-king-s-rights-group-backs-court-nominee.html> [accessed January 11, 2012]

<sup>266</sup> John Pezarro, “How the Left Trashes Black Conservatives,” *FrontPageMag.com*, July 10, 2002, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=23752> [accessed February, 12, 2012]

1995, he again drew the ire of the Jewish community and others when he decided to step out and support Minister Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March, much to the chagrin of many conservatives and moderates. Perhaps more than any of his earlier gambles, this one – two years before his retirement – may have carried the highest stakes in terms of his legacy.

As an administrator and leader of an organization much smaller than many realized, Lowery miraculously managed to meet over 520 payrolls – without exception – every two weeks for 20 years. Maintaining a “mean and lean” staff and rarely giving raises, Lowery conceded “we couldn't do nearly all the things I wanted to do, but we did what we could with what we had.”<sup>267</sup> One of the key advantages developed by Lowery was the profitable *SCLC Magazine*, a four-color, 200-page organizational bi-monthly magazine. Not only did the organ serve as a strong messaging forum with a circulation that reached international destinations, but it also featured dozens of lucrative full-page advertisements from major corporations like MCI, Pennsylvania Blue Shield, Cadillac, General Electric, Ford, Mrs. Winners and Dunn & Bradstreet. More so than Abernathy before him or his series of successors, Lowery mastered his use of both the media and media organs.

Much of Lowery's success as a fund raiser, spokesman and leader can be attributed to his broad knowledge and commitment to both domestic and international issues of concern to blacks and the oppressed. The other key factor to his success has been his strong vocabulary, ability to respond to issues in a timely fashion, and a keen ability to capture the attention of the media. Several observers have noted Joseph Lowery's significance to SCLC and the national human rights movement.

David Garrow credited Lowery with being the leading edge of a strong revival of the SCLC at the organization's 27<sup>th</sup> annual convention in Charlotte in 1984. “Lowery has been in-

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<sup>267</sup> Joseph Lowery, interview by author, April 7, 2012

strumental in bringing the SCLC back to the point where it is a major player among the national black organizations,” said author David Garrow, postulating that Abernathy was as good as King when speaking to grass-roots rallies, yet struggled when dealing with national audiences and political figures. Garrow said Lowery, on the other hand, had “acquired more of that over the years. It’s his commitment of energy, and also the fact he’s really an excellent public speaker.”<sup>268</sup>

For twenty years, Lowery honed his craft and earned the respect of many. John Blake, a writer at *CNN* and a long-time civil rights reporter who covered the SCLC for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* during the 1990s, remembers Lowery as a highly effective leader. A seasoned reporter, Blake marveled at Lowery’s ability to “spin a phrase” and interpret issues.

Said Blake:

I thoroughly enjoyed covering Dr. Lowery. I came to the conclusion that he was underrated, not only as a civil rights leader, but as a leader. Often when the media covers black leaders, they only describe them in narrow, stereotypical terms. The leader is “charismatic,” a “fiery orator,” – kind of like describing black athletes as naturally gifted and white athletes as “heady” players. They don’t really give credit to the intellect of black leaders. I always thought Lowery was one of the most intellectually gifted and witty leaders out there. I felt like there was nothing I could ask him that he hadn’t thought about deeply. Just a real, sharp, sharp mind.<sup>269</sup>

John Head, editor for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* during the nineteen eighties and nineties, framed the Lowery Legacy this way: “Lowery Kept SCLC Relevant.” Said Head:

Lowery’s legacy includes his vigilance in fighting for human rights of African-Americans on various fronts; economic empowerment through covenants he signed with several major corporations designed to infuse cash and jobs into the black community; and his tireless quest toward voter registration, education and participation.

<sup>268</sup> Tom Minehart, “King’s Organization Back in the Limelight,” *SCLC Magazine*, April/May/June 1984, 48-49

<sup>269</sup> John Blake, former *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* civil rights reporter, Interviewed by author, January 12, 2012.

Lowery has also been one of the nation's leading spokesman in the effort to quell the black church burnings and encourage further African-American voter participation for the general election.<sup>270</sup>

Blake, who literally attended and covered dozens of SCLC press conferences, campaigns and initiatives, said:

He was always pumping out press releases, calling for protests. He would call me at my office, wondering why I wasn't covering something the SCLC was doing. In retrospect, what I like also is that he never seemed petty or mean, at least to me. I wrote some things critical about him but he never seemed to get petulant or freeze me out. He always had this sense of humor or perspective about things that I appreciated. I always felt comfortable calling him. To think now when I call him, I don't hear the same booming voice or that chuckle, is kind of sad. He's remarkable.<sup>271</sup>

Another key indicator of the SCLC's resurgence under Lowery was the rebuilding of the skeleton staff, which grew from four part timers in 1977 to 20 full-time staff in Atlanta and two more in Alabama at the time of his retirement in 1997. Frederick Douglas Taylor, former SCLC chapters and affiliates director, who served on staff at the organization beginning in 1969 under Abernathy, until 2010, remembers Lowery's ascension to the presidency this way:

I think Dr. Lowery came along at a very critical point in the life of SCLC, Dr. Lowery did much to stabilize and bring in financial resources for the organization. That was strength of his. He was able to do that. During the 20 years of his administration, we did not miss a payroll. I might mention that during the last six months of Dr. Abernathy's tenure, we were not paid.<sup>272</sup>

Sampson, a key staffer from the 1960s who now pastors Fernwood United Methodist Church in Chicago and remains an ardent activist, agreed that Lowery was an effective keeper of the flame. Said Sampson:

It was a great moment in history when Dr. Lowery said 'nobody runs me but the Lord and I have to walk in the footprints of Dr.

<sup>270</sup> John Head, "Lowery has Kept the SCLC Relevant," *SCLC Magazine*, October/November/December, 1996,

<sup>271</sup> Blake, former *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* civil rights reporter, interviewed by author, January 12, 2012

<sup>272</sup> Frederick Douglass Taylor, interview by author, Atlanta, October 27, 2011

Ralph David Abernathy and Dr. Martin Luther King. I must stay in the history of those footprints.’ And I appreciate him even to this day because of that wisdom. And now he’s one of the key ministers in the life of President Barack Obama.<sup>273</sup>

Andrew Young expressed the opinion that Lowery was “the right man at the right time to lead the SCLC. Joe tried to fight off the backlash and I think did so successfully. It was getting no position nationally,” he said. “I think Joe stabilized the organization and continued the growth of grass roots chapters, solving grass roots issues.”<sup>274</sup>

Nearly fifteen years after he left office in 1997, Lowery’s steady hand of leadership of an organization that had lapsed into virtual irrelevance seems all the more impressive, especially given the challenges and turmoil that have plagued the SCLC since his departure. His consistency in challenging authority on all levels, his grasp of the issues and uncanny ability to articulate the hopes and dreams of the black freedom struggle, will be the traits that define him. And it was his willingness to speak truth to power -- even when it generated hostility and division within the circle of civil rights leadership -- will be among the enduring characteristics that set him apart.

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<sup>273</sup> Albert Sampson, interview by author, Atlanta, November 11, 2011

<sup>274</sup> Andrew Young, interview, by author, Atlanta, November 2, 2011

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