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MOURNING AND MESSAGE:  
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S 1968 ATLANTA FUNERAL AS AN IMAGE EVENT

by

REBECCA BURNS

Under the Direction of M. Lane Bruner

ABSTRACT

The seven-and-a-half-hour series of funeral rites that occurred in Atlanta on April 9, 1968, in honor of assassinated civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. were broadcast live to 120 million U.S. television viewers and reported extensively in local and national newspapers and magazines. While King's April 4 assassination triggered deadly riots in more than 100 cities, Atlanta remained peaceful before and during the funeral. In this research thesis I explore how the funeral was leveraged by three disparate stakeholder groups—King's family, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Atlanta's liberal white leadership—to stage image events. I create a historiography for each group that draws on primary sources and original interviews. Using an intertextual approach, I conduct qualitative content analysis of the media coverage generated by each group's actions, identifying seven major messages that emerged.

INDEX WORDS: Martin Luther King Jr., Death, Funeral, Atlanta, Coretta Scott King, SCLC, Ivan Allen, Intertextuality, Visual Rhetoric, Image Events

MOURNING AND MESSAGE:  
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S 1968 ATLANTA FUNERAL AS AN IMAGE EVENT

by

REBECCA BURNS

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

2008

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Rebecca Burns  
2008



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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S 1968 ATLANTA FUNERAL AS AN IMAGE EVENT

by

REBECCA BURNS

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Georgia State University  
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## INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that much of the mourning on display during the funeral services held in Atlanta on April 9, 1968, in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. was a genuine outpouring of grief and shock at the slaying of an internationally known advocate of nonviolence. But it is also true that an event of such magnitude could not occur spontaneously, and therefore some of the emotionally gripping images that appeared in media coverage of the event were the result of deliberate planning and staging. Who staged the funeral? Were there public relations goals behind the staging? What media coverage resulted from those strategies? Those are the core questions I sought to address through this project.

My hypothesis was that King's funeral was a deliberately staged "image event" that employed specific tactics intended to shape public opinion about King's colleagues in the civil rights movement, his family, and his hometown, Atlanta. To test this hypothesis, I examined how events that were part of the funeral ceremonies could have been staged to further the positions of three distinct groups: the members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); Atlanta's white civic and business leaders; and King's widow and family.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the funeral and its significance. The first section outlines the scope of the funeral in terms of attendance and media coverage, and then provides details on the four stages in which it unfolded. This section also places the peaceful funeral events in Atlanta in the context of the deadly rioting that occurred in more than 100 cities in other parts of the United States in the week following King's assassination. The second half of the chapter provides a detailed literature review that discusses the role that the funeral had in shaping King's place in history and demonstrates the dearth of academic attention paid to the funeral events despite their magnitude and significance.



Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical rationale for my approach to this project and an explanation of my methodology. I first discuss the concept of public relations and cite examples of how public relations strategies have been employed by social movements. I demonstrate King's implementation of public relations tactics in support of the civil rights movement. I then discuss the concept of "image events" and how counterpublics use them as communication tools. I identify the three stakeholder groups whose public relations strategies I plan to explore in this project, and then, drawing on Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics, I explain how each of the three groups examined in this study can be defined as either a counterpublic or a group in opposition to the larger dominant hegemony. One of the successful tactics of staging image events is comparing or contrasting one group to another, and I present the case for a pairing for each of the stakeholder groups: the SCLC with militant advocates of black power such as Stokely Carmichael; the progressive white leadership of Atlanta with Southern segregationists such as Lester Maddox; and the King family with the Kennedy family.

In the second half of Chapter 2, I outline my two-pronged methodology for researching this project. The first step is creating a historiography for each of the stakeholder groups. These historiographical overviews draw on primary and secondary source archival research as well as a set of first-person oral-history interviews that I conducted with people who helped to plan and/or participated in the funeral. These historiographies explore the groups' past experience with public relations and image events and discuss why each had specific messages to convey during the funeral events. I also provide background on the paired group for each stakeholder group. The second step is to analyze media coverage that was generated by the funeral events. My approach to this analysis is informed by Michael McGee's theory that an audience creates a

message from fragments. I also draw on the concept of intertextuality, or the way in which fragments of media messages refer not only to other fragments in their immediate context, but also to images and ideas in the common culture. I then provide a list of the fourteen media sources that are used for this project—newspapers, magazines, and television footage—and the rationale for their selection, explaining how they are representative of the larger media coverage of this major event.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are case studies of each stakeholder group. Each chapter first discusses the group's prior employment of public relations tactics and then outlines the key messages the group attempted to communicate through planning and staging specific events relating to the funeral. In the second part of each case study, I discuss how the groups' messages were covered by the representative media outlets. Finally, I discuss how each stakeholder group was compared to another group. A summary for each case study presents the staged actions of each group and representative media coverage.

A conclusion chapter discusses the findings of the three case studies in relation to the initial research questions. In this chapter I identify the seven key messages that emerged from the fragments of mass media coverage generated by the funeral.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE KING FUNERAL AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

On April 9, 1968, a seven-and-a-half-hour series of funeral rituals took place in Atlanta honoring Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights leader who had been fatally shot by an assassin in Memphis, Tennessee, five days earlier (Bigart; Schumach). King's funeral was the largest ever staged for a private U.S. citizen (Lentz, 302). The televised funeral events were viewed by more than 120 million people across the United States and made international newspaper headlines ("120 Million"; Bal; Pach). The funeral also was the subject of subsequent magazine cover stories such as the April 19 issue of *Life* magazine—the most widely circulated weekly in the United States (Audits and Surveys)—which featured a portrait of King's widow accompanied by the coverline "America's Farewell in Anger and Grief," or *Jet* magazine—one of the most influential media sources for African Americans (Association of National Advertisers)—which featured the widow and her children on its April 25 cover with the coverline "King's Widow: Bereavement to Battlefield."

The funeral was held five days after King's April 4 assassination. During the intervening period between his death and burial, there was enormous upheaval as riots broke out in more than 100 cities across the United States. In Washington, D.C., Chicago, and other cities, buildings were destroyed by arson. A firebomb was set off in Tallahassee. Violence escalated in Boston, Winston-Salem, New York, and Minneapolis. In Detroit, police officers sent to control rioting were shot. Police clashed with young men in Raleigh. By the end of the week, some 57,500 National Guard troops had been dispatched to cities around the country, the largest force mobilized for any domestic situation. Over the course of that week, dozens of people died, thousands of buildings burned, and millions of dollars in property was destroyed or looted. In

Washington, D.C., alone, the riots left 2,500 people jobless (Adams; Associated Press; “Flash Fires”; Meyer; “New Riots”; “Trouble Flares”; United Press International, “Racial Violence”).

Describing the violence in the *Los Angeles Times*, Max Lerner evoked an image of destruction, writing that

the skyline of urban America in the past week has been a desolating one—not only the landscape but the manscape: fire-riddled blocks of houses and looted shops cordoned off in the Negro ghettos; at least a half dozen great cities turned into fortresses and watched over by guardsmen and soldiers; cities ravaged from within by their own dwellers and occupied by soldiers from without.

His eloquent verbal description was matched by images that appeared on the front pages of newspapers and on television screens nationwide of looting (Figure 1) and arson (Figure 2).

Against that national backdrop of urban violence, King’s hometown of Atlanta proved to be a notable exception. In Atlanta, police were put on double shifts. Mayor Ivan Allen and police chief Herbert Jenkins patrolled African-American neighborhoods by foot and pleaded with residents to remain calm (Allen, 209-210; Mullá). Students and faculty on the campuses of the historically black Atlanta University Center served as peacekeeping marshals, distributed leaflets urging nonviolence, and staged a march in support of King’s nonviolent credo (Cook; Crawford, Norman, and Dabbs; McCartney and Hebert; Mullá). Despite isolated incidents of minor vandalism, the city was tranquil (Winter).

The calm in Atlanta was particularly noteworthy considering that during those same tense days tens of thousands of people began to arrive in the city to attend the funeral. The crowds taxed the still relatively small metro area’s transportation system, and maxed out its restaurants and hotels. In response, volunteers helped to feed and shelter the new arrivals, setting up makeshift hospitality centers in churches and private homes (Davis; Ripley, “50,000”; Robinson; “SCLC Volunteers”; Jeff Nesmith; Stepp).



**Figure 1: Looting in Washington, D.C.** Robert Scurlock. *Life*, April 19, 1968.



**Figure 2: Fires in Harlem.** Bettman/Corbis.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference offices on Auburn Avenue in downtown Atlanta served as command central for coordinating efforts to manage the influx of mourners,

many of whom had limited financial resources. “Thousands of people offered to help. White people who had never been to Auburn Avenue came over to SCLC with food, money, and volunteered their time,” recalled Tom Houck, who was then a member of the SCLC executive board, in an interview. One of the people who came to the SCLC with an offer of help was Kathy Kohn, a resident of the suburb of Doraville who’d had no previous involvement with the civil rights movement. “We heard the call for help on the radio, so we packed up food into our station wagon and took our little boys and drove downtown,” she recalled in an interview. “I went into the office and asked what to do, and they said, ‘Central Presbyterian is now the center of operations.’ I said, ‘That’s our church.’ So we headed right over.” She, her husband, Norm, and hundreds of their fellow congregants volunteered. Norm Kohn recalled, “I spent the next three days at the church. The doors were never shut. People were sleeping on the floor, anywhere we could fit them. It was the most remarkable thing. Where other cities were having violence, Atlanta wasn’t.” He went on to say, “We had reporters from all over the world. We had Black Panthers in leopard-skin outfits. Ladies from the northside were coming in and helping. There was a marvelous sense of peace and calm.” He conceded “it was scary at times” because “literally you had no idea what would happen.”

While the SCLC and churches welcomed regular folks, City Hall and King’s inner circle prepared to welcome arriving politicians and celebrities. The city set up a special hangar at the airport to welcome dignitaries, and vice mayor Sam Massell spent days on-site greeting the arrivals (Winston Johnson; Massell). Politicians traveled from all regions of the country, among them: Walter Mondale, senator of Minnesota; Carl Stokes, mayor of Cleveland; Richard Hatcher, mayor of Gary, Indiana; George Romney, governor of Michigan; and former Vice President Richard Nixon. Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, chartered a plane, sending a

contingent of 100 from New York to Atlanta. Ambassadors from Norway, Guyana, Ethiopia, India, Ghana, Australia, and more than a dozen other countries arrived. Also arriving were celebrities, among them Eartha Kitt, Sammy Davis Jr., Bill Cosby, Paul Newman, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Diahann Carroll, Wilt Chamberlain, Marlon Brando, Sidney Poitier, and more—including Diana Ross *and* the Supremes (“3 Presidential Candidates”; Bigart; Collins; “King’s Last March”; Woolcock). “Everybody in the world had come here. That was pretty damn impressive,” recalled Paul Hemphill, who was a columnist at the time for the *Atlanta Journal*. “We still weren’t used to it. Atlanta still was a small town in a way” (interview).

Jesse Jackson, who had been with King in Memphis when he was shot, recalled being shocked by the flurry of commerce he saw in Atlanta before the funeral. “Arriving in Atlanta from Memphis, I was struck that the airport was full of King paraphernalia—all those magazines stacked up,” he recalled in an interview. Indeed, Elizabeth Oliver of the *Washington Afro-American* reported that newsstands at the airport sold out of 100,000 copies of *Life* magazine’s commemorative King issue—at \$1.03 each compared with the regular price of thirty-five cents (“Atlanta Visitors”).

But despite the chaos and commercial hustle, not all arrivals were critical of Atlanta’s response. John Lewis, a civil rights crusader who spoke along with King at the 1963 March on Washington, was working for the Robert Kennedy presidential campaign at the time of King’s death. In his memoir, he recalls that on arriving in Atlanta “the city looked orderly and calm, which was surprising, considering the fact that riots had broken out from coast to coast during the past twelve hours, a shock wave of rage that swept through the streets” (408).

Some of the cost of those peacekeeping efforts was underwritten by Atlanta’s biggest corporate citizen, Coca-Cola (Pendergrast, 293). On the night King was shot, Robert Woodruff,

the head of Coca-Cola, and Carl Sanders, the former governor of Georgia, had been in the White House paying a visit to President Lyndon Johnson. The meeting was interrupted when Tom Johnson, a press secretary, came into the Oval Office and handed the president the news bulletin stating that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot in Memphis (Tom Johnson; Sanders; White House Diary). Woodruff and Sanders left the Oval Office to return to their rooms at the Mayflower Hotel and to place a call to Ivan Allen, the mayor of Atlanta. Recalled Sanders in an interview, “Bob Woodruff called Ivan and told him to do whatever he needed to, even if it meant using his [Woodruff’s] private jet to help Mrs. King.”

When calling the Atlanta mayor, Woodruff was cognizant of the potential economic problems that could occur should violence happen in Atlanta. Woodruff, Allen, and other Atlanta businessmen already had witnessed the deleterious impact on commerce in Southern cities such as Birmingham and Little Rock following incidents of violent racial unrest (Kruse, 152-155). Woodruff was aware that Atlanta would be under intense media scrutiny, and so in his call, cautioned, “Ivan, the minute they bring King’s body back tomorrow—between then and the time of the funeral—Atlanta is going to be the center of the universe. I want you to do whatever is right and necessary.” Woodruff then promised “whatever the city can’t pay for will be taken care of” (Allen, 205).

Buoyed by the pledge of financial support from one of the city’s wealthiest companies, Allen implemented extra security in Atlanta and prepared for the media attention that he knew would be focused on King’s hometown (Dodd; Massell; Mullá). Simultaneously, the King family and its inner circle of friends prepared for a funeral they realized could never be kept private (Clayton, interview; Coretta Scott King, “My Life,” 300-301). And King’s colleagues in the civil



rights movement prepared for a future without their visionary and charismatic leader (Houck; LaFayette).

### **The Four Key Funeral Events**

The daylong April 9, 1968, funeral ceremonies in Atlanta consisted of four major segments, each coordinated by one or more of the stakeholder groups, as I will discuss in more detail in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

First, starting in the mid-morning, a private service was held in the sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King, his father, and grandfather all had served as preachers. During that service—which was primarily organized by King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, and his sister, Christine King Farris (Jethro English; Ron English)—the choir and congregation sang King’s favorite hymns and gospels, his close associates said prayers, and King’s college professor and mentor, Harold DeWolf, delivered a tribute. DeWolf reiterated King’s philosophy of nonviolence and urged the audience to adhere to that credo, saying,

Martin Luther King spoke with the tongues of men and of angels. Now those eloquent lips are stilled. His knowledge ranged widely and his prophetic wisdom penetrated deeply into human affairs. Now that knowledge and that wisdom have been transcended as he shares in the divine wisdom of eternity. The apostle Paul has told us that when all other experiences and virtues of humanity have been left behind, faith, hope, and love remain. But the greatest of these is love. (DeWolf)

Although the service was designed to be a personal tribute to King, the national unrest and tense political situation also were addressed by another speaker, Ebenezer’s assistant pastor Ron English, who prayed,

Oh God, our leader is dead. And so now the question that he posed during his life finds us in all its glaring proportions: “Where do we go from here? Chaos or community?” We pray, oh merciful Father that the removal of this man will not nullify the revelation given through him.

English went on to pray, “Deepen our commitment to nonviolence so that this country will not be run asunder by a frustrated segment of the black masses who would blaspheme the name of Martin Luther King by committing violence in that name” (“Transcripts”).

In an interview, English told me his prayer had been carefully scripted with the goal of addressing the violence in other cities. “I was aware of the riots and how this would be perceived and how it could lead to the kind of things that would not honor Dr. King’s life, teaching, and legacy,” he said, adding, “so that was one of the reasons I mentioned that, that we would not use the occasion to bring dishonor to him.”

Despite the eloquence of the prayers and tributes, what most moved the attendees crammed into the sanctuary’s worn wooden pews, the crowd gathered outside the church listening to the service being broadcast on speakers, and the millions who watched the live television coverage, was the homily delivered toward the end of the service—a recording of the “Drum Major Instinct” sermon that King had delivered at Ebenezer two months earlier (“Dr. Martin Luther King”).<sup>1</sup> In that sermon, King envisioned his own funeral and provided suggestions for how he should be eulogized, stating, “Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. And I don’t think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, ‘What is it that I would want said?’” As the audience listened, King’s unmistakably rich voice resonated through the small church as he stated,

I’d like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all the other shallow things will not matter. (“Dr. Martin Luther King”)

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<sup>1</sup> Although Abernathy introduced “Drum Major” by referring to it as King’s “last sermon,” Ron English said that another sermon, on love, was actually preached by King at Ebenezer on the Sunday before his death.

This speech left the participants in the service emotionally shaken; Andrew Young wept visibly and King's younger children looked around in confusion (ABC News; Bernice King; Bigart).

The decision to use the "Drum Major" recording had been announced to the media before the funeral, and the text of the sermon ran as an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* the day of the funeral ("Drum Major for Justice"). That King seemed to prophetically prepare his own eulogy proved fascinating to the press, with headlines such as *Jet's* "Rev. King Preached Own Funeral Before Death" or the *Washington Post's* "King Gave Outline for Eulogy."

After the private service, the attendees made their way outside to Auburn Avenue where a crowd had been forming since early morning, craning to see the celebrities at the service and waiting to accompany King's casket to the campus of his alma mater, Morehouse College, for a public memorial service. The crowd created an almost carnival-like atmosphere as gawkers clustered around the church and the mule wagon to which King's casket had been transferred in a symbolic handoff from the Ebenezer pallbearers, among them Jethro English, to the SCLC marchers, including Hosea Williams (Civil Rights Digital Library wsb38838; Jethro English). Finally, someone grabbed a megaphone and yelled, "If you don't move back, I think that mule will move you back." The crowd then moved up a few blocks, creating enough space for the church-service attendees to exit and the march to begin (Tyson, "Nowhere to Move"). King's casket was transported by the mule-drawn wagon on a four-mile procession that went through the heart of downtown Atlanta. As they slowly marched along the procession route, the group sang spirituals such as "We Shall Overcome" (Civil Rights Digital Library, item wsb53564).

As the procession made its way through downtown Atlanta, bystanders joined in and the number of people marching grew; reports estimate at least 100,000 paraded that day. Describing the scale of the funeral in his memoir, Andrew Young, who then was the executive vice president

of the SCLC, recalled the assembly being “frighteningly enormous” (478). In addition to the marchers, tens of thousands of onlookers crowded onto sidewalks, walls, and rooftops (Figure 3).

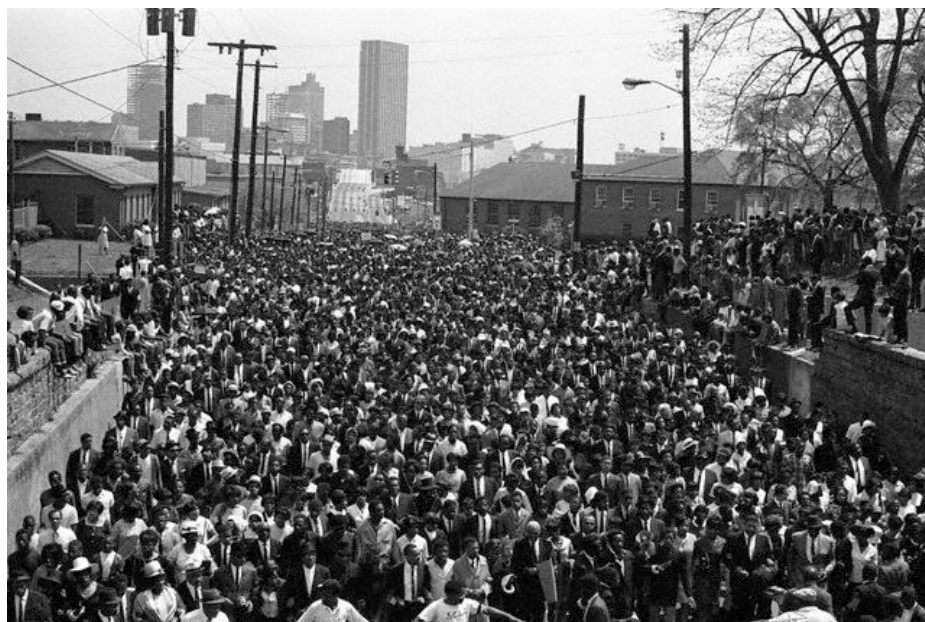
Some Atlanta businesses had gone to lengths to show their support for King’s family and followers. *Washington Afro-American* reporter Elizabeth Oliver noted that “signs seen on the famed downtown Peachtree Street and Margaret Mitchell Square do not memorialize *Gone with the Wind*, but they are now saying ‘In Memory of Our Slain Leader Dr. King’” (“More Tributes”). Department stores ran ads in Atlanta papers announcing they had closed out of respect for King (Ripley, “Funeral Is Ignored”).

But for every commemorative sign or show of support, there were equal signals of distrust of King’s followers or blatant disregard for the tragedy of his death. One reporter described Atlanta as a “racially tense city virtually closed down” (Ripley, “50,000”). Recalled Pete Kilgo, who was on duty that day in his role as director of sales for the Atlanta Transit System: “Almost all the stores were closed. People were expecting riots, all sorts of stuff. There was a tire place, Goodrich, that was closed. It had big glass windows and there were guards with shotguns at the windows.” Although there was interracial participation in the funeral, the crowd was predominantly African-American. Many whites stayed home, either afraid of violence or indifferent to King’s death (Ripley, “Funeral Is Ignored”). “A lot of guys just didn’t come to work that day. My wife was scared and didn’t want me to go downtown,” said Kilgo. Maria Saporta, a childhood friend of Yolanda King’s, was not allowed to take part. “My parents were both Holocaust survivors. They were extremely attuned to the civil rights movement. We were at picket lines back when I was seven years old,” she recalled. “I really wanted to go to the funeral; I thought I needed to go. And for the first time my parents—in an effort to protect me, I guess, out of the fear something would erupt—wouldn’t let me.”

White fears that King's funeral would spark violence were exacerbated by the actions of Georgia governor Lester Maddox, an unrepentant segregationist who barricaded himself inside the State Capitol and installed armed troops at the perimeter, giving them orders to shoot to kill if marchers approached the building ("Book Tells"; Greene and Ball; Rice 1988). The procession passed directly in front of the Capitol, which was across the street from City Hall. In an interview four decades later, Sam Massell, who then was Atlanta's vice mayor, described it thus:

We were the center of liberal America at that moment, white and black, Jew and Gentile, Northerner and Southerner. [The procession] had the leadership that thought progressively and it had the opponents ... across the street from City Hall standing in the door. Even then, you were a little apprehensive not knowing who was next to you, who was on top of a building across the street. You couldn't help but think of things like that.

That anxiety was shared by Kathryn Johnson, a reporter for the Atlanta Associated Press bureau, who recalled, "We were warned to be careful. The AP tried to give everyone who covered the funeral gas masks. But you can't carry everything you need—the tablet and the pens and all—and a gas mask, so I didn't bring mine. I was worried about getting the story."



**Figure 3: Crowds at King's Funeral.** Bettman/Corbis.

After making its way through the city, the procession arrived at the campus of King's alma mater, Morehouse College, for the third phase of the events—an outdoor memorial service. This service included a performance of “My Sweet Lord” by Mahalia Jackson and a formal eulogy delivered by the college's President Emeritus, Benjamin Mays (David Lewis, 391-392; John Lewis, 412). Like Ron English's prayer, Mays's eulogy referenced the political situation, as he issued a challenge to the audience:

It is now for us, all the millions of the living who care, to take up his torch of love. It is for us to finish his work, to end the awful destruction in Vietnam, to root out every trace of race prejudice from our lives, to bring the massive powers of this nation to aid the oppressed and to heal the hate-scarred world. (“Transcripts”)

Interestingly, while Mays delivered the most classic formal eulogy of the day, it did not receive as much media coverage as other elements of the funeral, perhaps because his words were overpowered by the size of the crowd. King biographer David Lewis, who attended the funeral, suggested that “on another day, perhaps a cooler one, and assuredly at an earlier hour, Dr. Mays's eulogy would have registered with great impact” (392).

Indeed, the delays caused by the long march forced organizers to shorten the planned program at Morehouse. Scheduled speeches by mayor Ivan Allen, SCLC cofounder Joseph Lowery, and others were canceled (Lowery; “Transcripts”; Civil Rights Digital Library, item [wsb53564](#)). “I regretted very much that I didn't get to speak. They cut me out—and they cut the mayor out, too. They apologized later, and I cussed them out,” recalled Lowery in an interview. “But it was a long funeral and there was a lot said. People were rejoicing at the opportunity to hear Mahalia, and Dr. Mays was eloquent. It was a long, hot day, but people were respectful—they endured the lengthy program. We were all still in a state of shock.”

In the fourth and final funeral event, King's body was taken by hearse to South-View cemetery, the graveyard founded by freed slaves in the 1800s and where King's grandparents

were interred (South-View). He was buried under a headstone inscribed, “Free at Last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, I’m Free at Last!” Ralph Abernathy, King’s closest friend and his successor as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, delivered a final prayer, saying that the Georgia ground in which King was buried was “too small for his spirit” (Bigart; Fiske; Oliver, “More Tributes”; “Transcripts”). Like the Ebenezer service, this was a smaller, private event. Unlike the morning service, this one was subdued as fewer celebrities and politicians were present (Butts; Houck). “I remember how tired the kids were, and Bernard Lee was carrying Bunny [Bernice King] back to the car and at that moment I realized that I now knew Martin Luther King was dead,” recalled Tom Houck. “For five days, we knew he was assassinated, but we knew he was still with us. At that moment, I knew he was dead.”

### **Significance of the King Funeral**

Even before he was killed, King’s place in history books was guaranteed. His influence as a leader of the American civil rights movement already had been recognized by the Nobel Prize committee and the editors of *Time* magazine (Garrow, 354-355; *Time*). He had been consulted on civil rights legislation by presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson (Garrow, 169-170, 436, 470). Millions of everyday people worldwide knew of him, thanks in large part to the eloquence demonstrated in such speeches as 1963’s “I Have a Dream,” and writings such as the 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Schumach). King’s rhetorical genius, personal charisma, and political savvy all contributed to his eventual stature as the iconic face of the civil rights movement, allowing him to eclipse pioneers who preceded him, such as A. Philip Randolph, as well as contemporaries such as John Lewis and Andrew Young (Rice 1983; Sharman).

But, as a number of scholars have effectively argued, it was an early and violent death that ensured King would not only earn the lead role in histories of the civil rights era, but also that he would secure a place in public memory as a martyr (Harrison and Harrison; Hoffman; Kane; Lentz, 281-307; Rice 1983). This was hastened not only by his assassination, but also the dramatic way in which it occurred. “The script could not have been written better by a Hollywood producer,” said Ron English, who is now an adjunct professor of African-American studies at West Virginia University.

The poignancy was heightened by the famous “Mountaintop” speech King gave the night before his death. Speaking to a group of striking sanitation workers and their supporters, whom he was scheduled to lead in a march, King created a comparison between his experience and that of the Biblical Moses who led the Israelites through the wilderness and only saw a glimpse of the Promised Land from a mountain peak before his death (Exodus 24). King told the audience,

We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter to me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. ... Like anybody I would like to live a long life ... but I’m not concerned. ... I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord. (Carson, 365)

The day after giving that speech, King was shot and killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis (Bond; Branch 2006, 766-767; Caldwell, “Guard Called”; Garrow, 623-624).

Later that evening in a television interview, Jesse Jackson, who’d been present at the time of the shooting, told reporters “the black people have lost their Moses” (*Eyes on the Prize*), and in the following days a barrage of media reports referred to King using terms such as Moses, apostle, Messiah, and prophet. The obvious Biblical metaphors of the mountaintop speech were covered by popular media at the time of King’s death, and they have since been examined for



their more subtle rhetorical technique by a number of communication scholars (Bobbitt and Mixon; Cummings and Niles; Lynch; Miller 1993; Osborn 1993; Harry Reed).

Communication scholarship has been dominated by a preoccupation with King's extraordinary prowess as a rhetor, as typified by the Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites–edited *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse* anthology or *Ring Out Freedom!* by Fredrik Sunnemark. Multiple researchers have addressed pivotal King texts, such as “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Berry; Fulkerson; Gaipa; Leff and Utley; Lee; Osborn 2004; Patton 2004; Snow) and the “Dream” speech (Miller 1989; Patton 1993; Vail). The latter speech is the subject of a book-length study by Drew Hansen. Other research has addressed individual episodes of the civil rights movement, such as the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott that launched King's public career as a civil rights activist, or the 1965 march on Selma, which garnered national media attention when it resulted in the violent “Bloody Sunday” episode on the Edmund Pettus Bridge (Hon; Selby; Wilson).

The phenomenon of mass media coverage of King as prophet/martyr in the immediate aftermath of his death has been documented by a number of scholars, including Dyson, Hoffman, Kane, and Lentz. Scott Hoffman asserts that the media coverage of King's death led the civil rights leader to achieve civic “canonization.” After King was assassinated, media reports emphasized martyr and saint descriptions, says Hoffman, who writes, “As the mantle of Moses and the cloak of Jesus were placed on King's shoulders during his lifetime, the trappings of sainthood popularly were placed around his memory after his death” (137).

But for all the attention paid to King's life and work and the acknowledgment that the dramatic events of his death led to a mythic status in cultural imagination, little effort has been made to study the rhetorical origins of the events staged to commemorate his death—despite the

magnitude of his funeral. A search of the database of theses and dissertations accessible through the global catalog WorldCat reveals more than 500 matches for graduate degrees awarded for work analyzing King's life, career, and/or rhetoric. However, less than a half-dozen of those theses or dissertations address King's funeral. An MA thesis written in 1970 by Joseph Alexander analyzes the rhetoric of one speech, the Mays eulogy, which he contrasts with eulogies for Robert Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower. A 1995 dissertation by Catherine Godboldte offers a detailed study of King's funeral as a reflection of African traditions, with an emphasis on an anthropological perspective. In a 1993 dissertation, Michael Eric Dyson contrasts King and Malcolm X as heroes, addressing King's death and funeral as one element of a larger study on the concept of heroism in African-American culture. Finally, King's April 3, 1968, "Mountaintop" speech is presented as one case study (among a group that includes writer Charles Bukowski, tennis star Arthur Ashe, and rapper Tupac Shakur) in a morbidly fascinating 2003 dissertation by Thomas Henry Kane titled "Last Acts: Automortography and the Cultural Performance of Death in the United States, 1968–2001."

While King's life and work have been the subject of dozens of books both popular and academic, hundreds of theses and dissertations, and thousands of articles in both scholarly journals and mass-market publications, few of those works explore the King funeral as a historical event, and fewer still have attempted to study its rhetorical impact. For example, popular histories such as Taylor Branch's three-volume King-era history, David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* chronicle of King and the SCLC, and *Voices of Freedom*, the oral-history companion volume to the *Eyes on the Prize* Public Broadcasting series, all end abruptly at King's death. *The Race Beat*, Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2006 book (Pulitzer) about newspaper coverage during the civil rights era, barely extends beyond King's

assassination. The funeral events have been covered in a few Atlanta-centric popular histories such as Gary Pomerantz's *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, Harold Martin's *Atlanta and Environs*, and Ivan Allen's memoir *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, but these reflect primarily Allen's take on the behind-the-scenes planning for the event and do not analyze in any detail the rhetoric of the ceremonies or the resulting media coverage. The funeral is addressed in memoirs by members of King's family and inner circle, such as Dexter King, John Lewis, and Xernona Clayton. But in these books the funeral is covered only briefly and, understandably, primarily from the perspective of each memoirist's individual experience.

The media messages generated in the course of the funeral events deserve further study because they not only played a pivotal role in establishing the place that King occupies in history and public memory, but they also were vital in shaping public opinion about three key groups: King's colleagues left to carry on his work; the business and civic leadership of Atlanta, King's hometown; and King's family. The role that those three groups played in staging the funeral is the focus of this project.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The hypothesis of this research project is that the King funeral was leveraged as a public relations platform by three distinct groups: the King family, the SCLC, and Atlanta's elite whites. I realize that the previous sentence initially may provoke strong negative reactions in some readers. For many in the academy—as well as practicing journalists—the term “public relations” is considered shorthand for callous manipulation of public opinion, often at the behest of corporate interests. To underscore the notion that “P.R.” stands for a dirty word, academics and journalists cite such practitioners as the masterful manipulator Edward Bernays, who staged carefully calibrated public spectacles on behalf of corporations with the intention of, say, encouraging American women to smoke, or persuading consumers to buy fashions made with U.S.-made silks, or urging children to carve turtles out of bars of “so pure it floats” Ivory soap (Bernays; Olasky).

#### **Public Relations, Staged Acts, and Image Events**

Beyond peddling cigarettes or soap, public relations campaigns also have been used to sway public opinion in support of social movements. As far back as the 1920s, the NAACP's Walter White organized a biracial conference in Atlanta with the intention of marshalling white sentiment in opposition to lynching (“Race Conference”). This event was deemed so successful that Bernays himself lauded its effectiveness (Bernays). In the past two decades, anti-smoking public relations campaigns have undone Bernays's own messages about smoking as a symbol of modern cool (Roddey).

Indeed, King himself was aware of the vital role that public relations played in the civil rights movement's success. King and his fellow organizers relied on images and stories that contrasted sympathetic portraits of their participants with negative portrayals of status-quo segregationist figures (Auerbach; Davi Johnson; Lentz, 293-296). Media coverage helped to transform civil rights protests from a localized issue in the Jim Crow South into a national concern. As Roy Reed notes, "those televised images galvanized the opposition to the Southern Way of Life. As the civil rights movement was electrified, Congress felt the shock. There were the two currents joined, the new communications medium and the new biracial politics" (85). The coverage was the result of King's shrewd use of visual rhetoric, asserts Adam Banks, observing that

what transformed the civil rights movement from a set of disturbances led by a "rabble rouser" to a coherent national movement led by one who would become a Nobel Prize winner and national hero depended greatly on King's grasp of how television worked as a rhetorical tool. ... For all of King's eloquence with the written and spoken word, it was a visual rhetoric of innocent protestors being beaten and hosed, of masses of Black people being willing to sacrifice all they had, of callous politicians that he could count on to put extreme words with those hoses and beatings that made the appeals successful. (198)

Images of those hoses and beatings that appeared on television and in newspapers and magazines were important rhetorical tools for King, according to Davi Johnson. Scrutinizing *Life* magazine photographs of the 1963 Birmingham campaign (images that were picked up by newspapers worldwide), Johnson calls King a "strategic rhetor" and says that the dramatic images the campaign produced, particularly those of children marching to integrate public facilities, "were an exercise in 'cross-racial vision,' making the reality of racism immediately visible to an audience of white moderates content in their complacent avoidance of overt conflict" (2). In their history of civil rights era media, Roberts and Klibanoff note the importance of visual communication to the movement (285-287), which they describe as "increasingly dependent on visual journalism" (287).

King himself conceded the importance of media coverage to the civil rights movement.

He wrote of the Birmingham campaign,

The major media were according us sympathetic coverage, yet many deplored our “using” our children in this fashion. Where had these writers been, we wondered, during the centuries when our segregated social system had been misusing and abusing Negro children? ... Newspapers carried images of prostrate women and policemen bending over them with raised clubs; of children marching up to the bared fangs of police dogs; of the terrible force of pressure hoses sweeping bodies into the streets. (Carson, 206, 209)

Clearly, King’s strategic vision helped to convey the actions of civil rights protestors to a global audience using mass media.

Therefore, my hypothesis that each of the three stakeholder groups employed deliberate public relations strategies while planning and staging King’s funeral should not necessarily be taken as a critical assertion that members of these groups coldheartedly exploited a tragedy for their own ends. Rather, what I do assert is that each group, recognizing the national and international media attention that would be focused on the funeral, deliberately employed media-savvy techniques to convey messages in support of specific goals. In chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this thesis, I will discuss how each of the three groups had employed public relations techniques prior to King’s death, and then examine how each employed similar tactics in planning events relating to the King funeral.

The precedent for using a funeral ceremony as a platform for conveying public-opinion messages extends millennia into the past. Ancient Greek and Roman funerals were part of a “shared testimony” that helped attendees confirm and celebrate the central values of the community (Hauser, 19). Donovan Ochs asserts that ancient Greek and Roman consolatory rhetoric included not only orations but also rituals that served as rhetorical devices in their own right. For example, in archaic Greek funerals the body of the deceased was purified, scented, and covered in flowers or herbs, while mourners tore their hair, shredded their clothes, and frequently

refrained from bathing (7-10, 12-13, 45-56). In Roman state funerals, images or statues of the deceased were incorporated into the rituals (Lauer, 434-435). Such ritualized actions, Ochs says, provided “messages amplifying the pain and anguish of death both for the close familial survivors and the community at large” (48).

Ochs says that the funeral services and eulogies for King and John F. Kennedy can be compared to the funerals of Patroklos and Pertinax, respectively. The death of Pertinax, a Roman emperor, was followed by an elaborate public ceremony during which a marble-and-gold shrine was erected to display the corpse, which was later taken by procession to a pyre where it was cremated along with a gold chariot (Ochs, 26-28, 97-99). Following the assassination of John Kennedy, the ritualized transfer of power to Lyndon Johnson aboard Air Force One and the presence of military honor guards at his funeral helped the public to mourn and reassured them that the state would remain steady and in control, says Ochs. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Patroklos, murdered by Hektor, is mourned by Achilles and other warriors, and his corpse is burned in a beachside funeral pyre (Schwab, 435-448), a funeral that was emotional and organized by friends, not the state. The unrest that followed King’s death could, Ochs says, be indicative that the public was not offered adequate consolation (26-28). Beyond that, its major feature was a march, which triggered thoughts of King’s other marches—forms of civil disobedience. “Whether or not the symbolic behaviors in Martin Luther King’s funeral ceremony aided, in any significant way, in restoring social equilibrium remains arguable,” Ochs writes (27).

This project will discuss in length the “symbolic behaviors” that were part of King’s funeral events, and it is my hypothesis that they *did* serve to mitigate further rioting, thus aiding “social equilibrium.” Furthermore, they accorded King, his family, and his colleagues a measure of respect and regard that had broader public-opinion reverberations by reaffirming his creed of

nonviolence. The King funeral events contained some rituals that can be interpreted as versions of classic funereal ritual undertaken to confirm the values of the community. For example, transporting King's coffin on a wagon while mourners walked behind could be viewed as a parallel to ancient processions. These elements are echoed in the images generated by media coverage of the funeral; because there is an ancient precedent of funeral processions following a coffin on an animal-drawn wagon (Ochs, 50-53), media images of the King cortege resonated with viewers of the television coverage and readers of magazines and newspapers. The ritual of dressing in mourning triggers the universal response to photographs of a veil-draped Coretta Scott King, while mourners in Atlanta carried signs or photographs of King (Figure 4), echoing ancient traditions.



**Figure 4: Mourners Carrying a Poster of King at the Funeral.** Bettman/Corbis.

Staged acts have long been used as a means of public persuasion. These include public relations stunts on behalf of business interests, such as Bernays's famous (or more accurately, infamous) parade of pro-suffrage women smoking on the streets of New York, designed to



equate Lucky Strike cigarettes with fashionable modernity (Olasky). They also have included events designed to influence politics or social norms. The “image event” is a staged act crafted by oppositional or subordinate groups in order to influence public opinion or provoke political leaders to action. John Delicath and Kevin DeLuca adroitly define the image event as “staged protest designed for media dissemination” (315). As Delicath and DeLuca note,

Dramatic acts of protest, like image events, challenge norms as to what constitute acceptable means of communication. As such, image events make the implicit claim that direct action protest, nonviolent civil disobedience, and critique performed through spectacle are acceptable forms of political participation. (321)

While DeLuca and Delicath use the term “image event” to describe actions by contemporary political protest groups, such as Greenpeace, my contention is that the King funeral contained many deliberately staged actions that enabled each stakeholder group to put forward messages that served as a form of social protest or critique and thus can be defined as an image event using the parameters outlined by Delicath and DeLuca.

The King funeral—with its 100,000 participants (Figure 3); spectacle in the streets of Atlanta (Figure 4); radical, for the era, multiracial participation (Figure 13); dramatic visual imagery, and narrative themes of prophecy and martyrdom—was not only a critique of the bigotry that led to King’s assassination, but also a statement about the power of King’s nonviolent philosophy. As argued by Delicath and DeLuca, “far from being stunts of the disillusioned, image events are best understood as a form of argumentative practice” (321).

### **The Dialectical and the Universal**

Writing in 1969, the year after the King funeral, Kenneth Burke discussed the value of differentiation to symbol creation. According to Burke, we define ourselves by dialectical opposition, or “to tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else” (24). As Burke

defines it, the dialectical is not a general opposition, but a contrast between specifics, thus: “the dialectical considers things in terms of not *some* other, but of *the* other” (33).

While used in many forms of argumentation, the dialectical is particularly useful for crafting image events, which use physical demonstrations in an attempt to show how Group A differs from Group B. For instance, in King’s 1963 Birmingham campaign, the passively resistant protesting teenagers and children provided a perfect foil to Bull Connor’s police dogs (Davi Johnson). Defining itself in contrast to Southern white segregationists was central to the success of the civil rights movement and a deliberately employed strategy (Hon).

In addition to the obvious spectacle of mourning in the streets of Atlanta, the King funeral served as a platform for staging image events and crafting messages that, for two of the stakeholder groups, emphasized differences between them and their oppositional counterparts. The SCLC leaders—King’s longtime colleagues and adherents to his philosophy of nonviolence—were contrasted by the media with younger, more militant black power advocates such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Ivan Allen, Robert Woodruff, Carl Sanders, and progressive white civic and business leaders of Atlanta were contrasted with segregationist Southerners, personified by Lester Maddox.

While some messages are crafted by setting up contrasts, other messages are formed by evoking similarities between groups or individuals. For example, in January 2008 when members of the Kennedy family endorsed presidential hopeful Barack Obama, it set in motion a domino effect of comparisons, prompting *Boston Globe* reporters Susan Mulligan and Scott Helman to write that

in casting Barack Obama as a contemporary John F. Kennedy, a parade of Kennedys and Obama himself yesterday evoked Franklin D. Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., and even Edward M. Kennedy’s famous 1980 convention speech in paying tribute to their party’s age-old commitment to the future.

Likewise, King, by referencing the language of Moses as mentioned earlier, associated himself with the Biblical leader.

The third stakeholder group that I identify in this project, the King family, is paired with another group, the Kennedy family, not in opposition but in similarity. Both families suffered the loss of a young, charismatic, internationally known leader. Both of the slain men left behind young wives and children. But the message created by associating Coretta Scott King and her children with Jacqueline Kennedy and hers goes beyond evoking similarity of the specific experience of loss following assassination. The image of a grieving widow and fatherless children strikes at the universal concept of personal grief. Describing the well-known photograph of Jacqueline Kennedy and her children at the funeral for John Kennedy (Figure 24), Janis Edwards writes that images such as this have a power “in a perceived ability to frame an event and to suggest more universal values that attach to the event in the public imagination” in such a way that “remembered and re-presented images transcend their positions in relation to specific events and create larger rhetorical frameworks that revive and re-imagine the narratives that constitute cultural myths” (179-180). My hypothesis is that the third group studied in this project, the King family, will be positively compared to the Kennedys, and that comparison used to present a more universal theme of loss.

### **Media Events, Fragments, and Audience-Created Messages**

Building on days of extensive print and broadcast coverage about King’s life and death and the actions of the family and followers he left behind (Gould, “TV Networks”), the funeral itself generated enormous media interest and commanded a national audience (“120 Million”;

Jones). The funeral generated a full day of live television coverage, preempting sports, the Academy Awards, and other scheduled programming (Gould, “Memorable Viewing”).

Given the scale of the funeral and the resulting media coverage, the argument could be made that it amounted to a “media event” as defined by Katz and Dayan, who describe such episodes as historic events that are broadcast live and shared by mass audiences, thereby contributing to shared collective memory. Dayan and Katz emphasize the broadcast of preplanned historic events, and cite such examples as John Kennedy’s 1963 funeral and the 1981 wedding of Lady Diana and Prince Charles, labeling these shared viewing experiences “high holidays of mass communication” (1). Stressing the rituals that constitute such proceedings, the deferential tone of television commentators, and the communal viewing experience, they claim these events are reminiscent of “high holy days” (16).

While the King funeral ostensibly meets the criteria laid out by Katz and Dayan, my contention is that the concept of “media event” is too restrictive to describe what happened and how it was covered. The term might be aptly applied to a singular broadcast event, whether unplanned—the Challenger space shuttle explosion, for instance—or carefully planned—the Charles and Diana wedding, perhaps. But the King funeral was a multidimensional event that encompassed formal oratory, religious rites, traditional rituals, and carefully staged individual and group performances. It was interrupted by spontaneous actions on the part of observers and participants. Certainly many of the proceedings were orchestrated by people who were fully aware of the history-making significance of the funeral. However, unlike a planned ad campaign or single staged event, the magnitude of the funeral and the wide-ranging media coverage meant that the planners’ messages could not be neatly controlled and the events of the day could not be contained to one script or set of stage directions.

Thus, rather than a single “media event” that resulted in coverage that was more or less the same for tens of millions of television viewers, the King funeral is better considered as a large-scale event that generated myriad fragments of messages communicated through a variety of media sources. To analyze how the stakeholder groups were portrayed by the mass media, one must look at multifaceted aspects of that coverage and then look at those multiple media messages in context. As Michael McGee astutely explains in his influential 1990 essay “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” messages are not communicated as complete, clearly defined, and whole “texts.” Rather, they are received as composites of many fragments, which are in turn assembled by the audience, with the result that

the only way to “say it all” in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than the producers of discourse.* (288)

Granted, this concept of assembling messages from fragments is often considered the purview of the modern mediascape with its hundreds of cable channels, millions of Internet sites, myriad print publications, instant messaging, e-mail, and other forms of rapid communication, the principle can be applied to text construction in 1968.

While those 120 million Americans who watched the King funeral had only three network channels to choose from, it is unlikely that all sat glued to single broadcasts for the full seven and a half hours of coverage. The television viewers would have also seen the morning papers, the weekly news magazines, and the preceding blocks of television coverage. They would have heard radio broadcasts of King’s speeches. Given its magnitude, the King funeral cannot be encapsulated in, for instance, only the texts of the eloquent eulogies or the graveside prayers, nor by just the still photographs of the mourning widow and fatherless children. Instead, media audiences *created* messages that were composed of many fragments: sound-bite snippets

of the formal speeches; a few lines from the spirituals sung by marching mourners; scattershot images of the widow and children; as well as paparazzi photographs of the celebrities attending the funeral and aerial views showing the throngs of everyday people marching in a procession past the Capitol building of a Southern state presided over by a segregationist governor.

The concept that messages generated by an image event are fragmented is echoed by Delicath and DeLuca, who argue, “image events constitute a form of visual argument that operates in fragments,” and go on to explain that such events create “dramatic images that advance indirect, incomplete, and unstated propositions; refute unstated assumptions; operate as evidence for claims; or otherwise serve as inventional resources for future deliberation” (323). This concept of messages being communicated through fragments of mass media coverage aptly applies to a mass spectacle such as the King funeral.

Furthermore, to analyze the messages communicated during the funeral, it is not enough to simply catalog the fragments of sound, text, and image generated in the context of that specific day. Rather, those media elements must be considered in the broader context of popular culture, general knowledge, and past media coverage. This holistic approach addresses the context into which a particular visual text might be received. For example, in their analysis of Dorothea Lange’s iconic photograph *Migrant Mother*, Hariman and Lucaites provide immediate historical context on the Great Depression and Lange’s work with the Farm Security Administration but then also discuss other texts—such as Roman Catholic artifacts and classic Madonna imagery—that inform the photograph’s composition and the reaction it triggers in viewers (53-67). In the same way, the striking image of a veiled and mourning Coretta Scott King cradling her young daughter on her lap (Figure 23) could be viewed by audiences not only in the context of the funeral, but also cultural iconography, triggering internal evocation of images ranging from

veiled Madonna paintings of the Renaissance to the memorable photographs of another widow, Jacqueline Kennedy (Figure 24).

The complex intertwining of media fragments and historical and cultural reference points is the underlying concept behind the theory of intertextuality in communication scholarship. The term “intertextuality” itself is complex and has a dual meaning in our field, suggest Ott and Walter. As they have shown, the single term “intertextuality” has been employed to reference two distinct approaches in communication scholarship. First, starting in the 1970s, intertextuality was used to describe the concept of audience as author, the process by which, drawing from many texts, the audience composed a message. In this usage, intertextuality refers to the immediate context in which a particular text is found, for example, one image in *Life* magazine in the context of many photographs, ads, and articles in the same issue. In the 1980s, the term evolved and was also used to describe the means by which one text references other texts that may not be directly connected, for instance, an advertisement that satirizes a well-known news photograph, or, referring again to the Lange photograph, the way that a photograph evokes classic paintings. “Hence, in current practice, media scholars employ the term intertextuality to describe two extremely different phenomena,” Ott and Walter wrote in 2000 (429).

More recently, scholars have broadened the definition to recognize that these two phenomena often occur simultaneously. In other words, audiences create meaning by drawing on multiple texts, both snippets of media messages in an immediate context as well as memories of iconic and culturally significant texts. Irit Rogoff has described this inclusive definition of intertextuality as an analytical approach “in which images, sounds, and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meaning” (24). This nuanced

and interdependent study of texts is, as Rogoff asserts, “nothing less and nothing more than an opportunity to reconsider some of present culture’s thorniest issues from yet another angle” (26).

While much recent work in intertextuality has focused on new media such as the Internet (Mirzoeff 2002, 3-22), such a focus overlooks the potential that the concept of intertextuality offers to the media historian or critic of rhetoric. This newer approach to reading texts should not be restricted to “new” media. Rather, this multifaceted filter should be seen as a supremely effective tool for reviewing historical events and resulting media messages. An intertextual approach provides the critic or historian a tool for exploring those past events from a broad perspective that can help to create more inclusive understanding. Thus, for instance, examining media coverage in both mainstream newspapers and those serving the African-American community might offer a more holistic perspective on a news event or social issue than relying merely on the coverage in hegemonic-dominated mainstream papers. Likewise, a study that considers the content of *Life* or *Ebony*, which largely catered to female audiences, as well as images and texts encountered in the pages of contemporary issues of male-skewing *Time* and *Newsweek* (Association of National Advertisers; Audits and Surveys) would offer more balance.

An intertextual approach is particularly relevant to the slice of United States history examined in this study. As Olson (2007) notes, the concepts of intertextuality and visual rhetoric flourished as scholars analyzed coverage of the civil rights movement and Vietnam War era. Images of that period—from the Emmett Till burial photographs in *Jet* (Harold and DeLuca) to images of Napalm attacks in Vietnam (Hariman and Lucaites 2003)—dominate scholarship in the field of visual rhetoric.



## **Audiences and Counterpublics**

If the spectacles staged as part of the King funeral events can be considered forms of argument, the question that follows is: who is arguing with whom? If the words, actions, and images generated during the funeral were calibrated to influence public opinion, who exactly composes the “public” being addressed and how do we define the groups doing the addressing?

In the broadest definition, the “public” addressed during the funeral events was a global audience; the King funeral was covered by international print and broadcast media (Bal). The audience certainly was national—not only was the funeral broadcast live, preempting both sports and the Academy Awards (Jones), but the day was also, in some parts of the country, decreed an official day of mourning, with schools and businesses closed in many cities. At the more local level, the “public” that participated actively in the events were the tens of thousands in the streets of Atlanta, who observed the funeral rites and ceremonies, or actively participated by marching in the procession (Bigart; Collins).

Given the complex nature of the events, I assert that the most apt theoretical definition of “public” to apply to this study comes from Michael Warner’s description of publics and counterpublics (2005). Warner offers several broad definitions of publics, including those defined by politics or national boundaries (65); those that comprise a “concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space” (66); and finally, “a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (90). The King funeral, as discussed above, could be viewed as meeting the first two definitions: it was a national event, and it was a concrete event, witnessed by the specific attendees in Atlanta. But the third definition, a public organized by the discourse and its circulation, serves as the most succinct description of the public addressed by the organizers of the King funeral. The funeral events were planned to be viewed by, and include, a specific,

physical audience in Atlanta, but also to generate texts and images that would go on to be circulated and recirculated far beyond the city.

Warner also provides an appropriate theory for describing the roles of the three stakeholder groups that are the subject of this study. Each of these can be qualified as being positioned “counter” to the audience that composed the “mass public” addressed by the funeral events. Warner’s broad definition of counterpublics is groups “defined by their tension with a larger public” (56). By defining counterpublics through their tension with the dominant group and not by arbitrary characteristics (age, gender, or race, for instance), Warner demonstrates that participants in counterpublics are not always subaltern (oppressed or in a minority). Warner states,

Some youth-culture publics or artistic publics, for example, operate as counterpublics, even though many who participate in them are “subaltern” in no other sense. At any rate, even as a subaltern counterpublic, this subordinate state does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members’ identities are formed and transformed. (57)

Thus he provides an apt description of how, in terms of the funeral, each of three stakeholder groups created discourse through staged events. Coretta Scott King, for instance, might not be otherwise defined as subaltern. She was a nationally known figure who participated in the civil rights movement as a fundraiser and concert organizer in addition to making frequent media appearances. Yet, in her capacity as widow and victim of hate-driven assassination, she occupied a subaltern role in the funeral proceedings, and thus represented the small counterpublic of the King family. Likewise, the members of the SCLC, nationally known figures, served as a counterpublic when using the funeral as a platform to identify with and promote the Poor People’s Campaign. The white business and political leaders of Atlanta would be more likely defined as the hegemonic group; after all, despite civil rights advances that bettered the lot of Atlanta’s many African-American residents, white men still dominated finance, industry,

politics, and social policy in the city. However, the white leaders of Atlanta presented a contrast to two hegemonic groups that had even more power than they. First, they were in opposition to the dominant class and race bias that still existed among segregationist Southerners. Second, despite Atlanta's economic gains in the 1960s, the city's white leaders represented a region that was poorer and less developed than other parts of the country.

By using the King funeral as an image event and staging actions that spawned extensive media coverage, the three groups aimed to capture the attention of a national audience. Each group staged its events with awareness of how it would be viewed by the dominant public. This follows Warner's assertion that "a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (119).

### **Methodology and Research Questions**

To answer the first part of this project's central research question—what were the intended goals of each group and how were its messages crafted?—I created a historiography for each stakeholder group. While I referenced some secondary sources, including civil rights movement histories such as those by Branch and Garrow, and previously published material, such as memoirs by participants in the events, the bulk of the research is original and comprises primary-source texts and a set of first-person interviews I conducted with people who took part in the events. Completed in late 2007 and early 2008 as part of the research for a 10,000-word journalistic article for the April 2008 issue of *Atlanta* magazine (Burns 2008), these interviews included more than two dozen people who planned and/or participated in the funeral. (Biographical details on the interviewees are in the Appendix.) Through these interviews, I was able to explore in detail some of the planning that went into the events and elaborate on some of

the specific decisions that were made by the stakeholders. For example, in my interview with Xernona Clayton, a friend and aide to the King family, I learned about the decisions that were made in selecting the specific fabric in Coretta Scott King's veiled hat so that it would allow her face to be covered but her expressions to still be captured clearly by television and newspaper cameras. By having access to firsthand accounts from journalists who were there, I was able to compare those recollections to archival sources. For example, I both read Paul Hemphill's columns for the *Atlanta Journal* and referenced his firsthand recollections of the time period. I read the transcript of Ron English's prayer delivered at the funeral, read newspaper articles that quoted the prayer, and discussed the prayer with English himself.

To address the second major question raised by this project—how were the goals translated into mass media coverage?—I conducted a qualitative content analysis of mass media coverage. The extensive coverage of the funeral provides an abundance of mass media content that could be the subject of a future detailed quantitative analysis. For the purpose of this thesis, I conducted a qualitative review of selected media that represent local and national coverage. In selecting mass media sources to review, I wanted to have a set of texts broad enough to reflect the array of the media coverage generated by the event, yet manageable enough for the scope of this particular research project. The sources that I selected, as outlined below, offer a national and local perspective and reflect both mainstream media and media outlets that targeted an African-American audience. That was particularly important since mass media at the time still reflected a white perspective. A description of the selected media texts follows.

*Newspapers.* I looked at coverage by three national papers: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. To analyze national coverage with an African-American point of view, I reviewed the weekly *Washington Afro-American*. For analysis of

coverage from a local perspective, I reviewed three dailies: the *Atlanta Journal*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the *Atlanta Daily World* (an African-American paper).

*Magazines.* I scrutinized coverage in *Life*, the weekly magazine with the highest circulation in the United States, as well as *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, a monthly and weekly, respectively, that served a significant African-American audience.

*Television.* Finally, as a representation of the mammoth television coverage of the day-long event, I examined footage in the WSB Television Newsfilm Collection at the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection at the University of Georgia. This archive of film from the Atlanta ABC affiliate was accessed via the Civil Rights Digital Library (<http://crdl.usg.edu/voci/go/crdl/home>), a multimedia archive database created by the University of Georgia. I also analyzed: archived footage featured in the *Eyes on the Prize* PBS documentary series ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/15\\_poor.html#video](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/15_poor.html#video)); digitized footage from ABC News (<http://ugv.abcnews.go.com/player.aspx?id=2733547>); and CBS News footage that is part of the Getty Images database ([gettyimages.com](http://gettyimages.com)). Although all of the “screen grab” images that I elected to include as figures in this study come from footage in the WSB Television Newsfilm Collection, these clips are representative of the coverage found in the other television sources.

Obviously, even this admittedly small sample of fourteen representational media sources offers a wealth of material, especially considering the many “fragments” that each yields. In an effort to ensure that random and misleading fragments would not be given disproportionate weight, or that the fragments would not be selectively gathered to support a foregone conclusion, I approached my review of media materials with the following two-step method.

First, I conducted an overview of each media source, noting dominant themes in its coverage and studying the weight that the media source allotted to various subjects associated with the funeral events and the days leading up to the funeral. For print sources, this included looking at placement of photographs and headlines, the space allotted to stories on different topics, and the recurrence of names cited. For television sources I looked at how often cameras focused on certain people or images, such as the frequent close-ups of the King and Kennedy family members or the shots that lingered on the mule wagon. I also looked for examples of how the stakeholder group was covered in contrast to the paired group. For example, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, I looked at how newspaper coverage of segregationist Georgia governor Lester Maddox specifically contrasted him with Atlanta mayor Ivan Allen.

Second, in analyzing the media fragments and their relation to the staged image events, I looked specifically for *visual* fragments. These obviously included photographs and television footage. But text fragments also were considered as part of the overall visual message creation. In discussing the psychological underpinnings of rhetorical images, Charles Hill points out that verbal descriptions can be as effective as literal images, noting,

We commonly speak of readers constructing a “mental image” while reading a narrative or descriptive text, and neurological studies show that this occurs quite literally—i.e. reading a descriptive text can actually activate the same parts of the brain used to process visual images. (30-31)

Thus, I paid special attention to passages of articles that used visual language to describe the actions that were part of the events.

The images that are selected as figures for this study are representative of the images that recurred throughout the media sources I examined. For example, while I elected to use a Bettman/Corbis image of the mule wagon (Figure 7) to illustrate the wagon’s frequent appearance in the print sources studied, there were dozens of other images that could have been

used in its place, representing dozens of similar media fragments that audiences would have seen. Furthermore, a similar image of the wagon taken as a still from one of the television sources could have been used to illustrate the same media message. In other words, the individual images used to illustrate this thesis should be viewed as representative of frequently recurring images that would have constituted the texts from which audiences would have assembled the larger message about the funeral events. (While there is one image, Figure 23, that I consider to be singularly iconic, that image was so widely reprinted that it still can be labeled a recurring fragment that numerous audiences would have encountered in a variety of media outlets.)

In summary, based on the theoretical rationale and methodological approach outlined above, this thesis explores the following key research questions:

1. How had each stakeholder group previously employed public relations tactics?
2. What tactics did each group use in the planning and staging of King's funeral?
3. How was each group covered by the representative media outlets?
4. Who made up the counterpart for each stakeholder group?
5. How was each counterpart group portrayed by those same media outlets?

By exploring these questions, my objective for this project is to examine the planning of a historically significant event from the perspective of three distinct protagonist groups: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta's white business and civic leaders, and the King family. I then analyze how the actions that were a result of those plans were viewed

through the lens of multiple observers, represented by the media coverage in seven newspapers, three magazines, and four television sources.

The goal is that by conducting this rich and nuanced exploration of how media images were created during the planning and staging of King's funeral, I can add to the scholarship on King's legacy as well as that of his family, his colleagues, and his hometown. In addition, this holistic model is a methodology that I plan to further develop in my future work as a technique for media-history research and qualitative intertextual content analysis.



## CHAPTER 3

### CASE STUDY: THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Deft use of images and words to generate sympathetic media coverage was central to the civil rights movement's success. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), co-founded in 1957 by King, Lowery, Abernathy, and other ministers, defined nonviolent mass actions such as marches, sit-ins, protests, and boycotts as the cornerstone of its efforts to end de jure and de facto racial discrimination (Branch 1988, 199; Lowery; Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Young, 124-157). Linda Childers Hon, who conducted a detailed analysis of the SCLC's public relations archives and initiatives from 1957 to 1968, says that the organization's mass actions were paired with media relations campaigns with the result that "African Americans orchestrated one of the most spectacular public relations campaigns ever waged," leading her to deem the organization's accomplishments "magnificent and profound" (201).

As Warner asserts, "like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers" (120). Civil rights protestors' actions created image events by putting the protestors into direct conflict with specific others (e.g., Bull Connor), but the resulting images and media coverage were aimed at the broader audience of "indefinite strangers," the mass media consumer, particularly the majority white audience. It was through the staged protests covered by the national media that King, his fellow members of the SCLC, and participants in the broader civil rights movements transformed themselves from an oppressed, subaltern group unable to freely use public transportation, register to vote, or have access to public spaces to an effective counterpublic with expanded civil rights, a national media platform, and increasing political clout (Black and Black, 98-125).

### **Prior Examples of Public Relations Strategies Being Used by the SCLC**

The SCLC's marches, sit-ins, nonviolent surrender to arrest, and other methods of civil disobedience were actions that created media images with significant rhetorical impact. As Blair and Michel note:

Each of these tactics worked by means of a visual performance or display. The material presence and visibility of the demonstrators, as well as of their opponents, was the crucial element. ... For example, the neatly-dressed, polite, African-American demonstrators were visible, as were their brutish, white supremacist opponents. The visual juxtaposition reversed historically accreted, stereotypical images of African and European Americans and their relative abilities to engage civilly. (142)

This assessment is seconded by Hon, who says "the most effectual strategy" of all the varied public relations tools used by the group was "the SCLC's stance of nonviolence," demonstrated through these staged actions (176).

As Hon found, the SCLC paired its mass actions with deliberate and disciplined media relations efforts. The organization hired a series of senior staff members to direct these initiatives (Blair and Michel; Branch 1988, 264-265; Gallagher and Zagacki 2005 and 2007). For example, in the early 1960s, the organization hired Ed Clayton, a former senior staffer with *Jet* magazine, who coordinated media coverage in advance of the 1963 March on Washington (Clayton, "I've Been," 1, 65-66, 68-69).

It is no coincidence that the SCLC gained strength, supporters, and public sympathy in tandem with the growth of mass media outlets such as network television news, national newspapers, and weekly news magazines. While coverage of the movement increased in part due to an idealistic commitment by a few news organizations such as the *New York Times*, the surge in coverage also can be attributed to the pragmatic need all media outlets experienced as they worked to fuel an ever-demanding news cycle and serve growing audiences. The movement that had been covered by a handful of African-American news outlets in the 1940s and by a few

Southern papers in the 1950s became a national news story by the early 1960s and—along with the Vietnam War—dominated news coverage through the end of the decade and into the 1970s (Roberts and Klibanoff, 21-23, 33-34, 75, 163-164, 184-207). As Roberts and Klibanoff observe, “In a sense, television networks and the civil rights movement had come of age together” (377).

After a record of effective exploitation of media coverage, at the time King died the SCLC faced controversy—and negative publicity—on several fronts. King’s opposition to the Vietnam War had eroded his relationship with President Lyndon Johnson (Garrow, 551-559, 592; Tom Johnson; Thomas; Young, 428-434). Describing King’s antiwar activities, Garrow writes, “King’s feelings about Vietnam grew stronger despite his concern that [the] SCLC would suffer for his outspokenness” (550). King’s anti-Vietnam efforts escalated in April 1967 with the delivery of a pivotal speech at Riverside Baptist Church, New York, in which he explained the philosophical connection between advocating for civil rights and against the war. He said, “as I try to delineate for you the road that leads from Montgomery to this place I would have offered all that was most valid if I simply said that I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the Living God,” and then elaborating, “beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and I believe the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children” (Washington, 234). Later that month, at a protest march at the UN Plaza in New York City, King delivered another version of this call for an end to military violence. “After these speeches, President Johnson and the White House wasted no time pressuring black leaders to denounce King,” wrote Andrew Young in his memoir (429).

In addition to pressure from the U.S. government, the SCLC faced criticism from within the broader black community. King’s philosophy of nonviolent protest that had been the

hallmark of the civil rights movement for more than a decade was being challenged by an increasingly vocal militant movement. As Lerone Bennett wrote in the May 1968 issue of *Ebony*, at the time of his death, King

was involved just then in a struggle for his very existence as a national leader. Although he was still the foremost symbol of the struggle for racial justice, he was being pressed by a new breed of organizers and orators who stressed Black Power and militant self-defense. More ominously, his moral authority as a champion of nonviolence was being eroded by a new mood rising from the despair and determination of the very young and the very defiant. (176)

For many observers, that young defiance was personified by Stokely Carmichael, the former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, commonly pronounced “snick”) and co-author of the 1967 book *Black Power* (Branch 2006, 486, 532-533; Garrow 483-489; John Lewis, 388-389; Sharman). As David Lewis writes in his biography of King, “the media yielded to a monopoly of Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick, H. Rap Brown, and burning cities; the news delectated over every lugubrious pronouncement of the Black Power militants” (356).

The debate over the effectiveness of nonviolence had been exacerbated by the specific controversy that prompted King to be in Memphis that April 4. A week earlier, sanitation workers striking in Memphis had asked King, Abernathy, and others to participate in a protest march. Although the March 28 march was not staged by the SCLC, King and the others agreed to take part. Poorly organized, the march devolved into violence, looting, and the arrest of more than 100 people. A teenager, labeled a looter by police, was shot and killed (Branch 2006, 730-737; Garrow 604-606, 609-615; “Nonviolence”). The march’s lack of structure contributed to its disastrous ending, said Bernard LaFayette, who as national field coordinator for the SCLC specialized in the logistics of staging marches and demonstrations. The failed march resulted in FBI leaks to the media and “character assassination on all fronts,” writes King biographer Taylor

Branch. “The lapses from nonviolent discipline freed the FBI from inhibitions due to public respect for King’s conduct, if not his message” (2006, 735). When King returned to Memphis in April to lead a second march, expectations were high. The march was anticipated to reassert the SCLC’s position as the nation’s leading civil rights organization and to reaffirm that its nonviolent tactics were effective. This was intended to quash objections of both militant blacks and critical whites (Branch 2006, 741-744; Garrow, 616; Young, 457-461).

In addition to quelling these controversies, King and the SCLC were attempting to drum up publicity for the proposed Poor People’s Campaign, a major initiative that was intended to address the national issue of poverty among all racial groups. The kickoff event of the campaign was to be a dramatic convergence on the nation’s capital by a train of more than ninety mule wagons and 1,500 demonstrators. “The Poor People’s Campaign was to be a more massive, long-range campaign of civil disobedience than we had previously undertaken,” wrote Young (443). In fact, King’s April stop in Memphis to lead the second sanitation workers’ march was a detour en route to Washington, D.C., to start the Poor People’s Campaign in earnest (Houck; LaFayette; Young, 448-451).

Thus, following King’s sudden assassination, the SCLC had a number of crises to contend with—along with real fear that King’s would not be the only death. Recalling the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Young wrote, “We reminded ourselves that Martin was surely not the only intended victim of the murder; the whole civil rights movement was the assassin’s target” (469). Said LaFayette, “I was surprised they didn’t take out at least another five of us” (interview).

It was against this backdrop that the SCLC had three key messages to deliver between the time of King’s death and his burial in Atlanta five days later. First, the organization needed to

stress that the movement would continue without King and that there would be a smooth transition in leadership. Second, to counteract criticism from militant blacks and skeptical whites, the SCLC needed to reaffirm its commitment to nonviolence and demonstrate the effectiveness of civil disobedience as a protest tactic. Third, the SCLC wanted to stress that the Poor People's Campaign would continue despite King's death. To deliver these three core messages, a number of public actions were organized, messages crafted, and symbolic gestures planned in the days between King's death on April 4 and his burial on April 9. A discussion of each follows, along with examples of how each effort translated into mass media coverage.

### **The SCLC's Key Messages and Resulting Media Coverage**

*Message: The movement would continue without King and there would be a smooth leadership transition.* To convey this message, two key actions were taken. First, in media appearances, the surviving SCLC leaders consistently repeated variations of the phrase "you can kill the dreamer but not the dream." First credited to Ralph Abernathy at an impromptu press conference held in the parking lot of the Lorraine Motel the day after King was killed, this statement and variations thereof were frequently made in the days between then and the funeral (Booker, "Rev. Abernathy"; Lowery). News photographs of the SCLC leaders with King's body in a Memphis funeral home emphasized both that the leaders were saying farewell to King and that they were united as a group (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: SCLC Leaders Surround King's Coffin.** From right: Andrew Young; Bernard Lee; Ralph Abernathy. Keystone/Getty Images.

Second, the group acted quickly to elect a successor and announce his appointment. There was some internal debate about who would succeed King, but the quick consensus was that Ralph Abernathy, King's closest friend, would take over (Houck; LaFayette; John Lewis, 409-410; Lowery; Young, 468-469). "There was some discussion ... but everyone knew and understood it was Abernathy. We used to call them the movement twins," LaFayette told me in an interview. The SCLC's statement that Ralph Abernathy would head the organization was issued within a day of King's death.

Members of the SCLC were aware that King and Abernathy would be compared—and favorable assessments were not likely. "Inside SCLC, members of Mr. Abernathy's inner circle, the same group that served Dr. King, realize that the greatest task now is to discourage comparison," noted Earl Caldwell in the *New York Times*. "'You have to let him be his own man,' they say of Mr. Abernathy. 'He is not Martin Luther King, and if he is going to be able to accomplish anything, he has to have the opportunity to be himself'" ("After King"). Another

*Times* article said of Abernathy's relationship with King, "in ways they complemented each other. Dr. King was the leader—eloquent and beloved by the crowds. Mr. Abernathy is calm, slow-talking and very polite." The article was accompanied by a photograph of Abernathy captioned "Dr. King's alter ego" ("Trusted Successor").<sup>2</sup> Media reports painted an image of Abernathy as self-deprecating and unassuming. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that the "mantle of leadership" was placed on the "reluctant shoulders" of the companion who had been with King "since the Montgomery bus boycott" (Achsah Nesmith).

Some media coverage underscored the less-than-flattering differences between Abernathy—who'd always been in the background despite his longstanding relationship with King—and the charismatic slain leader. The *New York Times* portrayed the new SCLC leader as the "stocky Baptist minister" (Lukas, "Thousands in Line"). *Jet* characterized him as a "quiet, expressionless man" and described him as "beefy shouldered" (Booker, "Rev. Abernathy").

To reaffirm Abernathy's designation as King's successor, Coretta Scott King, along with Abernathy, Young, Bernard Lee, and other SCLC leaders, held a televised press conference on April 6 at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Mrs. King read a statement in front of 250 reporters. She said that Abernathy "could express and interpret his views on nonviolence better than anyone else," and that her husband had "always said that if anything happened to him he would like for Ralph Abernathy to take his place in the struggle and as the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference" (Civil Rights Digital Library wsb53564). A transcript excerpting most of her statement was printed the next day in the *New York Times* ("Statement by Mrs. King"). After Mrs. King's statement, Abernathy, Young, and Lee fielded questions from reporters.

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<sup>2</sup> Abernathy did, however, elicit sympathetic media coverage by telling reporters he had stopped eating after King's death. "He has taken liquid nourishment. He said he is trying to 'purify my soul' for the job ahead," reported Jack Nelson in the *Los Angeles Times* (Nelson, "Abernathy Says"). *Jet* noted that, in the time between King's death and the funeral, Abernathy lost fourteen pounds (Booker, "Rev. Abernathy").



Abernathy repeated a variation on the SCLC's theme that the movement would go on, stating, "even though you have been able to stop the heartbeat of Martin Luther King, you cannot stop the movement he led" ("Mrs. King Pleads"). *Jet*, acknowledging newspapers' speculation that "SCLC 'would go to pot'" without King at the helm, called the press conference "a spectacular victory" because "top aides to Dr. King promptly lined up behind him [Abernathy] to end speculation" (Booker, "Rev. Abernathy").



**Figure 6: Press Conference Announcing Abernathy's Succession.** From left: Bernard Lee, Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy. Andrew Young is just off camera to the left.  
WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.

*Message: The SCLC would maintain its commitment to nonviolence.* To reinforce this message, SCLC members made frequent press statements repeating their allegiance to nonviolent tactics. For instance, the night King was shot, SCLC leader Hosea Williams called the *Atlanta Constitution* and gave an interview in which he insisted, "We must—we must—maintain and advocate and promote the philosophy of nonviolence," and saying of King's death, "We—those of us with him during his last moments on this earth—are concerned that this country might go

into a turmoil that would cause great bloodshed.” The *Constitution* story was picked up by other newspapers such as the *New York Times* (“Hosea Williams Appeals”).

Second, the SCLC carried out the planned Memphis march in support of striking sanitation workers, both to support the strikers and to prove that a nonviolent march, organized using their expertise, was effective and possible. On April 8, the day before King was to be buried in Atlanta, Young, LaFayette, Jackson, and other leaders went to Memphis, along with Coretta Scott King, the three oldest King children, the singer and activist Harry Belafonte, and the famed pediatrician and antiwar crusader Benjamin Spock (Jesse Jackson; LaFayette).

The march generated substantial press coverage. Although the participation of Abernathy and other SCLC leaders was mentioned, much of the coverage was sympathetic to Coretta Scott King and the children. For example, the front page of the April 9 edition of the *New York Times*—published the morning of the King funeral—carried a large photo of the Memphis march with Mrs. King, Abernathy, Belafonte, Young, and the King children leading thousands of marchers (Figure 22). The *New York Times* described a scene in which the widow, “wearing a simple black dress and with her face lifted up to the gray skies from which a few drops had begun to fall,” told the assembled crowd “this experience ... represents the Crucifixion, on toward the resurrection and redemption of his [King’s] spirit.” The *Times* reprinted the full text of Mrs. King’s speech. *Life* magazine ran an excerpt in its April 19 tribute issue to King (Coretta Scott King, “How Many”). *Jet* magazine featured the widow and her children on its April 25 cover with the line “King’s Widow: Bereavement to Battlefield.” The magazine ran extensive coverage of the Memphis march inside that issue.

*Message: The Poor People’s Campaign would continue as planned.* On the night King was killed, the leaders in Memphis “pledged to one another that the Poor People’s Campaign in

Washington must go forward,” recalled Young (469). They decided that part of the funeral events should convey the message about the Poor People’s Campaign.

In coordinating the funeral events, the SCLC and King family split duties. Coretta Scott King and King’s sister, Christine King Farris, organized the service at Ebenezer Baptist Church and the burial at South-View while the SCLC organized the funeral procession through downtown and the memorial service at Morehouse College (Clayton interview; Ron English; Houck; Massell). The SCLC took advantage of their portion of the proceedings—the march and memorial service—to create a symbolic staged action. They opted to place King’s coffin in a mule-drawn wagon, symbolizing the planned Poor People’s Campaign. “We [discussed whether it should] be one of the kingly type of funerals, with the horse-drawn coach like in England, the staff with high top hats and long coats,” said LaFayette. The mule-drawn wagon was presented by Hosea Williams, who “wanted to bring in the element of the Poor People’s Campaign,” said Tom Houck. “It symbolized what he lived for and what he died for. So after discussion we agreed it would be befitting,” said LaFayette.

The planned use of the wagon was announced to the media in advance of the funeral and newspapers ran articles previewing the decision and emphasizing the not-too-subtle symbolism. “National and foreign dignitaries will march behind a simple mule-drawn wagon,” wrote Jack Nelson and John Goldman in a front-page April 9 story in the *Los Angeles Times*, elaborating that “the unusual caisson, symbolizing Dr. King’s hopes for economic and social reforms to help the poor, will be followed by many of the nation’s top political, church, and civil rights leaders.” In the *Atlanta Constitution*, columnist Sam Hopkins noted that the mule wagon would serve as both a reminder of, and a contrast to, John Kennedy’s funeral. “It is bound to evoke memories of

the Washington scene in November 1963 when the body of John F. Kennedy was carried along the streets on a caisson pulled by horses.”

The wagon that was used in the procession was selected with image-generation clearly in mind. Elizabeth Omilami, Hosea Williams’s daughter, told me in an interview, “There was difficulty finding the right one. I remember them calling down to these counties—where they had had marches—trying to find just the right wagon. It had to look a certain way. It couldn’t be nice, it had to look rugged and so forth.”

The efforts to find a photogenic wagon certainly paid off; every media source I analyzed for this project covered the mule wagon, using both photographic depictions and verbal description. An aerial photo of the wagon and mourners dominated the *New York Times* April 10 front page, with the mules clearly visible. Similar photographs ran in prominent positions in the other newspapers. Television cameramen lavished attention on the wagon, zooming in for close-ups of the rusted wheels and tired mules (ABC News; Civil Rights Digital Library wsb38278). Television critic Hal Humphrey wrote of the networks’ live broadcasts in the *Los Angeles Times*, “it wasn’t easy to keep up running reports during the four-mile procession” but noted the recurring theme of the “two mules signifying the farm background of many of the poor” that King had “dedicated his life to helping.”

In print, writers outdid themselves to lyrically describe the wagon. In the April 13 issue of the *Washington Afro-American*, George Collins wrote a front-page story describing the mix of poverty and wealth evident at the funeral procession. He devoted space to the mules “Ada and Bell—the epitome of poverty that afflicts the nation’s poor and oppressed,” describing them as “unshod, unsheared, and their bones pressed tightly against their hides,” and saying that this gave “essence to the suspicion that malnutrition had become a way of life with them just as it has for

Dr. King's millions of followers." Collins went on to describe the wagon that Williams and colleagues had spent days tracking down. "It bore marks of wear and tear to the extent that a disciple of the poor kept watch over the rear wheel to assure it did not fall," he wrote. In the *New York Times*, Homer Bigart depicted a "crude Georgia farm wagon" and noted the contrast between the "gleaming African mahogany coffin" that was placed "on the rough planks of the faded green cart." *Washington Post* writers described "an old farm wagon to which were hitched two downhome mules" (von Hoffman and Carey). In a May 1968 *Ebony* article titled "The Martyrdom of Martin Luther King," Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote, "one has to go back more than ten decades, to the traveling Lincoln bier, to find an analogue to the marching King casket and the rivers of people following his body in misery," adding that "tens of thousands filed past his bier, weeping. Hundreds of thousands followed the plain wagon and the two Georgia mules which bore him" (174).



**Figure 7: SCLC Leaders and the Mule-Drawn Wagon.** Hosea Williams leads the wagon, with Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, and others immediately following. Bob Adelman/Corbis.

To further underscore the Poor People's Campaign initiative, members of the SCLC wore overalls, work shirts, jeans, or denim jackets to signify their solidarity with the working class. Abernathy wore the same scuffed boots that he'd worn when marching with King; they peeked out from under his robes when he presided over the Ebenezer service (Bigart; "King's Last March"). Reporters remarked on the "husky, denim-clad SCLC contingent" (Sloan) and "pallbearers garbed in the uniform of the poor—overalls" (Collins).

The mules created one of the most memorable impressions for participants in the procession as well as television viewers. "Today, there was only the clop, clop, clop of two mules pulling Dr. King's body through the streets of the city," wrote John Goldman in the *Los Angeles Times*. "At times, the singing of the marchers mixed in strange cadence with the clop of the brown, tiring animals," he added. Sam Williams, an intern in Ivan Allen's office who took part in the march, recalled, "Everybody was crying. Everybody. Adults, grandmothers, children. It was a mosaic of people. I remember the distinct sound of the mules' hooves on the street. That sound lingers with me to this day." He said, "When the procession would go by, people would get quiet, you could hear the horseshoes—whatever you call them on a mule" (interview). The dominance of the mules' hooves was noticed by a number of reporters. Interestingly, that detail—made possible by the relative stillness of the march—was in fact the result of a practical matter. Trained protest organizers such as LaFayette knew that keeping the crowd quiet would allow marshals to hear any scuffles and be alert to potential security breaches. "We kept it quiet, so all you could hear was the mules, so that way we could hear if anyone tried anything," LaFayette said in an interview.

The melancholy tenor of the procession, a few observers noted, was mitigated by the presence of politicians (Figure 8) and celebrities (Figure 9), who distracted participants and the

reporters, photographers, and camera operators covering the funeral. “There was the vice president, the presidential challengers, governors, senators, and \$20 million worth of show business talent packed into two silver and orange buses,” wrote Goldman in the *Los Angeles Times*. Elizabeth Oliver of the *Afro-American* described how “young men with pink, purple, and green hair matching their suits, girls in hippie skirts above their knees, mingled with celebrities from the far corners of the earth” (“More Tributes”), while John Davis of the *Atlanta Daily World* observed that “the atmosphere was one of sadness, gaiety, carnival, but most assuredly one of great respect for King. Despite the mixed emotions and mixed people, order seemed to have been the password.”

In a harshly critical summary of the funeral in his King biography published in 1970, David Lewis wrote,

In some ways, the manner in which Martin King was laid to rest reflected the circumstances of his public life: organizational inefficiency, limited and revocable white support, fervor for the man and gnawing doubts about the doctrine among the poor, artificially generated homage by the black middle class, and once again, the voyage of the leader to a new place when, although he had brought the message and pointed the way, his followers were sore and afraid. (393)

In staging the procession to follow the mule wagon, the SCLC effectively reminded the participants and media audiences of King’s legacy but also promoted their planned next campaign. While the symbolism of the march was readily apparent and the event created stunning visuals, the magnitude of the crowd and the distracting presence of celebrities and politicians lessened the overall sense of mourning.



**Figure 8: Bobby Kennedy at the King Funeral.** WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.



**Figure 9: Sammy Davis Jr. Arrives at the Funeral.** WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.

### **Stokely Carmichael as Dialectical Other**

The SCLC commitment to nonviolence was underscored by contrasting King—and the surviving leaders of SCLC—with more militant advocates. A front-page story of the *Atlanta Journal* published the day after King’s death ran under the heading “News Analysis” and stressed that the assassination occurred when “[King] was locked in a life-and-death struggle to keep nonviolence as the major weapon in the Negro’s arsenal” (Lundy). In a long *New York Times* article that ran the same day, Steven V. Roberts wrote, “the strategy of Dr. King and the conference has varied little, no matter what the issue. They have steadily espoused the ideal of



nonviolence and have depended more on moral than political influence to win their battles.”

Roberts contrasted the SCLC support of nonviolence with “angry statements by such young Negroes as H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael” (Roberts).

If King symbolized the nonviolent civil rights movement, at the time of the funeral the person who symbolized its militant wing was Stokely Carmichael. After working as an activist while a student at Howard University, Carmichael joined a campus chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Company (SNCC) and volunteered in the Freedom Rides and voter registration drives. As an activist he was intrepid and, like Abernathy, King, Williams, John Lewis, and other movement veterans, had been arrested many times in the course of carrying out acts of civil disobedience. He also was as brash as he was bold. As John Lewis, who was SNCC chairman when Carmichael joined, recalled in his memoir,

Stokely was, as always, very visible. He loved nothing more than to scare the hell out of people, especially white people. And he was good at it. He had a sharp tongue, and he knew how to use it, to poke and prod and provoke. ... He either mesmerized you or irritated you; there was no middle ground. (177)

In 1966, Carmichael orchestrated a takeover of the chairmanship of SNCC from John Lewis (John Lewis, 380-386; Young, 308, 395-397). That year, at a march in Mississippi in which both the SCLC and SNCC were involved, Carmichael first used publicly the phrase “black power,” a term that had been used within student activist circles to describe black socio-economic independence. Carmichael’s slogan was taken up by young activists who began chanting “black power” accompanied by a raised fist salute. This was countered by SCLC leaders with the chant “freedom now,” coined by SCLC’s Hosea Williams (Branch 2006, 486; Garrow, 481-490; Young, 397-398). The factions within the march engaged in “competitive chanting,” wrote King biographer David Garrow (485). Garrow quoted King saying of the episode, “Because Stokely Carmichael chose the march as an arena for a debate over black

power, we didn't get to emphasize the evils of Mississippi and the need for the 1966 Civil Rights Act" (489).

Carmichael gained increasing media attention during this period, recalled Young, who described him as a "sharp, fast-talking rhetorician" who "went right to work attempting to establish a more militant image of himself" (395). A year later Carmichael co-wrote the book *Black Power* with Charles Hamilton, and went on a speaking tour of college campuses. He was ousted from SNCC in 1967 and replaced by H. Rap Brown. In 1968 Carmichael was named honorary prime minister of the Black Panther Party (Kaufman).

A reminder that King and his followers posed little threat to white America in contrast to black power militants occurred the night King was shot, when Jesse Jackson, flying back to Chicago, gave a television interview in which he asserted that "the white people have lost their best friend" (*Eyes on the Prize* video). This thought was echoed by the *Atlanta Constitution* editorial board, which quoted Carmichael himself saying, "Dr. King was the symbol of nonviolence, of reconciliation. He was the dam that stood between the raging currents of white racism and black racism. Black America has no single leader at this time who can constructively channel the anguish of his people" ("Will His Truth").

The SCLC was aided in creating the media perception of a radical opposition between the two groups thanks to a number of actions by Carmichael himself. The morning after King's death, Stokely Carmichael spoke at a SNCC press conference, stating, "When white America killed Dr. King, she declared war on us. ... Black people have to survive, and the only way they will survive is by getting guns" (quoted in John Lewis, 408).

Carmichael's ability to attract media attention was demonstrated several times during the King funeral. On the morning of April 9, Carmichael arrived—with an entourage in tow—at

Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was already packed, its doors shut to prevent crowding (Figure 11). Recalling that episode, King childhood friend and funeral attendee June Dobbs Butts told me,

I looked up and saw Ron Karenga and Stokely with this huge pole; they were banging on the door of Ebenezer Baptist Church and they were angry. They were saying, “This is an outrage. You won’t let us in but you’re seating white dignitaries.” They were right, but they shouldn’t have behaved like that.

Butts went on to recall how Carmichael made his way to the front of the church. “Stokely, once he got in the church, came down the aisle and knelt by Coretta and he talked to her. And I kept thinking, ‘I don’t believe people can be this mean, this obtrusive.’” That moment was captured by news photographers, and it was an image of Carmichael with the widow, rather than of her with an SCLC supporter, that ran in *Life* magazine (Figure 10).

Reporters noted that Carmichael, unlike the denim-clad SCLC supporters and somber-suited politicians (Figure 12), was dressed in hipster fashion. *Time* magazine described his “zippered suede diddybop boots” (“King’s Last March”) and the *New York Times* dubbed Carmichael “the black power apostle ... wearing a light blue turtleneck sweater under a dark sports coat and accompanied by six body guards” (Bigart).



**Figure 10: Stokely Carmichael with Coretta Scott King.** Bob Fitch/BlackStar. *Life*, April 19, 1968.



**Figure 11: Stokely Carmichael Arriving at the Funeral.** Carmichael, center, is shown giving a black power salute. WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.



**Figure 12: Memorial Service at Morehouse.** Ralph Abernathy, at podium; Jesse Jackson is at the right by the flag, head in hand. Bettman/Corbis.

### Summary of the SCLC Public Relations Initiatives

Facing criticism from other black leaders at the time of King's death, and following the fallout of a failed march in Memphis, the SCLC needed to act quickly to try to hold on to its perceived status as *the* leading voice on behalf of African Americans. The leaders recognized that losing King, the most visible face of the SCLC, could hamper the organization's ability to maintain its influence. They moved quickly to put out the message that the group would go on without King, to demonstrate the effectiveness of nonviolent mass actions, and to draw attention to their planned Poor People's Campaign. The following table summarizes the deliberate tactics used to deliver these messages and the resulting media coverage.

**Table 1: Summary of the SCLC Messages and Media Coverage.**

Message	Image(s) Staged or Statement(s) Made	Media Coverage
The movement would continue without King	Repeatedly stating “you can kill the leader but not the movement”	Statements by Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson, and others reported by the media
	SCLC leaders gathered at the Memphis funeral home to view King’s body, showing solidarity	Photographs of the SCLC leaders paying tribute to King, an image that conveyed that King was dead but followers carried on; media reference to SCLC staffers as “disciples” and “apostles”
Ralph Abernathy was King’s successor	Immediate announcement the day after King died	All media sources I examined mentioned Abernathy’s role, stressing his personal relationship with King. However, coverage also emphasized differences between him and King, underscoring Abernathy’s lack of charisma, calling him “quiet and expressionless” or “slow-talking.”
	Press conference in Atlanta with Coretta Scott King, Andrew Young, Bernard Lee	Images of Abernathy appeared in television coverage, sitting with Mrs. King; Abernathy’s statement was covered by print media
	Prominent role of Abernathy at the funeral	He appeared in television and print images, presiding over the service at Ebenezer, the memorial at Morehouse, and giving the burial prayer. However, his statements were overshadowed by King’s “Drum Major” recording.
Nonviolence was still the most effective tool for social protest—despite criticism of the SCLC’s methods by both militant blacks and apprehensive whites	Successfully completing the planned march in Memphis with Coretta Scott King, the King children, SCLC leaders, and well-known supporters such as Harry Belafonte and Benjamin Spock	Photographs appeared on front pages of newspapers; the march was covered by television; written accounts stressed the poignancy of Coretta Scott King leading it and her speech was reprinted in several publications while Abernathy’s was only quoted.
	Staging a large-scale procession at the funeral that was reminiscent of King’s famous civil rights marches	Photographs and television coverage of the mass gathering, sound recordings of familiar spirituals and songs such as “We Shall Overcome,” and written accounts all stressed the idea of a “Last March” and underscored the symbolism.
The Poor People’s Campaign would continue as planned	Using the mule-drawn wagon to carry King’s coffin, thus symbolizing his connection with the poor and the planned wagon train to D.C.	Previews of the decision to use the wagon ran in newspapers with numerous mentions of the Poor People’s Campaign. Images of the wagon appeared in every media outlet I analyzed.

While not a result of deliberate staged actions by the SCLC, the group was contrasted in the media with militant black activists, typified by Stokely Carmichael. Richard Lentz, who analyzed funeral coverage that ran in the three major newsweeklies (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*), suggests that those media outlets set up a contrast between Carmichael and the SCLC as shorthand to explain the complex philosophical differences between the groups (287-290). In contrast, my conclusion based on looking at a wider spectrum of media outlets than just newsweeklies is that the coverage was less of an artificial construct created by the media than reportage prompted by actions of Carmichael and others. The nattily dressed Carmichael, arriving at the funeral in a dramatic style accompanied by an entourage and delivering a “Black Power” salute to television crews, created an image event of his own that contrasted with the somber SCLC leaders.

While Carmichael reinforced some of the SCLC messages through his dramatic gestures at the funeral, he also undermined some of the SCLC attempts to reassure the watching nation that King’s work would continue as before. “Abernathy’s first big challenge will be in the management of SCLC’s relations with Stokely Carmichael’s Black United Front,” noted the *Washington Post* in a follow-up story. “Dr. King was able to maintain an avuncular indulgence toward the young and volatile Carmichael. Abernathy does not have the same rapport” (Good). The death of King, who’d served as a buffer between white America and black militants, was portrayed by some media outlets as not only a tragedy but also a possible cause for alarm, heightened by coverage of Carmichael’s behavior at the funeral (Table 2).

In planning the funeral, the SCLC leadership faced a daunting task. Not only did they have to assist in the logistics of what amounted to a state funeral (without state funding or

support) but they also had to manage public opinion, given that King's death occurred at a time when the organization faced criticism on multiple fronts.

**Table 2. Contrast Between Ralph Abernathy and Stokely Carmichael.**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Images Associated with, or Created by, Abernathy</b>	<b>Images Associated with, or Created by, Carmichael</b>
Appearance shown in media images	"stocky Baptist minister"	Hipster clothes and "diddybop boots"
Demeanor shown in media images	Somber, grief stricken	Energized, defiant attitude arriving at Ebenezer
Actions shown in media images	Singing, praying, marching	Giving a Black Power salute
Associates depicted in media images	SCLC leaders, King family, friends, supporters	Entourage of bodyguards
Written media descriptions	"King's alter ego" "the man who had stood by [King's] side, and usually in his shadow"	"the Black Power apostle"

Of their efforts, three actions created particularly sympathetic and effective media images. First, the march in Memphis was a reminder of King's philosophy of nonviolence. Its success in contrast with the failed non-SCLC march a few weeks earlier served to re-establish, at least in the eyes of white-dominated mass media outlets, the SCLC's position as the leading civil rights organization. It also stifled some contention that the nonviolent philosophy was irrelevant. Second, the next day's massive funeral procession in Atlanta both reinforced the nonviolent philosophy and served as a reminder of King's legacy of mass action—and by extension the legacies of SCLC leaders such as Abernathy, Young, LaFayette, Williams, and Jackson. Finally, the use of the mule wagon to transport King's coffin created memorable images while generating publicity for the Poor People's Campaign, a message that was further underscored by the SCLC leaders' decision to dress in the work clothes of the poor.

That said, for all the skill employed in the SCLC's image campaign, it was not as effective as it might have been for three reasons. First, the role of the SCLC leaders in staging



the Memphis march was overshadowed by the presence of the King family members. However effective the march was in conveying the value of nonviolent protest, the emotionally charged presence of King's widow and children, and Mrs. King's delivery of an eloquent speech on a rainy day, proved to be the dramatic images that media outlets chose to emphasize. Although coverage informed readers and viewers that she was carrying on her husband's work, the dominant focus was the human-interest story of the widow's experience. Second, while the SCLC message that a smooth leadership transition had taken place and that Abernathy was King's successor was widely reported in every media source I analyzed, the message might not have been as reassuring as was intended. Coverage emphasized the difference between the two men—not reflecting favorably on Abernathy. Finally, although the SCLC managed to convey its message stressing the difference between its philosophy and that of militants, and although Carmichael's actions at the funeral, inadvertently or not, reinforced those differences, the media attention that was focused on Carmichael deflected attention from the SCLC and added an element of tension to an event that was intended to be somber, reflective, and evocative of the SCLC's legacy and intended future leadership.

## CHAPTER 4

### CASE STUDY: IVAN ALLEN AND ATLANTA'S WHITE LEADERS

Ivan Allen, Atlanta's mayor and the former head of the city's Chamber of Commerce, was acutely aware of the importance of presenting Atlanta in a positive light as it prepared to host King's funeral. Facing national scrutiny, Atlanta was arguably in the position of a counterpublic as it crafted its messages in preparation for the attention it would face. By most measures Allen, scion of an old-money clan and deeply influential in the city's civic, business, and political circles, would be considered to epitomize the hegemony (Pomerantz, 18-19). That is, he had money, power, influence, and had—even if inadvertently—benefited from centuries of white Georgians' subjugation of blacks. However, in the context of the era, Allen and his fellow progressive white Atlanta businessmen could be viewed, if not as a counterpublic, then at least clearly positioned counter to dominant groups. According to Warner's characterization, “counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (63). As progressive whites looking to overcome the old Jim Crow status quo, Allen and other Atlanta leaders were in conflict with the norms of the Southern establishment and thus positioned themselves counter to the region as a whole. Likewise, in a national context, they were viewed critically thanks to the effective public relations tactics of King (Chapter 2) and the SCLC (Chapter 3) that broadly stereotyped most white Southerners as brutish segregationists. Thus, Atlanta's white hegemony was viewed by much of the rest of the country—justly or not—as being in conflict with shifting national norms that were increasingly in favor of civil rights. Furthermore, although Atlanta had experienced growth, the South as a region still lagged behind other areas of the United States in terms of economic development. Highly aware of their status from a national perspective, Allen and other white business and

political leaders in Atlanta were savvy practitioners of public relations campaigns, using a variety of tactics in an effort to differentiate Atlanta from other parts of the South.

### **Prior Examples of Public Relations Strategies Used by Atlanta's White Leaders**

Atlanta's position as a role model for the South and a beacon of progress was really the result of public relations, wrote James Townsend, editor of *Atlanta* magazine, founded in 1961 by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce to serve in part as a tool for promoting the city.<sup>3</sup> "The city was hailed in the world press as 'the city too busy to hate,'" wrote Townsend, going on to elaborate,

We were no such thing. There were as many "haters" in Atlanta as Birmingham or any other major Southern city. We were merely luckier—and smarter—than Birmingham. Without Birmingham's awful example of race relations, and there could have been no worse in the world, Atlanta almost surely would have erupted into the same kind of image-tarnishing riots. And instead of being known nationally as a good city for rearing children and locating industry, the distinction of being the foremost city in the South might have been seized by, say, Charlotte or Jacksonville. (162)

Townsend goes on to credit Atlanta's image to "a combination of good luck" and "excellent leadership" combined with "a benign and benevolent power structure—those business leaders, all white, who ran the banks and major industries and who belonged to the Piedmont Driving Club" (162).<sup>4</sup>

Learning from incidents such as the violence in Little Rock following school desegregation, and resulting negative national media coverage, Atlanta's "benign and benevolent" white city leaders orchestrated a major civil rights public relations campaign in 1960-1961 when the city's schools were integrated. The Chamber ran dozens of newspaper, radio, and television

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<sup>3</sup> In disclosure, I must note that at the time of this writing, I am employed as editor in chief of *Atlanta* magazine. Sold by the Chamber of Commerce decades ago, the magazine is now an independent general-interest magazine, owned by Emmis Communications along with other city and regional titles such as *Los Angeles* and *Texas Monthly*.

<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1887, the Piedmont Driving Club is widely considered the most exclusive private club in Atlanta. As of 1989, the Club had not admitted a black member nor had a Jewish member for five decades (Auchmuty).

ads with the theme “How Great Is Atlanta?” encouraging peaceful integration (Kruse, 149). This effort was assisted by community organizers in the biracial coalition of parent and church groups called OASIS (Organization Assisting Schools in September). Churches—black and white—held prayer services during “Law and Order Weekend” before the first day of integrated classes in fall 1961, and OASIS prepared a briefing document for reporters and television crews who came to cover the event. The successful integration was touted by the Chamber of Commerce in follow-up ads and in articles in *Atlanta* magazine (Allen, 82-83; Hein; Kruse, 149-150, 152-155; Lassiter, 94-99). These actions helped Atlanta earn a reputation as a racially harmonious city. For instance, the *New York Times* called Atlanta’s school integration process “a new and shining example of what can be accomplished if the people of good will and intelligence, white and Negro, will cooperate to obey the law” (“Atlanta’s Good Example”).

In 1968, Ivan Allen was the face of the white business community as well as the city’s political leader. Former head of the Chamber of Commerce, he had been elected mayor in 1961. As Chamber chief, Allen crafted what would become the “Forward Atlanta” campaign of the 1960s, a campaign of consumer and business research, advertising, and education that was designed to promote Atlanta as an excellent place to run a business and raise children (Allen, 148-150). The campaign had a budget of \$500,000 (Allen, 34).

As mayor, Allen had been a visible supporter of civil rights. The day he took office in 1962 he removed all the “white” and “colored” signage from City Hall’s drinking fountains and restrooms (Allen, 84). In 1963, he testified in support of the Civil Rights Act—one of the only white Southern elected officials to do so (Kruse, 205-206; Pendergrast, 286-287). In 1964, after King won the Nobel Peace Prize, Allen organized a biracial banquet in his honor, despite

resistance from white business leaders.<sup>5</sup> And in the fall of 1966, Allen staged his most dramatic personal action during a riot in Atlanta's Summerhill neighborhood. Following a summer when riots broke out in inner cities nationwide, Allen had been wary of what might happen in Atlanta. In September of that year, police shot an African-American man accused of stealing a car after he resisted arrest. Following the shooting, Stokely Carmichael, who happened to be in Atlanta that day (and had visited the mayor the same morning, accusing him of "police brutality" for arresting antiwar activists), drove through Summerhill in a SNCC vehicle equipped with broadcast equipment saying the man had been killed. At Carmichael's instigation, 2,000 people gathered in the streets. Allen and police captain George Royal walked through the crowd, begging them to be calm. At one point, the mayor climbed on the roof of a police cruiser and tried to talk to the crowd using a bullhorn; the car was rocked and the mayor sprang down. The riot was broken up when police arrived with tear gas. Later that night, Allen went back to Summerhill and resumed walking the streets and talking with residents. (Allen, 176-192; "Interview with Ivan Allen"; Pomerantz, 345-350).

As one of the few Southern politicians openly in favor of civil rights, Allen had a national reputation for being progressive. For example, in 1967, he, along with King, actor and activist Dick Gregory, and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, appeared in the "Face to Face" television forum moderated by Mark Evans. In this interview they discussed inner-city rioting. Allen, although insisting he would not hesitate to call for federal troops if needed, stressed, "I will not, however,

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<sup>5</sup> "I was angry at some people who had been my friends for a long time, and I was beginning to think about how it was going to look if Martin Luther King, Jr. were not even recognized in his own city as a Nobel winner," wrote the mayor, who gained support for the banquet idea from Paul Austin, president of the Coca-Cola Company. The two convened a meeting at the Piedmont Driving Club. The men who attended agreed to the dinner, as Allen noted, "on pragmatic grounds: that it would look bad for Atlanta's image if we did *not* honor Dr. King" (Allen, 97). He goaded the men, saying that even if they didn't show up or sent underlings in their places, he would be there. In the end, a biracial gathering of 1,500 attended the dinner at the Dinkler Hotel in downtown Atlanta—including virtually every man who'd attended the meeting at the club (Allen, 97-98; Pomerantz, 335, 337-340).

hide behind just a façade of law and order. We must recognize that the deep problems that have created these unlawful acts must be solved” (Washington, 395).

Despite progress made under Allen’s leadership, Atlanta’s lingering racial tensions had been exposed just a month before King’s death. The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—commonly referred to as the Kerner Report—looked at riots and civil disobedience. Fred Crawford and a team of researchers at Emory University’s Center for Research in Social Change contributed to the Kerner report. Their findings on Atlanta were presented along with this statement:

It is against this background of two population groups, each with incorrect information about the other, each reacting under false stereotypes of the other, each fearing the other somewhat, and neither actually interested in integrating with the other, that civil disorders occur in Atlanta. (Crawford, Norman, and Dabbs, vii-viii)

The researchers reported that the races in Atlanta rarely interacted and that persistent white racism contributed to conditions that led to unrest.

While Allen held a personal conviction that addressing civil rights concerns was the morally right thing to do, he admitted that his fellow white businessmen were more pragmatic in their support of the changes. “The top fifty business and civic leaders in the city have backed me to a man all the way through the civil rights issue,” he told *Atlanta* magazine in a January 1969 interview. He added candidly, “that doesn’t mean they liked it. I think many of them would prefer the old segregated practices because it was personally more convenient, and it was an easier way of life. But they have faced up to the necessity of making these changes” (“Interview with Ivan Allen”).

Thus, when faced with the prospect of hosting King’s funeral, Atlanta’s business leaders responded with characteristic pragmatism. As noted earlier, Carl Sanders, the former governor of Georgia, and Robert Woodruff, the head of Atlanta-based Coca-Cola, were in the Oval Office

visiting Lyndon Johnson when the news came in to the White House about King's assassination, and they placed a call to Allen, warning him that "all eyes would be on Atlanta" and reminding him that preventing violence would be crucial to preserving the city's progressive image.<sup>6</sup> The editorial board of the *Atlanta Journal* went even further, saying that quelling unrest in Atlanta was nationally significant, and essential to preserving the civil rights movement's gains. On the day of the funeral, they wrote an editorial stating,

Around the grave of this man, the country has a chance to commit itself anew. If violence follows, we cannot rest upon the excuse which it will seem to offer for evading the nation's responsibility to do what it has always said it does and to be what it has always said it is.

The editorial board went on to opine that the outcome of the funeral in Atlanta was more significant than past watershed events, writing,

For all the importance of the Washington march and the rallying of the nation at Selma, the challenge in Atlanta in 1968 is of far greater import. It has to do with the most fundamental question of whether we shall surge forward as a nation to finish the task while there is still time. ("Ingathering in Atlanta")

Allen, representing the city's white business and civic leaders, was aware of the attention that would be focused on Atlanta and responded quickly.

Three messages were essential to preserve peace in Atlanta. First, leaders wanted to ensure that Atlanta would remain peaceful despite violence in other cities. Second, white leaders wanted to emphasize that they were cooperating with King's family and the SCLC in staging the funeral, but not overstepping their bounds. Allen knew that the city needed to offer help to King's widow and extended family and support to the Atlanta-headquartered SCLC without seeming to co-opt the funeral (Massell; Mullá). Third, Atlanta's civic and business leaders

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<sup>6</sup> Biracial cooperation between white business leaders and African-American ministers and community leaders had an established history that predated the civil rights era by half a century. An unprecedented biracial coalition had been crafted five decades earlier following the deadly 1906 Atlanta race riot, setting the stage for a pattern of cooperation between the city's elites of both races (Burns 2006, 20-21; Godshalk, 10-11).

needed to demonstrate that Atlanta was equipped to welcome all of the guests arriving for the funeral. Still a relatively small city, Atlanta had been promoting itself as a convention and tourist destination. Hospitable handling of the influx of mourners would send an important message to the rest of the country that Atlanta was playing in the big leagues (Allen, 208, 213-214). A discussion of each of the steps initiated by the white leadership in support of those messages, and examples of the resulting media coverage follows.

### **White Leaders' Key Messages and Resulting Media Coverage**

*Message: Atlanta would remain peaceful despite violence in other cities.* In the five days between King's death and the April 9 funeral, Allen and the chief of police, Herbert Jenkins, drove to every black neighborhood in the city and walked around, allowing themselves to be seen, and expressing their grief to the city's African-American residents (Allen, 209-210). Their physical presence evoked memories of Allen's response to the Summerhill events two years earlier. As the mayor later recalled, "Here we were, two white, middle-aged, gray-haired men—the mayor and the police chief of the city—walking up and down the streets, standing on the corners, talking to the people, trying to show them our concern" (Allen, 210). This visible presence not only created a striking image for city residents, but also reminded Atlantans of the mayor's dramatic actions in the 1966 riots.

While Allen and Jenkins were visible, the city also stressed the role of its African-American officers, including Eldrin Bell, then a police detective, who recalled in an interview, "We did a lot of behind-the-scenes work to keep things calm. We were walking up and down the streets all hours of the day to [prevent] riots." Although there was some vandalism and small



skirmishes between police and young African-Americans, large-scale riots never broke out in Atlanta (John Davis; Houck; Winter).

City Hall staff also ensured that reporters were well informed about the extra steps that had been taken to add police coverage (Dodd; Mullá). The fact was mentioned in at least a few reports, such as Anthony Ripley's *New York Times* account that described coordinated efforts by city police, the FBI, and Justice Department, as well as Allen's decision to close liquor stores ("50,000").

Building on Atlanta's tradition of interracial coalitions, the city held a number of high-profile meetings following King's death. The Metropolitan Atlanta Summit Leadership Congress (MASLC) called a meeting in the Civic Center that was attended by 500 blacks and whites. "Let's show the people who believe in the sword that we can win," said black minister William Holmes Borders, while white MASLC member Joe Simmons said, "We need the help of the white leadership ... Please join us!" (McCartney and Hebert).

The result was a flood of offers to help from Atlanta's middle-class whites. "There was an amazing outpouring," recalled Tom Houck, who was a member of the SCLC executive team at the time of King's death, in an interview. "There was in a sense, the thought that we were arranging for the funeral of one of our own. That was the primary thought." The white daily papers emphasized King's position as a native son of Atlanta. "King's Body to Come *Home*" read a front-page headline in the *Constitution* on April 5, 1968. "No home town could claim him. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was *from Atlanta* but of the world," wrote John Pennington in a front-page story in the *Journal* on the same day (italics mine).

Allen was quick to get out the message that police were working overtime and City Hall was being proactive against rioting by quashing even petty vandalism (Mullá; Winter). Although

there was no major violence in Atlanta between King's death and the funeral, the fear that trouble might happen lingered. Describing the mood before the funeral, *Journal* columnist Paul Hemphill wrote on April 9 that

the question everybody had, but few asked except in whispers, was whether now the trouble is going to come to the city where Martin Luther King Jr. was born and educated and where he headquartered during a brief but thundering career. Atlanta has not had the racial explosions experienced by many of the other major cities across the county. (Hemphill, "A Sort Of Quiet")

A similar fear was expressed by reporter Elizabeth Oliver in the April 13 issue of the *Washington Afro-American*. Oliver, who had been in Atlanta to cover the funeral, wrote, "No one is guaranteed violence will not be visited upon Atlanta. ... Tension is great with rumors of coming events fueling the air" ("More Tributes").

With rioting in other cities being covered by media outlets along with coverage of the funeral, audiences could not help but be reminded of the threat of violence, no matter how peaceful the Atlanta events were. *Los Angeles Times* television critic Hal Humphrey described the coverage as "almost unrelenting" and observed, "Making the coverage even more dramatic was the interspersal of riot and looting scenes which came as the aftermath of King's assassination." Indeed, scenes in Atlanta of interracial observers of the procession (Figure 13) and calm mourners lining up to see King's body at Spelman College (Figure 14) contrasted with the images of looting (Figure 1) and fires (Figure 2) elsewhere.



**Figure 13: Mourners Gathered in Downtown Atlanta.** Keystone/Getty Images.



**Figure 14: Mourners Waiting to View King's Body.** WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.

A few days following the funeral, Atlanta's "liberal but tough" police chief Herbert Jenkins was praised in a *Washington Post* article on the few major cities that had not experienced

rioting (Pearson and Anderson). A front-page *New York Times* article that ran the day after the funeral noted that 740 policemen and 100 firemen guarded the march route and there “had not been a single incident of violence associated with the vast procession” (“Atlanta Is Peaceful”). The visible presence of African-American officers served to reinforce the concept that Atlanta had empowered its black residents as well as underscoring efforts the city had made to put African Americans in government jobs, in contrast with neighboring Southern cities (Figure 17).

*Message: City Hall would cooperate with King’s family and the SCLC in staging the funeral.* It was important to Allen that City Hall was shown as being supportive of the King family and colleagues, but not wresting control of the events away from them. Linda Mullá, an assistant in his office, recalled being sent to the King home to offer use of the Civic Auditorium, but being instructed to defer to Coretta Scott King if she insisted (as she did) on using Ebenezer Baptist Church (Mullá).

Allen’s support of the King family was most dramatically covered on the night of the assassination, when he not only escorted King’s wife to and from the airport, but was photographed helping her through the rain and then waiting with her in her home to watch news coverage of the assassination. The widely circulated Associated Press photograph of the mayor walking behind the widow showed a level of intimate attention that was still surprising for the South (Figure 15). Likewise, television coverage from that evening also showed Allen at ease in an African-American neighborhood. Footage from local ABC-affiliate WSB showed Allen escorting Coretta Scott King through the airport (Figure 16), driving with her, and entering the King home. In the *New York Times*, Walter Rugaber described Mrs. King being “rushed to the airport” by the mayor, who later “broke the news to her at the airport” and “drove Mrs. King back to the King residence, a modest home about two miles northeast of the downtown business

district” (“Mrs. King Is Planning”). Mike Davis of the *Washington Afro-American* wrote an article describing the support shown by Atlantans—white and black—for the King family. He described how Allen “rushed through rain-slicked streets” to be able to “console the assassinated civil rights leader’s widow” while “neighbors poured into the street” (“Atlantans Rally”).



**Figure 15: Ivan Allen and Coretta Scott King on the Night of the Assassination.**  
Associated Press.



**Figure 16: Ivan Allen Escorts Coretta Scott King through the Atlanta Airport.**  
WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.

Covering the April 5 return of King's body to Atlanta from Memphis, Rugaber again mentioned the mayor, describing him waiting at the airport for an hour for the plane with the body to arrive and then leading a convoy of cars to the funeral home ("Dr. King's Funeral"). This was also remarked on by *Atlanta Daily World* reporter Marion Jackson, who called the scene outside the funeral home a "pulsating drama" as "radio, television and press media surged forward and jammed the seam ruptured street." Allen's actions earned praise from the *Atlanta Daily World*, which, in an editorial on April 7, stated that the mayor had "set the pace" for honoring King's death with nonviolence and respect, noting how the "head of a great metropolitan center ... in reverent humility and brotherhood went all out to comfort Dr. King's widow" ("Rioting and Looting"). The paper also ran a front-page item noting that the mayor had declared April 9, the planned funeral date, "Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Mourning" and "urged all citizens to join with him in praying for 'complete racial justice and equality,'" calling King a "martyr for the ages" ("Mayor Proclaims").

The mayor was not as warmly welcomed when, on the morning after King's death, he attempted to join a march staged by African-American students at the Atlanta University Center. Chanting "black power," more than 1,000 students assembled at the campuses of the historically black colleges and universities (Bryans; Cook). Allen's offer to march with them was turned down, so he and police chief Jenkins rode ahead of the marchers in a car (Bryans; Charles Jackson; Rugaber, "Dr. King's Funeral").



**Figure 17: Jacqueline Kennedy at the Funeral Flanked by Police Officers.** Keystone/Getty Images.

*Message: Atlanta would welcome all guests for the funeral.* The night of King's death, Allen called in all forces to help at City Hall. Then vice mayor Sam Massell, who would serve as mayor after Allen, recalled fielding calls in City Hall the night of King's death, and later spending days stationed at the airport, where a hangar was designated for arriving VIPs. Marie Dodd, who worked in the advertising department for Allen's office furniture and supply company, The Ivan Allen Co., was brought in to help field media inquiries. "City Hall became 'command central.' Back then, before the Internet and cell phones, people's reaction was to ask the mayor's office what was going on. The press office was down the hall. City Hall was wild," Dodd recalled in an interview.

While the SCLC had ostensible responsibility for welcoming arriving mourners, City Hall, public authorities, and private businesses provided financial, practical, and in-kind support. Coca-Cola, Krispy Kreme, and other companies donated food, as did local restaurants ranging from the Dodd House cafeteria to the Playboy Club (Norm Kohn; Stepp). The Atlanta Transit Authority donated bus service for arriving guests, arranging for nonstop shuttles from the airport

to downtown. At least some of the service was bankrolled by Woodruff and Coca-Cola. As Pete Kilgo, then head of sales for the Atlanta Transit System, told me in an interview:

At first Atlanta Transit talked about charters, but then we were told to give everyone rides for free. After it was all over, I got a call from the company president. He said, "You need to fix me a bill." I said, "You told me to do it; nobody said anything about charter orders." He said, "I need a bill." So I went to the records, looked for guys who had turned in time sheets. I looked for everything we ran extra for April 8, 9, 10, how many hours, who we paid, and so on. I figured out what we'd done and got the bill ready. It came to the neighborhood of forty or fifty thousand dollars. In 1968, that was a lot of money.

I always wondered what happened, so I checked later. It showed up in accounts receivable. The bill was sent to the Coca-Cola Company. I found out later that Mr. Robert Woodruff had said he'd take care of what had to be done. So the transit company looked like good guys, giving everyone free rides. And we thought we were. But we got paid for what we'd done.

While, like Coke, some of the city's corporate citizens contributed donations to the hospitality efforts, others clearly profited. As Elizabeth Oliver reported in the *Washington Afro-American*, visitors to Atlanta spent at least \$25 million. Taxi rates were hiked, restaurants ran out of food, and hotels were so crowded that cots were crammed into rooms to handle overflow ("Atlanta Visitors").

### **Lester Maddox as Dialectical Other**

Lester Maddox, then the governor of Georgia, had long opposed Ivan Allen on civil rights issues. Unlike the well-bred Allen, Maddox came from a blue-collar working-class family, was a high-school dropout, and never went on to college (Rice 1988; Tharpe). Maddox worked a variety of jobs, including a stint for Atlantic Steel, before opening a cafeteria called the Pickrick ("You 'pick' and we 'rick' it up") that specialized in fried chicken. He, his wife, Virginia, and four children worked long hours at the Pickrick (Schuchman). Starting in the 1940s, Maddox advertised his restaurant in the weekend *Atlanta Journal*. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, Maddox began to use the ads as vehicles to espouse his segregationist views,



decrying King as “Martin Luther Coon” (Harold Martin, 406). In 1964, following passage of the Civil Rights Act, Maddox closed the Pickrick rather than serve blacks. When African Americans tried to enter the restaurant, he chased them off waving a pistol, while his staff held aloft ax handles. In August 1964, Maddox told a *New York Times* reporter, “We’re closed for good. I can’t integrate. God forbid” (“Atlantan Shuts”).<sup>7</sup>

Such demagoguery earned Maddox regular front-page news stories and nighttime television news segments, whether it was noisily shutting down his restaurant or leading a 1965 march in support of segregation through downtown Atlanta (“Maddox Leads”). Without press attention, however, Maddox might have been an unremarkable Southern segregationist and a mere footnote in Atlanta history. As Rice notes, “if not for his well-publicized ranting about integration and Communist influence, few people other than Atlanta-area fried chicken aficionados would ever have heard of Lester Maddox” (1988, 193).

Maddox’s grandstanding continued the week of the King funeral. He refused to lower flags on state buildings until ordered to do so by the Georgia Secretary of State (“Maddox Is Upset”). On the day of the funeral he kept state employees at work, and denied requests that he close state schools (Bigart; Greene and Ball; Riner; Ripley, “50,000”; Schumach). The day before the funeral, the *Atlanta Constitution* ran an article headlined “Civil Disobedience a Sin, Maddox Says,” quoting remarks the governor made at a local church, in which he called nonviolent civil disobedience such as practiced by King and his followers “a sinful pastime.” The same day, a *New York Times* story contrasted Allen’s decision to close Atlanta city schools and Atlanta’s closing of liquor and major department stores with Maddox’s refusal to close state

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<sup>7</sup> While Maddox shut the restaurant, he went on to profit by setting up a shack and selling segregationist souvenirs, including replica ax handles called “Pickrick Drumsticks,” which earned him more than \$130,000 in 1964, according to the *New York Times* (“Cafeteria Owner”). In the 1970s, he ran a souvenir stand in Underground Atlanta, the downtown tourist destination. His merchandise included the “Wake Up America Lester Maddox Alarm Clock” (Reynolds).

schools and offices. Reporter Anthony Ripley contrasted “Mayor Ivan Allen, who will take part in the funeral” with “Gov. Lester Maddox, who plans to be at the State Capitol here while the march is taking place” (“50,000”).

On the day of the funeral, Maddox barricaded himself in the State Capitol with 160 state troopers in place. This action garnered plenty of press coverage. “As the funeral services for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began Tuesday, the State Capitol began to resemble a small fortress,” wrote Tom Greene and Steve Ball in the *Atlanta Journal* edition published that evening. They described soldiers “armed with rifles, shotguns and riot guns, carrying big night sticks and wearing helmets.” The *Atlanta Constitution* ran a half-page photo that showed the crowd of at least 100,000 marchers following King’s coffin in the mule wagon and passing the Capitol, which the newspaper also described as a “fortress.” George Collins of the *Washington Afro-American* referred to the Capitol as an “armed camp” presided over by a “segregationist hashslinger-turned-governor.” The *New York Times* reporter Homer Bigart depicted Maddox “sitting in his office under heavy guard,” while *Time* magazine described a scene in which “King’s coffin, followed by his Atlanta mourners, passed the helmeted, machine-gun-armed cops of Governor Lester Maddox at the Georgia Statehouse. Maddox had refused to close schools on the funeral day and later protested the lowering of the flag to half-staff” (“King’s Last March”). As former Atlanta mayor Sam Massell recalled in an interview, “They were very visible uniformed guards. They were showing their strength, no question about it. Daring anybody to cross that line in the sand.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The symbolism of Maddox staying in the Capitol during Martin Luther King’s funeral was recalled decades later, when Coretta Scott King died. Her body was placed in the Capitol for public viewing and flags across Georgia were lowered to half-staff at the order of the governor. Associated Press writer Errin Haines described the tribute as “a sign of civil rights gains.”



**Figure 18: Funeral Procession Passing the State Capitol.** Bettman/Corbis.



**Figure 19: Atlanta City Hall with Its Doors Draped in Black Bunting.**  
WSB Television Newsfilm Collection.

Following the funeral, the United Press International produced a story contrasting Allen and Maddox. Of the three Atlanta papers, only the *World* featured the piece prominently, running

it on the April 11 front page under the headline, “‘Two Unlike Peas in a Pod’ Are Gov. Maddox, Mayor Allen.” The article opened with the line “Gov. Lester Maddox, who did not go, and Mayor Ivan Allen Jr., who did, both had high praise for the way Atlantans conducted themselves in the mass funeral for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that drew upwards of 150,000 persons.” Likewise, the *Washington Afro-American* noted that “Mayor Allen was at the funeral but ordered all available police and firemen on duty” (Oliver, “More Tributes”).

Interestingly, of the three local daily newspapers, the African-American-owned paper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, allotted more coverage to Allen than either the *Constitution* or *Journal*. Indeed, on its April 10 front-page recap of the funeral, the *World* featured a large photograph of Allen, his wife Louise, vice president Hubert Humphrey, and King’s brother, A.D. Williams King. The paper also stressed that the city was quiet in part due to a “mayoral proclamation” (John Davis).

In May 1968, just a month after the funeral, the “Civil Aggression Study Team” at Emory’s Center for Research in Social Change surveyed Atlantans about their reaction to the death of King and their views on the way the funeral had been handled (Crawford, Norman, and Dabbs). They found that 90 percent of blacks approved of Ivan Allen’s actions, while only 59 percent of whites did. More telling was the finding that 41 percent of whites said they agreed with Maddox’s actions, while 44 percent disagreed (compared to 95 percent of blacks). Furthermore, the researchers found that 84 percent of white Atlantans considered King’s death to have no impact on their personal attitudes about racial problems. “These proportions demonstrate once again that white Atlantans simply did not identify with Dr. King; his death to them was simply an event which would not affect the individual lives of white people,” the researchers concluded (17).

### Summary of White Atlanta Leaders' Public Relations Initiatives

Mayor Ivan Allen and Atlanta's white business leaders had a vested interest in staging a successful and peaceful funeral for King. Not only would the event underscore the support for King and the movement held by Allen and other progressive whites, but it also would highlight the difference between Atlanta and other Southern cities, assisting the business community in its concerted effort to market Atlanta as the economic hub of the Southeast.

**Table 3: Summary of the White Leaders' Messages and Media Coverage.**

Message	Image(s) Staged or Message(s) Made	Media Coverage
Atlanta would be free of violence experienced in other cities	Mayor Allen and police chief Jenkins walked through African-American neighborhoods.	This was primarily covered by the Atlanta press, but for Atlanta witnesses, this significantly evoked the mayor's actions during previous riots.
	African-American police officers were placed in visible roles.	The African-American officers were photographed, visible on television, and written about in newspapers and magazines.
City leaders would work with the King family and SCLC in staging the funeral	Ivan Allen's accompanying Mrs. King to the airport and home	Images of Allen and Mrs. King were picked up by newspapers and television. This was some of the only coverage that mentioned him specifically.
	Allen and staff participating in the funeral and procession	Allen and others were low-key. The <i>Atlanta Daily World</i> ran a photograph of him at the funeral on its front page.
	Allen agreeing to speak at the memorial	Due to time constraints this was canceled, so there was no image generated; however media outlets covered the cancellation, which communicated that Allen would have been willing to speak
Atlanta would welcome all visitors	Vice mayor sent to airport to welcome VIPs	All media outlets covered celebrity presence (but did not cover vice mayor's role in any detail)
	Churches and City Hall helped the SCLC to arrange food and shelter. Companies donated food, drink, and services.	All media outlets covered the mass of arrivals. The <i>Afro-American</i> paid attention to treatment of working- and middle-class arrivals. The local papers mentioned companies—Coca-Cola, Krispy Kreme, and others—that donated supplies.

While Allen and progressive white leaders did not deliberately emphasize the differences between themselves and segregationists as typified by Lester Maddox, the governor's actions

fueled media coverage of the differences between the two Georgia leaders—and by extension the differences between the two groups on a larger scale in the South.

**Table 4: Ivan Allen Contrasted with Lester Maddox.**

Aspect	Images Associated with, or Created by, Allen	Images Associated with, or Created by, Maddox
Actions and resulting media coverage	Draping City Hall in black bunting	Refusing to lower flags
	Participating in march, funeral	Remaining in State Capitol which was depicted as a “fortress” and “armed camp”
	Deploying African-American police	Calling in state troopers
	Escorting Coretta Scott King on the night of King's death	Staying away from the funeral, saying his presence would distract
Statements made	Declaring King a “martyr for the ages” Asking Atlantans to join him “praying for ‘complete racial justice and equality’”	Calling nonviolent civil disobedience “a sinful pastime”

Ivan Allen physically performed actions that helped to create media images demonstrating City Hall’s support for the King family and efforts to prevent violence. By walking through African-American neighborhoods to ask for calm, he not only conveyed a sense of personal concern for the safety of Atlanta’s black residents but also evoked memories of his actions two years earlier when rioting seemed imminent. By attending the funeral service at Ebenezer, walking in the funeral procession through downtown, and standing near the podium at the memorial service at Morehouse ready to deliver a tribute, Allen’s presence was significant considering how few white elected officials from Georgia attended the events (Sanders).

Other images were created with symbolism clearly in mind. By ordering black bunting to be draped over the doors of City Hall, Allen created a bold visual statement about his support for King’s family and followers and paid a public tribute to King. By deploying African-American police officers to the funeral locations, City Hall created images (Figure 17) that reminded audiences of Atlanta’s progress relative to other Southern cities.

In addition to these deliberate actions, Allen created media images by his spontaneous response to the news of King's death: going to the King home and escorting Coretta Scott King to and from the airport, entering the home and spending time with the family (Figures 15 and 16). The newspaper photographs and television images of the elegant, older, white Southern businessman escorting the young, African-American widow through the Atlanta airport and the rainy streets on the night of April 4 conveyed a universal sense of human connection and personal response to the events.

As much as Allen created deliberate media images, he and Atlanta's white leadership were equally concerned with the *prevention* of images. They were desperate to keep pictures of rioting or other violence in Atlanta from making the front pages of newspapers or the evening television news programs. It was important to them that media coverage of Atlanta showed a *lack* of unrest as a contrast to images of looting and arson in other cities (Figures 1 and 2). Likewise, providing food, shelter, and transportation to arriving mourners and welcoming dignitaries was significant not only because of the direct services offered but because it *prevented* scenes of chaos that potentially could have occurred.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to how Allen and progressive whites were portrayed—particularly in the national media—was triggered indirectly by the actions of Lester Maddox, who served as a dialectical opposite to Allen (Table 4). Maddox's actions attracted local and national media coverage that reinforced the mayor's progressive leadership. However, by serving as the embodiment of lingering racism in the South, Maddox also played to prejudices in the national press and, as the Emory researchers' study revealed, reflected lingering racial biases held by the majority of white Atlantans.

## CHAPTER 5

### CASE STUDY: THE KING FAMILY

As an African-American woman in the 1960s, Coretta Scott King, as well as her children and family members, could be described as members of a subaltern group; that is, a group outside of the hegemonic power structure and usually subjected to systematic discrimination for gender, ethnic, and/or social reasons (Pedroni) and thus a constituent of a counterpublic (Warner). That said, Coretta Scott King was a visible presence alongside her husband for many years—and a noted speaker, singer, and performer in her own right. As an international and national celebrity she had more power than most of her counterpublic counterparts. However, in 1960s America, she and her four children certainly served as a synecdoche for the country's powerless—women and children generally, and specifically women and children of color. The family had been struggling financially and, although they had already worked to secure copyrights of King's famous speeches and writings as a potential means of income, they had limited financial resources at the time of King's death (Branch 2006, 768; "Dr. King Left"; White). King took no salary from the SCLC (Young, 281-282). By portrayals at the funeral that evoked pathos for the young widow and four fatherless children, the family strove to ensure public sympathy—despite the criticism King had faced around the time of his death due to his antiwar efforts (Garrow, 551-559).

#### **Prior Examples of Public Relations Strategies Used by the King Family**

Throughout her marriage, Coretta Scott King had participated in marches, demonstrations, and other public events. As a partner in the civil rights movement, she was well aware of the power of public relations, having seen the strategies employed by King himself



(Chapter 2). She also had personal experience in staging events. For example, she organized a series of fundraising concerts in support of the civil rights movement. The so-called “Freedom Concerts” were critical successes and proven moneymakers; the 1964 concert in New York’s Town Hall, for instance, netted \$6,000 for the SCLC and the Goodman-Chaney-Schwerner Fund (Coretta Scott King, “My Life,” 231).

The Kings raised public awareness about poverty when the whole family moved into a Chicago tenement in the summer of 1966. “Although we lived as simply as we could at home, our mode of life was totally different from that of our comrades in the slums,” Mrs. King recalled in her memoir, adding, “There was nothing for the children to do except go outside the apartment building and play in the black dirt. . . . I realized that this was everyday life for the children who lived there. My children were there by choice” (260). During the Chicago sojourn, the King family was photographed by major newspapers and magazines such as *Life*, just as they had frequently been at home in Atlanta (Johnson and Adelman, 36-51).

In planning for the funeral, Coretta Scott King worked closely with an inner circle that included the following people: her sister-in-law, Christine King Farris; King’s personal assistant, Dora McDonald; the Kings’ friend and supporter Harry Belafonte; Ron English and the staff of Ebenezer Baptist Church; and Mrs. King’s friend and aide Xernona Clayton (Clayton, interview; Ron English). Coretta Scott King frequently traveled with Xernona Clayton, whose husband Ed, the former SCLC public relations director, had died in 1966. Clayton, a media-savvy journalist and community organizer, helped the Kings with personal and SCLC public relations efforts and also had assisted with Coretta Scott King’s Freedom Concerts (Clayton, “I’ve Been,” 4-5, 67, 71).

Unlike the SCLC leaders and Atlanta's business elite, groups that had specific messages to convey through the funeral event, the family circle wanted to focus on a few broader themes. First, the family stressed that, while the assassination was an event with international impact, it also represented a personal loss. The family had to arrange for a service that allowed the friends, family, and Ebenezer congregants to grieve with a measure of privacy, while acknowledging the international interest in, and response to, King's death. Second, the family and inner circle of friends determined that the funeral would be used to reaffirm the continuation of King's work, and that his personality and his life's work would be the dominant themes of the services. Like members of the SCLC, Coretta Scott King felt it was important to stress that King's death did not equal the end of the movement. "In the same way that I had given him all the support I could during his lifetime, I was even more determined to do so now that he was no longer with us," recalled Mrs. King in her memoir. "Because his task was not finished, I felt that I must rededicate myself to the completion of his work" (304).

While Coretta Scott King had been a partner with her husband in the civil rights movement and evolution of the SCLC, it was in protesting the Vietnam War and speaking at antiwar rallies in King's place that his wife had "come into her own," according to the couple's friend and SCLC executive vice president Andrew Young (478). After King's death "in her view, it was the role of the SCLC to carry on the movement that was part of Martin's legacy" while "she wanted to train people in nonviolence" in a role beyond the civil rights movement, wrote Young (479).

A review of images that the family constructed during the days leading up to the funeral and during the funeral service follows, along with analysis of the resulting media coverage.

## **The Family Circle's Key Messages and Resulting Media Coverage**

*Message: While the assassination was an event with international impact, it also represented a personal loss.* For the inner circle, planning an event that reflected King's personal tastes and underscored his family connection to Ebenezer Baptist Church was important. Ron English, who worked with Coretta Scott King and Christine King Farris on plans for the funeral, recalled that there was a deliberate effort to reflect King's preference in each aspect of the ceremony. "Coretta and Christine worked to create a program that reflected him. There were some of his favorites, like 'In Christ There Is No East or West,' which is not an easy hymn for a congregation to sing."

At the time same, the inner circle was cognizant that King's death was an international news event and that some rituals would have to be designed to allow maximum public participation. One of the main ways to accomplish this was to allow as many people as possible to view the body. "We felt that this ceremony should be shared by all those people whom he loved so much and had served during his lifetime, and that those who came from far-off places to honor him should be able to view his body for the last time," recalled Coretta Scott King in her memoir (300). Thus, the body laid in state in Sisters Chapel on the campus of Spelman College for three days over the weekend of Saturday, April 6, to Monday, April 8. During that time King's body was viewed by an estimated 60,000 people, moving through the chapel at a rate of 1,200 an hour (Coffin and Hurst; Lukas, "Thousands in Line").

During her many public appearances in the days leading up to the funeral, Mrs. King asserted that her preference would have been to remain private. In the speech she gave at the April 8 Memphis march, she talked about King's frequent travels and the impact his absences had on the family. "In spite of the times that he had to be away from his family his children knew

that Daddy loved them, and the time that he spent with them was well spent. And I always said that it's not the quantity of time that is important but the quality of time" (Coretta Scott King, "How Many"). A few days earlier, during the press conference she held ostensibly to announce Ralph Abernathy's assumption of the SCLC presidency (Chapter 3), she had said,

I would have preferred to be alone at this time with my children. We were always willing to share Martin Luther King with the world because he was a symbol of the finest man is capable of being. Yet to us he was a father and a husband. Our far-too-brief moments with him are cherished personal memories, too precious to be adequately described. (Civil Rights Digital Library wsb53564)

She went on to say, "I have put aside traditional family considerations because my husband's work for his people and for all poor people transcends our wish for privacy" (Civil Rights Digital Library wsb53564).

In the television broadcast of the press conference, the widow's emotional strain is physically manifest. Her face is wan and her eyes are swollen. She speaks with a flat, tired-sounding voice and her grief is palpable (Figure 6). The photograph in the *New York Times* that accompanied a transcript of her statement likewise shows a tired, serious woman ("Statement by Mrs. King"). A report in the *Washington Post* described her as "speaking in a clear, soft voice" and "dressed in black, seated on a worn wooden chair before a thick wooden cross with a flickering orange lightbulb over it" ("Mrs. King Pleads").

Knowing that the appearance of the widow and children would be scrutinized by the media, Xernona Clayton planned wardrobes for the family, working to select clothes, hats, and accessories that would have an impact on camera. "Coretta had asked me, 'Help me do everything.' She and I started planning—what will she wear? Planning for the ultimate stage, the funeral," recalled Clayton, adding, "When you see pictures of her that week, every garment I selected." Clayton, who began working in television in 1967 and would soon become the first black woman to host a television show in the South, said that she took into consideration how the

clothes she selected would appear in news photographs and television images (Clayton, interview).

Both Clayton and Mrs. King were aware that Mrs. King's appearance would be compared to—and contrasted with—that of another famous 1960s widow, Jacqueline Kennedy. This was a factor that Clayton took into consideration as she worked with the millinery department at Atlanta's downtown Davison's department store to design the hat that Mrs. King wore on the day of the funeral (Figures 20 and 23). "She wanted a headdress. She told me she wanted something covered but didn't want to look like she was trying to look like Jacqueline Kennedy," said Clayton. Thus, Clayton strove to create a look that had the same visual impact as Kennedy's veiled hat (Figure 24) but did not seem to be a copycat. She also considered how the headpiece would look through the lenses of news and television cameras. "It had to be a veil that covered her, yet allowed her expression to be seen," Clayton said (Figure 20).



**Figure 20: *Life* Magazine Cover, April 19, 1968. Flip Schulke.**

The King children figured prominently in media coverage. They came to the Atlanta airport when Mrs. King returned from Memphis with King's body. A *Washington Post* article described the arrival of the plane bringing King's body thus: "The Kings' four young children, who had waited several hours under somber skies and in a slight drizzle were the first to board the plane and ran into the arms of their mother" ("King's Body Flown"). The *Atlanta Constitution's* Alex Coffin described a scene in which the family deplaned and Mrs. King "smiled sadly" at the 300 onlookers assembled while "sympathizers, black and white, touched the window glass of the hearse" before a "long procession of cars started back to Atlanta," driving down Auburn Avenue where "flags were flown upside down."

The next day, Alex Coffin went, along with Margaret Hurst, to report on the mourners lining up to view King's body displayed in Sisters Chapel. Describing the scene of people queuing to enter the Spelman chapel (Figure 14), they wrote, "Mourners were backed up as much as a mile in a serpentine line through the campus, which was dotted with dogwoods and red and pink azaleas ("Mrs. King Takes"). In a similar *Washington Post* piece, Judith Martin described the emotional outburst by Martin Luther King's father upon seeing the body. She noted that, by contrast, "the widow and her children neither wept nor touched the casket, which held their unwavering gaze" (Figure 21).



**Figure 21: Mrs. King, the King Children, and Family Friends at the Bier.** The boy at the far right is Abernathy's son. J.P. Laffont/Sygma/Corbis.

Each of the print media sources that I analyzed for this project featured depictions of the Kings' married life. In its May 1968 King tribute issue, *Ebony* ran a page of photographs showing the family in both candid shots and formal portraits under the headline, "A family man bound by ties of love and faith" (140). The April 25 cover of *Jet* showed the widow and children, echoing the sympathetic cover of the April 19 issue of *Life* (Figure 20). *Jet* ran a story on the King's marriage, accompanied by a photograph of the couple dancing at a celebration for his Nobel Prize. "God meant us to be together," Mrs. King was quoted saying in the article. That statement was used as a bold headline across the accompanying photos (Morris, "God Meant").

Likewise, each media outlet covered the unique home life of the King family. *Washington Post* reporter Judith Martin interviewed the widow's sister, Edith Scott Bagley, and quoted her saying of her nieces and nephews, "my sister has never tried to shield them" and that the children "have all been in marches. They have lived with the knowledge that their home could be bombed any minute" ("Mrs. King Is Grateful"). *Washington Afro-American* writer Elizabeth Oliver visited the King home before the funeral and wrote a story that emphasized the

universal nature of a family's mourning period. Oliver painted a domestic scene with "huge platters and trays that held food" and "neighbors and crowds washing glasses, plates, and silver, hustling and bustling around to take that load off the family" while the Kings' sons, Marty and Dexter, "sailed model airplanes with small friends their own age." A similar domestic milieu was depicted by *Life* magazine, which in its April 19 issue paired an excerpt from Mrs. King's Memphis speech with photos of the children playing a game of Chinese Checkers on the morning of the funeral (34-35). Bernice King, who was five at the time, said in an interview that she recalls "flashbulbs going off all the time" because of the number of photographers in the house. Patricia Latimore, who was the Kings' babysitter at the time, recalled the home being packed with neighbors, celebrities, extended family, and reporters.

*Message: The funeral would be used to underscore the continuation of King's work.* The most dramatic personal gesture that Coretta Scott King made was to carry on with the march in Memphis that her husband had been scheduled to lead. As discussed in Chapter 3, taking place the day before the funeral, the march was heavily covered by the media, and Mrs. King's speech received considerable attention. The *Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page article describing the young widow "dressed in black" saying of her husband "his spirit will never die" (Burke and Meagher). Reporting on the march, *Jet* magazine's Simeon Booker described the widow as "the Black Madonna of Grief" and said she had "entered from the wings and demonstrated her mettle" as she "served as a symbol of valiant black womanhood" ("Returns to Walk," 6).





**Figure 22: Coretta Scott King Leads the Memphis March.** Also pictured are her three oldest children and SCLC leaders Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young. AFP/Getty Images.

The widow's role in continuing her husband's work also was stressed by Abernathy's announcement that she would be named to the executive board of the SCLC, along with Harry Belafonte. "The election ... indicates SCLC plans to expand her role in the protest movement to keep alive the symbol of her husband to stir support for the movement," wrote Jack Nelson in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Abernathy Says").

### **The King Family Compared to the Kennedys**

Comparing the King and Kennedy families was a theme featured in every media source I studied. For example, the *Washington Afro-American* ran a front page photograph of the two widows facing each other and holding hands. This image was captioned "Gallant Mourners." Describing Jackie Kennedy's visit to the King home, *Jet* magazine's Simeon Booker wrote that "only a knowing smile linked the two great women" before "the nation's most revered lady in black comforted Mrs. King and patted the heads of her children urging them to 'be brave'"

(“Returns to Walk,” 16). In the same issue, a full-page photo of the two women ran with the caption, “At the King household in Atlanta, the tragedies of Dallas-Memphis are linked” (31).<sup>9</sup> Reinforcing that notion of a shared spirit of grief was a photo feature on the front page of the *Washington Post* April 10 “women’s” section. Images of the women meeting at the King home, of Mrs. Kennedy talking with a mourner, and of Coretta Scott King comforting her five-year-old daughter, Bernice, were headlined “The Feeling Within—Tragedy Is Their Bond.” In the accompanying text, the *Post*’s writers stated,

The two women, one white and one black, have much in common. Each saw her husband dedicate his life to public service and each saw her husband cut down in the prime of life. Each was left with young children to whom she must explain the unexplainable. Each received an outpouring of sympathy from the entire world, and yet each was left essentially alone to deal with her private grief.

The images of the beautiful young widows paired with such words stressed that, although each woman’s situation was specific, the feeling of grief was universal.

While coverage of Jackie Kennedy’s visit to the King home had a tone of respectful sympathy, the reporting on her attendance at the funeral service at Ebenezer Baptist Church had a paparazzi flavor (Tyson, “Kennedy Stirred”). Describing Kennedy’s arrival at Ebenezer, *Atlanta Daily World* columnist Thaddeus Stokes wrote, “Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy’s appearance caused a surging tide of human body (sic) to flow toward her with a terrific force. Men and women rushed forward to shake her hand, to touch her and holler ‘Hello Jackie.’” Reporters dished up predictable fashion commentary. Ozeil Woolcock, a writer for the *Atlanta Daily World*, described Kennedy “appearing very much as she did at the funeral of her own husband,” and went on to describe “Mrs. King, dressed all in black” sitting with her children, “two girls, in

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<sup>9</sup> Kathryn Johnson, the AP reporter, filed a story about Jackie Kennedy’s visit to the King house. The following anecdote, which she shared during an interview, did not make it into the AP dispatch: “I came by very early, and went to the kitchen, put on an apron and started cooking breakfast for the King family; Coretta’s parents had come in from Alabama. When Jacqueline Kennedy came in, I was standing at the door of the dining room, wearing an apron with a towel over my hand. She made a beeline for me and shook my hand; I know she thought I was the Kings’ white maid!”

contrast to the sober garb of the rest of the congregation, were dressed all in white, and the youngest, Albertine, had two big bows in her hair. Mrs. King's black gloved hand occasionally reached out to calm or caress the girl as she started to fidget."



**Figure 23: Coretta Scott King and Bernice King.** Moneta Sleet/Corbis.

Television cameras that panned from one widow to the other also highlighted their shared experience. Describing the coverage, *Los Angeles Times* critic Hal Humphrey wrote,

The climax of the five days came Tuesday with the two funeral services for Dr. King—one at Ebenezer Church, the other outdoors at Morehouse College. Viewers must have feared for the safety of Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy as police struggled to get her inside Ebenezer Church.

Humphrey then went on to add that “even more dramatic than the collection of dignitaries” was the presence of the King family “as they sat listening to the service at the church.” Describing the widow, he wrote, “She sat with her eyes closed most of the time, but composed.”

Of all the striking images of Coretta Scott King, the most compelling is Moneta Sleet’s photograph of her with five-year-old daughter Bernice (Figure 23). In the photograph, Bernice

gazes toward, but not directly into, the camera, and the girl's expression of sadness blended with boredom evokes the natural response of children to tragedy, saddened but not fully comprehending. Coretta Scott King, meanwhile, holds her daughter but gazes ahead, also not making contact with the camera, and with an expression of sadness and calm resignation.<sup>10</sup>

The image has obvious echoes of iconic Madonna-and-child images, both photojournalistic, such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, and classic paintings. The Madonna image is especially applicable to the portraits of the widow and her child because it carries the connotation of the absent father and husband. Hariman and Lucaites write describing *Migrant Mother*: "As with the Madonna, a substitution has occurred. Another provider will be called to step into the husband's place. ... The shadow father continues the Biblical allegory" (58-59). As Janis Edwards has noted, "visual images express particulars to evoke the universal" (179), and the image of a mourning Coretta Scott King suggests the universal grief experienced by the passing of a loved one. The image creates an obvious evocation of the famous photograph of Jackie Kennedy and her children at the funeral for John Kennedy (Figure 24). In that photograph, which Edwards has defined as iconic, the serene widow dressed in dark clothing gazes ahead through a veil while a young child (John Jr.) dressed in light clothing engages in a spontaneous childish act, in this case, imitating the military salute directed at his father.

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<sup>10</sup> Photojournalist Moneta Sleet, who was covering the funeral for *Ebony* magazine, was almost barred from entering Ebenezer because of the crowds. Coretta Scott King, noting the dearth of African-American reporters, helped Sleet get into the church. This photograph was printed in newspapers nationwide and earned Sleet the first Pulitzer Prize for photography awarded to an African American (Pulitzer; Roberts and Klibanoff, 404).



**Figure 24: Jacqueline Kennedy and Son at the Funeral for John F. Kennedy.** Stan Stearns/ Corbis.

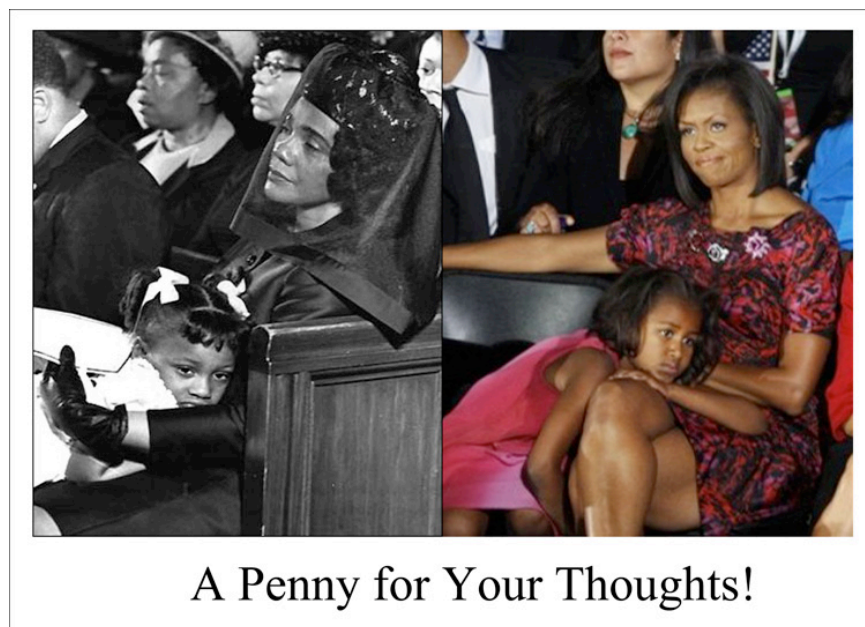
Of all the images generated by media coverage of the King funeral, the Sleet photograph stands out as arguably iconic. As described by Lucaites and Hariman, the “iconic photojournalistic image” is an important rhetorical device because

its freezing of a critical moment in time intensifies the journalistic experience, focusing the viewer’s attention on a particular enactment of the tensions that define the public culture. But more than this, it does so ritualistically, as it repetitively conjures images of what is unsayable. (2007, 41)

They go on to establish four criteria for iconic images: being recognizable in a public culture; being understood as depicting historic occasions; provoking strong emotional responses; and being frequently reproduced. The Sleet photograph meets all of those criteria. In addition, like the image of John Kennedy Jr.’s salute, this mother-daughter portrait addresses “the enduring nature of life and hope for the future as much as sadness for the present” (Edwards, 184).

An interesting testament to the Sleet photograph’s impact came forty years after it was taken. In late 2008, a painting based on a photograph of Michelle Obama and daughter Sasha created an Internet controversy when bloggers remarked on its similarity to the Sleet photograph. The image then was alternately criticized or praised. Critics saw the painting as a racist

prediction that Barack Obama, like King, would be assassinated. Supporters considered the image to be a positive tribute, associating the Obama and King families. A document that featured the photograph on which the Obama painting was based, the Sleet photograph, and the message “A Penny for Your Thoughts!” was posted on a few blogs (Figure 25). Downloaded from blogs and websites, the document then gained a wider audience through viral communication as it was forwarded from e-mail to e-mail. (When an e-mail with the document reached my inbox, it had already bounced through a string more than 100 e-mail addresses.) An online search found more than 14,000 references to the image on websites ranging from Michelle Obama Watch (<http://michelleobamawatch.com/sometimes-a-painting-is-just-a-painting-elizabeth-peyton-painting-controversy>) to Kirsty.com ([http://www.kirtsy.com/story.php?title=The\\_past\\_and\\_the\\_present\\_Coretta\\_Scott\\_King\\_and\\_Michelle\\_Obama](http://www.kirtsy.com/story.php?title=The_past_and_the_present_Coretta_Scott_King_and_Michelle_Obama)). Comparisons of the images were even discussed on the Arts Beat blog on the *New York Times* website (<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/new-museum-adds-michelle-obama-portrait/>).



**Figure 25: Paired King and Obama Images Circulated Online.**

### Summary of the Family's Public Relations Initiatives

Unlike the SCLC and white business leaders, who were obligated to convey specific messages, the King family circle was less concerned with making certain points than finding a means of balancing a private loss with unrelenting media attention. There was one key message that was conveyed—that King's work, of which Coretta Scott King had been a major participant, would continue. This was clearly communicated through her presence at the Memphis march, the speech following it, and her participation in the SCLC press conference. That said, the family did undertake some specific efforts to control how it was portrayed in media coverage, as summarized in the following table.

**Table 5: King Family Messages and Resulting Media Coverage.**

Message	Image(s) Staged or Statement(s) Made	Media Coverage
While King's death was an international news event, it was also a private time of grief	At the press conference announcing Abernathy's succession, Mrs. King stated: "I would have preferred to be alone at this time with my children."	Her statement was widely quoted and newspapers described her worn appearance.
	Reporters came into the home	Images of the children playing; domestic scenes described
The universal nature of grief transcends race/class	The family wore traditional mourning clothes	Striking images of family, especially Mrs. King, appeared in every media outlet analyzed.
	The family participated in traditional rites, such as viewing the body	Images of the family at the coffin ran in most of the print publications that I analyzed; the visit also was televised. The family's trip to the funeral home after the body was delivered to Atlanta from Memphis was heavily reported.
King's work would continue and his family would take part	Participation in Memphis march the day before the funeral by Coretta Scott King and three of the children	News images focused on the family's role in the event; considerable print coverage of the march focused on Mrs. King's participation, and her speech was widely reprinted and excerpted.

While there was not a deliberate effort on the part of the King inner circle to contrast and compare the King family experience with that of the Kennedys, it was virtually inevitable that

such a comparison would occur in the resulting media coverage. And indeed, both words and visuals in television, newspaper, and magazine coverage repeatedly underscored the common grief of the two families and depicted the serene but sad widows and the poised fatherless children.



## CONCLUSIONS

The King funeral was an event of international significance and one that contained many examples of genuine and spontaneous emotional response to the sudden assassination of the acclaimed civil rights leader. These include the tears openly shed by mourners following King's casket through the streets of Atlanta, the handmade signs and banners carried during the funeral, and the patient queuing by tens of thousands of mourners waiting to see King's body as it lay in state.

That said, after conducting this research project, I have concluded that my initial hypothesis is correct and that key elements of the funeral were deliberately planned image events, staged as an effort to influence public opinion. These efforts were undertaken by three stakeholder groups—the SCLC, Atlanta's white leaders, and the King family—each of which had past experience in effectively using staged actions to further their public relations strategies. Each of the stakeholder groups was able to create certain spectacles that reinforced their key messages. Through the shrewd use of image generation, the three stakeholder groups were able to both shape the event and create symbols and messages that were covered by the varied media outlets at the funeral.

Thus, the story of the King funeral was shaped in part by narratives directed by three groups each with different, but sometimes overlapping agendas. At times, the disparate groups shared the same goal, but with different motives. For instance, both Ivan Allen and the SCLC had a vested interest in communicating that Atlanta would remain peaceful despite violence in other cities. Aside from the obvious prevention of physical and property damage, Allen and Atlanta's business leaders wanted to demonstrate that Atlanta was more progressive and had better interracial relations than other cities, particularly other Southern cities. Deploying highly

visible African-American police officers was a means of creating media images that spoke to both public safety and social change. On the other hand, the SCLC leaders wanted to demonstrate the effectiveness and relevance of their nonviolent philosophy, and staging a visually compelling and peaceful march with more than 100,000 participants was a way to accomplish that. As another example of differing goals contributing to the same staged acts, both the SCLC and King family shared the goal of communicating that King's work would continue. For the SCLC, this was largely a matter of confirming the organization's mission to continue planned activities and assert its relevance; for Coretta Scott King, it was to reaffirm the broader concept of nonviolence as it related to the antiwar movement. The goal of both groups was accomplished by the images created as a result of the Memphis march the day before the funeral and the televised press conference in Atlanta shortly after King's death.

For all this careful planning, the staged actions by the stakeholder groups were responsible for only a portion of the significant media coverage of King's funeral and the days leading up to it. Some of the details that captured media attention or added poignancy to the coverage were simply matters of happenstance: the delicate raindrops that fell during the Memphis march for instance, or the individual decisions of particular celebrities and politicians to attend or not attend the funeral.

Other events that attracted extensive media coverage were the result of actions by people other than the stakeholders. These actions, inadvertently or not, created contrasts with or comparisons to the three stakeholder groups and had an impact on the overall effectiveness of their messages. For example, Lester Maddox's decision to stay in the Capitol and call in troopers created a contrast with Ivan Allen. This was positive in that it highlighted Allen's progressive commitment to civil rights. It was negative in that it played to national media stereotypes about

Southerners and prejudices held by some white Atlantans. The decision of Jacqueline Kennedy and other members of the Kennedy family to attend the funeral evoked a sympathetic comparison between Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy—and by extension their families.

### **Seven Key Messages**

Given the magnitude of the funeral and the extensive media coverage, the intertextual examination of “fragments” of media messages served to create an overview of the event and the ways that it might have been received by audiences. After examining representative samples of text, images, and news film from local and national newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts, I have concluded that seven key messages repeatedly emerged. Some of these reinforced the objectives that were important to the stakeholder groups, while others did not. Out of the myriad media fragments generated by the funeral events and the days leading up to the funeral, the following seven key concepts emerged more frequently, and more consistently, than any others. Each spawned both literal images and descriptive reportage.

*1. The mule-drawn wagon.* The SCLC leadership decided to transport King’s casket through Atlanta in a mule-drawn wagon as a way to publicize King’s planned Poor People’s Campaign and to symbolize his identity with the country’s impoverished citizens. The funeral planners worked to find a photogenic, distressed wagon. The wagon, and the Georgia mules that hauled it, were photographed and filmed extensively. Every print media source I reviewed featured images of the wagon as well as written descriptions. The wagon was a dominant image in the television coverage. This staged action conveyed the SCLC message powerfully.

*2. The peaceful march through Atlanta.* The sight of more than 100,000 people calmly marching through Atlanta while other cities in the United States were engulfed with violence and

arson was a mass action that generated substantial media coverage. This image underscored the SCLC message that its philosophy of nonviolent civil protest would continue despite King's death. Singing of spirituals and hymns such as "We Shall Overcome" that were closely associated with King's work served as a reminder of King's other famous marches.

The procession served the other two stakeholder groups as well. It emphasized Atlanta leaders' efforts to maintain peace in the city in contrast to the experience in other urban areas of the country. Participation in the procession by mayor Allen and members of his staff underscored City Hall's role in maintaining peace. Finally, the presence of King's widow and children at the march reminded observers of the personal tragedy behind the international news story.

3. *King's "Drum Major" self-eulogy.* Of all the speeches, prayers, and tributes delivered at the funeral, the one that received the most media coverage, and appeared to strike the deepest emotional resonance with observers, was the playing of King's "Drum Major" sermon in which he outlined his own eulogy. The decision to include this in the ceremonies was announced to media outlets, and reported by them in advance of the event. The speech was featured prominently in the live coverage of the funeral as well as follow-up reportage. Coretta Scott King's decision to include the recording in the funeral service had the result of eclipsing the other speeches, prayers, and tributes—including those of King's successor Ralph Abernathy. The speech also intensified media imagery that already was rich with metaphors alluding to King as a prophet or Moses-like figure.

4. *The appearance and demeanor of Stokely Carmichael.* The dramatic arrival of Carmichael and his entourage at Ebenezer Baptist Church generated television, newspaper, and magazine coverage. In his hipster outfit and with his bold attitude, Carmichael presented a sharp contrast to the solemn SCLC members in their denim jackets and overalls. The visual and

attitudinal differences demonstrated at the funeral event served to heighten the debate that had been presented in media coverage over the days leading up to the funeral: would King's philosophy of nonviolent protest be maintained by the SCLC colleagues and others, or would King's absence allow Carmichael and more militant activists to gain ground?

While Carmichael's participation generated media coverage and thus created images and phrases that audiences picked up on, his role was a relatively minor one in the overall scheme of the events, and much of the coverage was critical of his behavior. In the aggregate, the coverage of the somber SCLC leaders following the mule-drawn wagon dominated.

*5. Lester Maddox's decision to call out guards and stay in the Capitol.* The Georgia governor's refusal to either lower flags in deference to King or close schools and state offices for the funeral generated media coverage before the funeral. His decision to call in state troopers and remain in the Capitol during the services also generated media commentary, much of it negative. By referring to Maddox as the creator of a "fortress" and showing images of the foreboding, guarded Capitol, media outlets cast him as a newer incarnation of Bull Connor and other segregationists. This was in stark contrast with the handful of white Atlanta and Georgia politicians—such as Allen, Massell, and Sanders—who took part in the funeral, and the many more white politicians—Robert Kennedy, George Romney, Nelson Rockefeller, Richard Nixon, and dozens of others—who traveled from other regions of the country to take part.

*6. Participation of the Kennedy family.* Attendance at the funeral by the Kennedys resulted in two key messages being conveyed. First, the presence of the Kennedy family members—in particular the widow Jackie Kennedy—served to remind audiences of John Kennedy's assassination and affirm the similarities between his death and King's. The calm demeanor of the widows, their somber but chic appearance, and the presence of their young

children, were strikingly similar. Second, the presence of members of the Kennedy family, including Edward Kennedy, then a U.S. senator, and Robert Kennedy, then also a senator and a Democratic presidential candidate, served to emphasize the political significance of King's death. While the funeral was not a designated state event, the presence of so many dignitaries, typified by the Kennedys, lent an official atmosphere to the proceedings.

*7. Images of the King family (in particular the photograph of Coretta Scott King with Bernice King).* Images of King's widow and children transcended the political specificity of the funeral event. These images evoked the universal narrative of death, loss, and survival. Sympathetic coverage of the family underscored their similarities to members of the audiences who otherwise might have differed from the Kings in terms of race, socioeconomic status, religion, or other factors. While most of the other images generated by the funeral rites were noteworthy for the frequency of their appearance (the dozens of photographs of the mule-drawn wagon and aerial photographs of the procession, for example), the King family experience generated a singular image—the Moneta Sleet portrait of Coretta Scott King and her daughter. With its emotional resonance, historic significance, universally understood subject, and broad dissemination, the photograph can be considered iconic.

### **The Most Enduring Message**

So, to address the initial hypothesis for this project: was the King funeral used by key stakeholder groups associated with King as a platform to stage image events? Simply put, yes. The leaders of the SCLC, the civic and business leaders of Atlanta, and King's family all deliberately staged actions as part of the funeral event with the intention of conveying specific

messages. Those actions generated significant media coverage, which, in whole and in fragments, conveyed those core messages to audiences.

But even the best-laid plans are susceptible to interference. Thus the carefully orchestrated funeral events were disrupted by the actions of others—chiefly Lester Maddox, Stokely Carmichael, and the Kennedy family. This resulted in media messages other than those planned. For the most part, these actions, even if inadvertently, reinforced the main messages of the stakeholder groups.

The King funeral was a remarkable event in terms of scale, planning, and drama. It generated memorable images. But just as King's self-recorded eulogy topped any of the planned speeches and spectacle at the funeral, it was the force of King's presence—revealed through his absence—that dominated the seven and a half hours of mourning that day and resonates forty years later.

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- Figure 3: Crowds at King's Funeral, Bettman/Corbis, item BE047055. Image licensed for publication in this thesis.
- Figure 4: Mourners Carrying a Poster of King at the Funeral. Bettman/Corbis, item 42-15883576. Image licensed for publication in this thesis.
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- Figure 6: Press Conference Announcing Abernathy's Succession. The WSB Television Newsfilm Collection, University of Georgia Libraries Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection. Accessed through the Civil Rights Digital Library database, item wsb53564.
- Figure 7: SCLC Leaders and the Mule-Drawn Wagon. Bob Adelman/Corbis, item 42-20715059. Image licensed for publication in this thesis.
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- Figure 23: Coretta Scott King and Bernice King. Moneta Sleet/Corbis, item U1589289. Image licensed for publication in this thesis.
- Figure 24: Jacqueline Kennedy and Son at the Funeral for John F. Kennedy. Stan Stearns/Corbis, item BE023766. Image licensed for publication in this thesis.
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## APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Bell, Eldrin: A detective with the Atlanta Police Department at the time of King's funeral, he was involved in anti-riot efforts undertaken by City Hall. Bell later became chief of the Atlanta Police Department and at the time of the interview was chairman of the Clayton County Commission.

Butts, June Dobbs: A family friend of King's, she traveled to Atlanta to attend the funeral. She and King knew each other as children and later worked on a research project together after graduation from college. She is the daughter of Atlanta civil rights pioneer John Wesley Dobbs and the aunt of Maynard Jackson, the first black mayor of Atlanta.

Clayton, Xernona: An assistant to the King family at the time of King's death, she frequently traveled with Coretta Scott King. Her husband, Ed, who died before King's assassination, was the former public relations director for the SCLC. Clayton planned Coretta Scott King's wardrobe for the funeral and coordinated with Robert Kennedy on protocol for arriving dignitaries. She went on to become one of the first African-American women to host a television interview show in the South and later founded the Trumpet Awards.

Dodd, Marie: The director of advertising for the Ivan Allen Co., she was brought in by mayor Ivan Allen to assist City Hall with crisis communication at the time of the funeral.

English, Jethro: A longtime member of Ebenezer Baptist Church and a deacon at the time of King's death, he sang in the choir at the funeral and also was a pallbearer. He sang at both King's wedding and King's parents' wedding.

English, Ron: Assistant pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church at the time of King's death, he delivered the opening prayer at the funeral. He knew King since childhood and was a fraternity brother of King's at Morehouse College.

Hemphill, Paul: A journalist who wrote a daily column for the *Atlanta Journal*, he covered the funeral extensively.

Houck, Tom: A member of the executive board of the SCLC at the time of King's death, he was involved in planning Poor People's Campaign outreach among poor whites in Appalachia. Houck started with the SCLC as the driver for the King family and during the funeral assisted with traffic planning and logistics.

Jackson, Jesse: A leader in the SCLC, he was head of Operation Bread Basket, an anti-poverty campaign at the time King was killed. Also involved in the Poor People's Campaign, Jackson was with King in Memphis the day of the assassination and appeared on television interviews that evening. He later went on to found the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and in 1988 ran for President.

Johnson, Kathryn: The only female reporter in the Atlanta AP bureau in the late 1960s, she spent several days at the King home while the funeral was being planned.

Johnson, Tom: A press aide to Lyndon Johnson at the time King was killed, he went on to have a distinguished career in newspapers and later as head of CNN.



Johnson, Winston: The former director of VIP services for Eastern Airlines, he was stationed at the Atlanta airport during the funeral week to help visiting celebrities and politicians. He escorted Eugene McCarthy's wife, Abigail, to the King home before the funeral. He later formed a close relationship with Coretta Scott King and was instrumental in fundraising for the King Center.

Kilgo, Pete: Director of sales for the Atlanta Transit System at the time of the King funeral, he was involved with logistics of transporting the arriving mourners in Atlanta. On the day of the funeral he supervised buses carrying celebrities.

King, Bernice: The youngest child of the King family, she has gone on to have a career as a minister and author.

Kohn, Kathy: A lifelong member of Central Presbyterian Church, she went, along with her husband, Norm, to volunteer at the church to help feed and shelter mourners arriving in Atlanta for the funeral.

Kohn, Norm: A member of Central Presbyterian Church, he and his wife, Kathy, volunteered at the church to help feed and shelter mourners arriving in Atlanta for the funeral.

LaFayette, Bernard: The national field director for the SCLC at the time of King's death he was involved in staging marches and other forms of nonviolent protest. He helped to organize the march held in Memphis between the time of King's death and the funeral and also helped with the planning of the funeral procession's route through Atlanta. He went on to become an educator and minister. At the time of his interview he was distinguished-scholar-in-residence and director of the Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies at the University of Rhode Island.

Latimore, Patricia: The King's former babysitter and a longtime friend of the family, she attended the funeral and stayed with the family the day before to help them prepare. At the time of our interview, she was working as an archivist at the King Center.

Lowery, Joseph: The chairman of the board of the SCLC at the time of King's death, he later became the organization's president. A longtime civil rights activist and minister, he was a founding member of the SCLC.

Massell, Sam: The vice mayor of Atlanta at the time of King's death, he later became mayor of Atlanta.

Mullá, Linda: The City Hall assistant to Ivan Allen at the time of King's death, she went on to work at the Ivan Allen Co.

Omilami, Elizabeth: The daughter of SCLC member Hosea Williams, she helped with logistics of obtaining the mule-drawn wagon. Today she is an actress and runs the Hosea Feed the Hungry and Homeless nonprofit in Atlanta.

Robinson, Don Carl: The longtime minister of music for Central Presbyterian Church, he volunteered to help feed and shelter mourners arriving in Atlanta for the funeral.

Sanders, Carl: The former governor of Georgia, he was in the White House with Robert Woodruff when Lyndon Johnson received the news of the assassination. Sanders was one

of the few Georgia politicians to attend the funeral. He is presently chairman emeritus with the Troutman Sanders law firm.

Saporta, Maria: A childhood friend and schoolmate of Yolanda King, she visited the home during the funeral and was at the airport the day the coffin was brought from Memphis. She went on to have a long career as a journalist with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. She now is a columnist with the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*.

Williams, Sam: A Georgia Tech student and intern in Ivan Allen's office at the time of King's funeral, Williams is now head of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.