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## Guest Opinion: A remembrance of Coretta Scott King

by Clayborne Carson

I have learned much about Coretta Scott King in the years since 1985, when she called me unexpectedly one evening to explore my interest in editing her late husband's papers.

I saw her then mainly as the widow of the man I had first seen at the 1963 March on Washington. Only gradually did I come to appreciate Coretta's historical significance.

During the dozens of meetings we had after that first call, she made me aware that she saw herself as nurturing a living legacy rather than simply continuing Martin's work. Building the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta and initiating the King Papers Project had been her dream, not his.

When I first came to the King Center, I learned that she shared Martin's commitment to peace and social justice, but she also had a singular determination to create a permanent institution to promote these ideals.

On several occasions, she reminded me that more of her adult life had been spent without Martin than with him. Coretta Scott's basic identity had been shaped by the racism she encountered during her formative years in Alabama. During the years before her marriage, she was already a political activist. While breaking racial barriers as an undergraduate at Antioch College, she became an enthusiastic supporter of the left-wing Progressive Party.

After entering the New England Conservatory in Boston to study music, Coretta was drawn to her future husband's idealism, which reinforced her own views. She recalled that Martin rejected the notion of "making all the money you can and ignoring people's needs."

When she let me see the letters Martin had written her during their courtship, I understood more fully the shared political passions that sparked their romance.

It was revealing that Coretta would send her fiancé a copy of Edward Bellamy's utopian socialist novel *Looking Backward*, but equally revealing was the intermixing of poetic expression of devotion and political digressions in their love letters. In a 1952 letter, Martin interrupted a florid "romantic flight" to criticize capitalism for taking "necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the class," adding that he preferred "evolutionary rather than revolutionary" change.

“This, it seems to me, is the most sane and ethical way for social change to take place,” he wrote.

Coretta King’s emergence as a public figure in the years after her husband’s assassination was a reaffirmation of the political commitments she brought into the marriage. Even while raising four children, she sought opportunities to demonstrate her irrepressible idealism.

In 1956, when Martin considered having armed protection during the Montgomery bus boycott, it was Coretta who insisted that she would feel less safe with guns around. After the family home was bombed, she firmly resisted pressures from her parents and in-laws to move away from Montgomery with her infant daughter.

During the early 1960s, Coretta affiliated with Women’s Strike for Peace, and she expressed her opposition to the Vietnam war several years before her husband was willing to take a public anti-war stand. Like Martin, she viewed the civil rights struggle in the United States in the broader context of anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia. Both attended the 1957 independence ceremony of Ghana, Africa’s first black-ruled nation, and both toured India in 1959 as guests of the Indian government.

As founding president of the King Center, Coretta not only campaigned tirelessly to establish the national King Holiday but also exhibited her expansive vision of global peace and social justice. During the occasions I was around her, I often had the privilege of witnessing her encounters with other visionaries, ranging from Cesar Chavez to Bono. After Corazon Aquino rose to the presidency of the Philippines as a result of the “People Power” movement, Coretta King was among those invited to attend Aquino’s inauguration.

When she allowed herself and two of her children to be arrested at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C., it was consistent with the engrained beliefs. Although many Americans saw Coretta as well as her husband in their limited roles as civil rights advocates, I came to see both as among the world’s most important visionaries of the past century.

After her retirement as the King Center’s president, I saw Coretta less often. But several years ago, my wife, Susan, and I had the pleasure of attending her 75th birthday celebration, held on a lake at Stone Mountain, near Atlanta. No longer having to discuss matters concerning the King papers, we had become friends with two decades of memories, which included occasional arguments and reconciliations. Aware of the pressures of her public life, it was a pleasure to see her relax in the company of family and friends.

As I think back to that event, I marvel that she continued until the end to speak out on issues such as gay rights and economic justice. But, most of all, I celebrate all that Coretta accomplished during her life, especially during the half century since she and her husband decided to return to the South to fight against injustice.

She had contributed to the momentous twentieth century struggles against the Jim Crow system, colonialism, legalized gender discrimination, and South African apartheid that achieved basic rights for most of humanity. She left the world far better than she found it.

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