Whitewashing Black History By James Clark

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell characterized the government's authoritarianism by saying "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."[1] With this powerful quote, Orwell touched on the immense role a people's history plays in their ability to achieve self determination, as well as the capacity for the distortion of history by those who write and teach it. The Civil Rights movement was a watershed period in American history that helped shape the social and political climate at the time, as well as what would follow. Yet, in the remembrance and teaching of such an important topic, we see the misunderstandings, distortions and over-simplifications that Orwell warned against. Through a variety of sources, we will examine this perception of history in relation to the issue of violence and the aims of the Civil Rights movement as well as its implications for the future.

When examining history, it is important to venture from the published scholarly works and hear what less remarkable but no less relevant people have to say about their experiences at the time or what they have learned about what happened. To accomplish this, I interviewed a number of individuals of varying demographics and backgrounds. Lora Lofton is an eighty-one year old black woman who grew up in Oakwood, Texas and recalls having to "go through the back" at public establishments as a child because she was black.[2] Sedalia Johnson is an eighty year old black woman who grew up in a small town in east Texas.[3] Elizabeth Kaul Clark is a fifty-one year old woman who grew up in Mission Woods, Kansas, outside Kansas City, and she also happens to be my mom.[4] Stephanie Vu is nineteen, of Vietnamese descent and a friend of mine. She grew up moving around the United States often.[5] Finally, Andy Hatch is seventeen and white, and

was studying the Civil Rights movement at his public high school in Katy, Texas at the time of our interview.[6]

Perhaps the most misunderstood and distorted aspect of the Civil Rights movement is the issue of violence and non-violence. The dominant view is that the Civil Rights movement was exclusively non-violent, with the exception of a few radical militants mostly in the late 1960s. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. especially is seen as the shining beacon of the non-violent approach to civil rights. Ms. Lofton, Ms. Johnson, and Ms. Clark all expressed their belief in the use of non-violence as well as their affinity for Dr. King.[7] When queried about the more militant segments of the civil rights struggle, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Clark were rather hostile, believing that these more militant activists were "detrimental"[8] to the struggle because they "just added more hate."[9]

The reality of the civil rights movement, however, was far more complicated than the standard dichotomy of gratuitous violence versus strict non-violence. More often the question was "In which situations is the use of force appropriate?" The right to self-defense, "even involving weapons and bloodshed," was upheld by even the most devoted adherents to the non-violent program, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.[10] Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation noted Dr. King's armed guards and was prompted to describe Dr. King's house as "an arsenal."[11]

Fundamentally, this position was no different than that taken by the more typical militants of the Civil Rights movement like Malcolm X or the Black Panther Party, which upheld their right to bear arms in what they considered to be self-defense. The Panthers were even originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.[12] What certainly is

arguable is the point at which self-defense stops and aggression begins, but the basic principle of self-defense still stands.[13]

The major difference between the "violent" and "non-violent" camps was the role of self-defense in their political program and their portrayal by the media and the history books. While not abandoning the right to self-defense, the "non-violent" civil rights leaders continued preaching and leading non-violence in public, whereas for the more militant groups, arms played a central role in their outward projection to the public, making it easy for the media and history to ignore the other facets of their political program.[14] It allowed strong advocates of armed self-defense like Robert Williams, described by astute historians as "typical" of his demographic of black Civil Rights activists in the south and a receiver of broad local support from that demographic,[15] to be cast as a "pariah" of the Civil Rights movement by the New York Times Magazine.[16] While many people who "didn't have anything to do with" the more militant segments of the civil rights struggle, like Ms. Lofton, recognized that these radicals "did some good things…were working for the same thing [as the "non-violent" part of the movement]," and "weren't part of the problem,"[17] it was all too common for many others to see the strong self-defense advocates as the opposite side of a coin of hate and violence.[18]

This distorted legacy of what the more radical and militant segments of the struggle accomplished is carried into the conventional history of the movement today. Alamo Community Center staffer Pamela, 50, asserts that while "no one really understood [Malcolm X] at the time," "[n]ow we do."[19] Yet, today's youth still seem unaware of his real significance or what he stood for. While Stephanie Vu knows a little about Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, she does not credit her high school with any of

the knowledge. In high school, these people and groups were always "just a sentence in a book," and she subsequently does not feel like she knows enough about them to make any statement that is not an "ignorant judgement" about them.[20]

Likewise, Andy Hatch takes issue with what his high school history textbook teaches him about the subject. Out of twenty-seven pages in the book about civil rights, "one [page] contains everything we need to know to understand black power, the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X," which he finds "absurd." In relation to the Black Panthers, "[the textbook] focused mainly on their potential…to have had illegal tactics. [The Panther's] phenomenal social programs were sort of a footnote or after thought to the police shootout and such."[21] Neither student was satisfied with what they were taught,[22] Stephanie observed that textbooks generally "spend more time talking about wars" than domestic social movements.[23] With education like this, is there really a widespread better understanding of people like Malcolm X or groups like the Black Panther Party?

Another issue of remembrance of the Civil Rights movement is the aims and goals of the movement. Andy Hatch asserts that "we're taught that it was all about segregation and voting…it started with Brown v. Board and ended with the Voting Rights Act." This is convenient because if these are the only goals of the movement, then "it was an extremely successful movement" which "accomplished all of its main goals…[and] eliminate[ed] racism in our society." However, this idea of a linear and complete Civil Rights movement that we are taught fails "to identify the social constructs which hindered African freedom in the U.S" and also "fails to answer what is causing obvious racial stereotyping/profiling, and other forms of inequality" today.[24]

Those who lived through the Civil Rights era are similarly hesitant dismiss the goals of the Civil Rights movement as being achieved. While acknowledging the accomplishments of the movement, Both Ms. Lofton and Ms. Johnson express dissatisfaction with the economic inequality that remains today. Ms. Lofton believes that "if you got money, you can do anything you want to do and get away [with it], but if you ain't got no money, you got to pay the price."[25] Ms. Johnson highlights the injustice that "some people's just rich" and have "several houses, [while] others ain't even got a pair of shoes."[26] These sentiments are the same as those of the Civil Rights era among movement participants. It is important to recall that the 1963 March on Washington, remembered primarily for Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, was really the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Issues of economic equality were central to the Civil Rights movement, but are often overlooked today. For example, it is seldom remembered that Dr. King's dream included a "radical redistribution of economic and political power."[27]

Elizabeth Clark recalls her first memory of segregation from when she was about eight years old. The house next door to her was for sale but not selling, so the owners, whom her family was good friends with, put the house on the "open market," meaning it could be sold to whites or blacks. She remembers her best friend's mother making nasty comments about the neighbors willingness to sell the house to blacks, as well as a bottle being thrown at the neighbors house that ended up in her back yard. Issues of white flight and segregated communities are rarely raised because they are "issues that continue today."[28] Indeed, a study by the Harvard Civil Rights Project states that:

> "Thirty years after Boston's school desegregation order and busing crisis, metro Boston public schools remain highly segregated by race and ethnicity. High segregation levels largely reflect the fact that white children are heavily concentrated in the suburbs, while minority children are over-represented in the city of Boston and surrounding satellite cities. White flight to the suburbs and high levels of private school enrollment within the city contribute to the very low white share in Boston's public elementary schools. Segregation brings inequality: racial and ethnic minorities attend schools with higher levels of poverty and live in worse neighborhoods, while whites reap the benefits of more privileged schools and residential areas."[29]

The issue is not restricted to Boston either. Ms. Clark cites the same problems and more in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, having lived there for twenty years and sent two kids through its public school system.[30]

This sentiment that the Civil Rights movement was not the complete success that it is portrayed as leaves a desire for more progress. Among my interviewees, there was consensus that the struggle for Civil Rights continues today, though there was varying opinions on how and the prospects for change. Stephanie points to continued racial stereotypes and profiling as evidence that "black people are still not seen as equal."[31] Andy cites similar evidence, but also says that at least his textbook notes the current controversy over affirmative action as a subtle hint that the "the struggle continues."[32] Ms. Clark sees much progress to be made in the areas of "affirmative action, school desegregation issues, and economic parity issues," but she feels that the Civil Rights

movement is "somewhat sputtering."[33] Ms. Johnson echoes similar beliefs when she states that "with Martin Luther King [Jr.], that's the best its ever been. Black people never had it so good."[34] While it can hardly be argued that the physical quality of life for black people was better forty years ago, what was distinctly better then was the prospect for change, a prospect that seems all but lost today. Both Ms. Johnson and Ms. Lofton conveyed their belief that "it's never really gonna change,"[35] and that "there won't be freedom 'til the good Lord comes."[36]

The "official" Civil Rights movement is over. It began with Brown v. Board in 1954 and ended with the Voting Rights Act in 1965. It was an exclusively non-violent movement that sought legal desegregation and franchise for blacks. Yet, the struggle for justice and equality, the real aims of the Civil Rights movement, lives on in the hearts and minds of people today, young and old. Orwell was right in a way: control of the media and education system can lead to huge influence over how people remember and learn about the past. As Pamela from the Alamo Center asserts "You have to remember your history so you won't be bound to repeat it." While our understanding of the past can influence how we work for change today, it cannot blind us to the inequality in the present or quell the desire "to make the world a better place in the future."[37]

[1] George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Penguin Group, 1949), 248.
[2] Lora Lofton, Personal interview. 15 February 2006.
[3] Sedalia Johnson, personal interview. 15 February 2006.
[4] Elizabeth Kaul Clark, telephone interview. 26 February 2006.
[5] Stephanie Vu, personal interview. 3 March 2006.
[6] Andy Hatch, email interview. 2 March 2006.
[7] Clark; Johnson; Lofton.
[8] Clark.
[9] Johnson.
[10] Dr. King quoted in Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *The Journal of American History* (1998): 561. (pg 158 in Course Packet).
[11] Smiley quoted in Tyson, 546. (pg 143 in CP).
[12] Sol Stern, "The Call of the Black Panthers," in *Black Protest in the Sixties*, ed. August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and John Bracey, Jr., 230 (New York: Marcus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1991).
[13] Tyson, 562. (pg 159 in CP).
[14] Stern, 230-232.
[15] John Dittmer quoted in Tyson, 546. (pg 143 in CP).
Tyson, 560-563. (pgs 157-160 in CP).
[16] Stern, 232.
[17] Lofton.
[18] Jhonson.
[19] Pamela, interview transcript on Black Board. 27 Septembe 2004.
[20] Vu.
[21] Hatch.
[22] Hatch; Vu.
[23] Vu.
[24] Hatch.
[25] Lofton.
[26] Johnson.
[27] Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, in Course Packet, 110.
[28] Clark.
[29] John R. Logan, Deirdre Oakley, and Jacob Stowell, "Segregation in Neighborhoods and Schools: Impacts on Minority Children in the Boston Region," published online at http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/metro/Summary_Logan.pdf [cited March 6 2006], 1.
[30] Clark.
[31] Vu.
[32] Hatch.
[33] Clark.
[34] Johnson.
[35] Johnson.
[36] Lofton.
[37] Pamela.