AUTHOR'S FOREWORD TO 2017 REPRINT

The growth of the post-war Civil Rights Movement of 1955–68 is widely recognized as a development of profound significance in American history. In the United States today some 900 roads, spread across almost all major American cities, are named after Martin Luther King.¹ On both sides of the Atlantic the African American freedom struggle is well established as a key subject area in university, high school and 'A' level history courses.

Since the publication of the first edition of *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* in 2006 there has been heightened public and scholarly interest in the civil rights struggle. This was reflected in the 2011 unveiling of a national memorial to Dr King in Washington DC and the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in the nation's capital in 2016. There have been a series of high-profile fiftieth anniversary commemorations of key events of the post-war civil rights struggle, including Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech at the 1963 March on Washington, the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, and the Selma to Montgomery March the same year. The latter was also the subject of an award-winning film *Selma* (2014), directed by Ava Du Vernay. The commemorations are set to continue with the impending fiftieth anniversaries of the Poor People's March on Washington and the assassination of Dr King in 1968.

In 2008 the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States focused attention on the nation's long, and often troubled, history of race relations. The new president was quick to acknowledge the debt he owed to civil rights campaigners of earlier decades. Activists like Rosa Parks, Dr King and John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were the 'Moses generation' who, by their dedication and self-sacrifice, had made possible the advances achieved by Obama and others of the 'Joshua generation' who came after them.² Looking to the future, President Obama envisaged even greater opportunities for his daughters, Malia and Sasha, and the next generation of African Americans. In the words of a widely cited poem from the 2008 campaign:

Rosa sat so Martin could walk.
 Martin walked so Obama could run
 Obama ran so our children can fly!³

'All history is contemporary history', observed the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce.⁴ Simply put, each generation reinterprets the past in the light of their present-day experiences. Unsurprisingly then, increased public and media interest in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s has been reflected in developments in the scholarly literature. From the 1980s through to the early years of the new millennium, historians emphasized the idea of a 'Long Movement', viewing the post-war era as part of a longer African American freedom struggle which could be traced back at least as far as the abolition of slavery at the end of the American Civil War in 1865. Since 2006 there has been a renewed focus on the 1950s and 1960s, seeing this as a unique period in civil rights history that was distinct from earlier events. This point of view was most powerfully argued in an influential essay by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, 'The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies', *Journal of African American History* (92.2, 2007), pp. 265–88. The evocative imagery in the title reflected the belief of the authors that to see the events and individuals of the 1950s and 1960s as comparable with those of previous decades was fundamentally flawed. Courageous as civil rights campaigners of past generations may have been, the opportunities open to them had been limited by the racial values of the society in which they lived. Not to recognize this was to represent them as individuals who existed in a kind of limbo outside of time and space – like the mythical vampire. Conversely the achievements and possibilities of the post-war Civil Rights Movement were of such unprecedented magnitude that they eclipsed what had gone before. Beyond a certain point, a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind.

By 2008 the understandable veneration of the achievements of Martin Luther King and others of the 'Moses generation', combined with Obama's election, had contributed to public and media speculation that the United States was now a 'post-racial' society. The mood did not last. 'Such a vision, however, well-intended, was never realistic', the outgoing president noted some eight years later

in his farewell address in January 2017. Race continued to be 'a potent and often divisive force in our society'.⁵ This sobering reflection followed a disturbing series of race-related incidents during the latter years of the Obama presidency. A succession of damning US Department of Justice investigations highlighted the deeply troubled relationships between police departments and African American communities in cities across the nation. Reforms advocated included the need for community policing, training in implicit racial bias and the recruitment of more police officers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Such findings echoed the recommendations of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, or Kerner Commission, set up by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of the race riots of the 1960s, and suggested, at best, that there had only been limited improvements in police practices in the intervening half century.⁶

At the start of the Trump presidency other aspects of US race relations also seemed uncomfortably reminiscent of an earlier era. African Americans continued to suffer major disadvantages relative to white Americans in respect of almost all recognized quality-of-life indicators, including education, home ownership, income, health-care and life expectancy.⁷ In the 1950s and 1960s the new medium of television shocked network audiences with hitherto unfiled evidence of the violence inflicted on civil rights protesters by law enforcement officers and white segregationists. In the present day, the rise of smartphone technology has resulted in a seemingly never-ending succession of incidents in which previously undocumented evidence of police violence against African American citizens has been recorded by bystanders and posted on the internet.

In 1965 the historian August Meier argued that Martin Luther King occupied a unique position in public life by virtue of his ability to articulate the concerns of African American communities to white audiences in a way that generated empathy rather than anxiety or distrust.⁸ In the present day, Barack Obama arguably fulfils a similar need. Moreover, in his final years in office there were signs of the former president becoming more outspoken in voicing his concerns over continuing racial injustice, for example in his address at the 2015 fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Selma to Montgomery March. Similarly, the emergence of Black Lives Matter as a grassroots protest organization since 2012 has

been seen, by some, as comparable to the spontaneous growth of civil rights protest during the 1950s and 1960s. 'We know the march is not yet over', as President Obama observed at Selma. 'We know the race is not yet won.'⁹

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January 2017

Notes

- 1 <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/18/us/martin-luther-king-jr-streets/> (last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 2 Barack Obama, 'Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration, Selma, Alabama', 4 March 2007, <http://www.presidency.ucsby.edu/ws/?pid=77042> (last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 3 Full transcript of BBC interview with President Barack Obama, 24 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-33646542> (last accessed 10 February 2017); <http://www.ship.edu/assets/0/153/236/599/600/255263a0-084d-40a8-b601-431e53636ecd.pdf> (last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 4 Quoted in Vernon Bogdanor, 'I Believe in Yesterday', *New Statesman*, 17 December 2009, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2009/12/contemporary-history-public> (last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 5 Full transcript of President Obama's farewell speech, 10 January 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-obama-farewell-speech-transcript-20170110-story.html> (last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 6 The following US Department of Justice reports are available online at <https://search.justice.gov/search?affiliate=justice&op=Search&page=2&query=polic+department+investigations> (last accessed 10 February 2017): New Orleans, Louisiana, 16 March 2011; Seattle, Washington, 16 December 2011; Cleveland, Ohio, 4 December 2014; Ferguson, Missouri, 4 March 2015; Baltimore, Maryland, 10 August 2016; Chicago, Illinois, 13 January 2017. See also *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1968), pp. 299–322.
- 7 Rogers M. Smith and Desmond S. King, 'Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics', in Mark Ledwidge, Kevern Verney and Inderjeet Parmar (eds), *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (New York and London, 2014), pp. 103–5.
- 8 See page 88.
- 9 'Remarks by the President at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches, Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama', 7 March 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-anniversary-selma-montgomery-marches> (last accessed 10 February 2017).