

The Constitutional and Moral Philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to *We The People*, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a non-partisan, non-profit chartered by congress to increase awareness and understanding of the constitution among the American people. Monday, January 16th was Martin Luther King Day. In this episode, we will pay tribute to Dr. King by discussing his constitutional legacy.

Jeffrey Rosen: Joining us are the scholars Christopher Brooks and Hasan Kwame Jeffries, who are going to walk us through some of Dr. King's most important writings and speeches, and talk about his intellectual influences. Professors Brooks and Jeffries are selecting the sources for the civil rights section of the Founders' Library, and I'm so honored to welcome them to *We The People* today. Christopher Brooks is professor of history at East Stroudsburg University. His current research focuses on John S. Rock the first African-American attorney admitted to argue before the US Supreme Court. Professor Brooks, welcome back to *We The People*.

Christopher Brooks: Thank you. Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

Jeffrey Rosen: And Hasan Kwame Jeffries is associate professor of history at Ohio State University. He's the author of *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, which tells the remarkable story of the African-American freedom moment in Lowndes County, Alabama, which was the birthplace of Black power. Professor Jeffries, it is an honor to welcome you back to *We The People*.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Well, thank you so much. It's great to be back with you.

Jeffrey Rosen: We're focus our conversation on texts that each of you has- has selected and we're going to begin with Dr. King's address before the New York State Civil War Centennial Commission, which he delivered on September 12th, 1962. Professor Brooks, tell us about that speech and why you selected it.

Christopher Brooks: Well, I kind of selected it largely because it was something that was a little bit off the radar. In fact, it was discovered, apparently, kind of by accident by a staffer at the New York State Museum only 10 years ago. This speech was held at Park Sheridan Hotel in Manhattan, and King spoke about 30 minutes. And during this speech, he articulates the

significance of the Declaration of Independence and of the Emancipation Proclamation to the American fabric. In fact, he even contended that these documents were sacred.

Christopher Brooks: I think one thing ... and maybe we'll get into this later on in discussion, this speech, like so many of his speeches, tend to do something, I think that Frederick Douglass did pretty successfully in his 1852 speech about the constitution. It was the Constitution to the Black Man, to the Negro. And in that speech, it starts out articulating very clearly the problems, but it closes with kind of highlighting the fact that these words, these documents, are aspirational and that the argument there is that it was high time to live up to the words of the documents.

Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for that. Thank you for focusing on this speech. I'm going to read a selection from it, and I hope *We The People* listeners will check it out as well on the resource page.

Jeffrey Rosen: History reveals that America has been a schizophrenic personality where these two documents are concerned. On the one hand, she's proudly professed the basic principles inherent in both documents. On the other, she has sadly practiced the antithesis of those principles.

Jeffrey Rosen: Professor Jeffries, what can you tell us about this speech before the New York State Civil War Centennial Commission?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Well, the idea of America being schizophrenic when it comes to its founding documents and this idea of professing democracy and yet not extending it really, I think, speaks to what Professor Brooks was saying. This idea that we must be clear, that when King is talking about the Declaration of Independence, when he's talking about the Constitution, he's talking about these founding documents, he's not blinded to the reality that America has not lived up to the promise it up on words.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: I think, in the contemporary moment, we have a few too many people, uh, who like to quote King and point to King celebrating the profoundness of what was put down on paper and ignoring the fact that he understood that as a nation, we were still aspiring to get to the point where we were giving full meaning to these words. So, it's a wonderful selection because it really speaks to the truth about the past that King was talking about in the context of the present.

Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for that. Another beat on this remarkable speech, it was delivered in 1962, it comes before the Birmingham jail letter, and it ends by quoting the persecution of the ancient Christians in Rome, and then, "There's something in the universe which justifies Carlisle in saying 'no lie can live forever,' something in the universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying 'truth crushed to earth will rise again,'" and then he ends by saying "We have a long way to go before it's solved, but all of us can think of the fact we made some strides." Tell us more, Professor Brooks, if you would, about what was going on when King delivered this speech, the context, and something about his intellectual influences that led him to quote Carlisle and Bryant at the end of this speech.

Christopher Brooks: So, the one thing about King is that he studied philosophy. So, I think that sort of piece with respect to the intellectual sort of influences are clear. One of the major influences of King, and I feel like a bedside book, something he traveled with, a book that Howard Thurman published in, I think it was 1949, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Like King, Thurman recognized, I mean, he lived through segregation.

Christopher Brooks: In fact, Thurman, not to get away King for too much, but if we're going to talk about those who influenced him. Thurman was largely raised by his grandmother, for the most part, because his mother was working to support the family, his father died when he was young. And his grandmother was a freed slave. So, those who were chattel slavery, people who ... African-Americans who want to do research on their family, prior to 1865, they're looking at property records, not genealogical studies.

Christopher Brooks: The fact that, human beings were treated as property and that this woman—this grandmother of Howard Thurman, like millions of others, had been thought of as such. And then, the next generation, so those who were living in the first half of the 20th century, Thurman's generation, King's generation, they witnessed Jim Crow. First hand, horrible things. Horrific things that we can get into or not maybe later.

Christopher Brooks: And then looking at these documents, looking at also their Christianity and what happened with Jesus. How was Jesus treated with his back against the wall, to borrow from, Thurman. And that this moral sense always seemed to rise within all of the speeches of King. And people, going back to Thurman, I think that this may be why books like *Jesus and the Disinherited* may have been a major influence of somebody like Dr. King.

Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting and illuminating. And, as you say, in the New York speech, Dr. King says, "Racial injustice must be uprooted from American society because it's morally wrong. It must be uprooted because it stands against all of the noble precepts of our Hebraic, Christian heritage. Because segregation substitutes and I-it relationship for the I-thou relationship." There, obviously, an invocation of Martin Buber's famous "I-thou" relationship. And the Thurman book, as you say, influenced King in the days leading up to the Montgomery boycott and changed history forever. Professor Jeffries, more about the influences on King and what's going on in 1962 when he's delivering this speech.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Yeah, I'm so glad Professor Brooks called the name of Howard Thurman, because too often we will quote King's sermons, we'll acknowledge him as a preacher, but we will ignore the intellectual inheritance that he is operating from. And that is deeply rooted in the Black church tradition. And not simply...when we think about Black churches, we think of ... we often get caught up, I think, in the theatrics of the church; the emotion of the church.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: But we don't pay close enough attention, I think, to the intellectual tradition that King was inheriting. His father's a pastor. His grandfather's a pastor. He goes to Morehouse College, sits at the feet of Benjamin Elijah Mays, sits at the feet of Howard Thurman. And so, he is inheriting religious, deeply spiritual, religious understanding of what the problems of America are.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And I'm so glad you shared that quote, because he fundamentally sees ... and we should not be surprised about this, although later in some of the speeches - and texts. It's King talking about labor and economics and war and the like. But he fundamentally sees the problems that Black folks face, the problem of racial discrimination, the problem of white supremacy as a moral problem. As a moral failing.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Certainly, there are political implications. Certainly, there are economic implications, but at the heart of it is this moral failing. This moral deficit. And I think we really get...we can gain a better understanding of his critique of American society, and global society as a whole, if we connect his intellectual roots to his Black, Baptist, in particular, but Black theological tradition.

Jeffrey Rosen: It's so powerful to do that and the words are just leaping out, now that I'm reading the speech in light of what you're both suggesting. He says, "The struggle for civil rights is rooted in moral values. As we pursue our goals everywhere, everyone will benefit from the moral awakening a movement compels. We must all maintain faith in the future and believe the American dream can and will become a reality." And he's criticizing the focus on a super highway teeming with cars and building machines that sing with needles luxuries and contrasting filling the planet with luxury, we're capable of destroying it totally with this imperative moral urgency.

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, that brings us to our second document. It's the famous letter from the Birmingham jail, which is April 16th, 1963, a year after the New York speech. Professor Brooks, tell us about what's going on in 1963, about the context for the letter for the Birmingham jail, and what aspects of this famous letter would you like to highlight.

Christopher Brooks: Wow...this very question is...you could write a book. I think there is one on this very issue. So, the context is the non-violent protests were starting to pick up, and the reaction by the leadership in the city of Birmingham was simultaneously responding. And this happened; King was in jail more than once for peaceful protests. In any event, while there were some white ministers who were appalled at the immorality of him being imprisoned and he responds with this letter.

Christopher Brooks: One thing that strikes me, and I thought it was very appropriate for the topic that we're discussing today. One thing that struck me about the letter was the concept of justice. So, if we take a take a moment to think about the preamble of the constitution, "We the people, in order to the form a more perfect union, establish first justice." If you compare that to some of the wording in the letter from Birmingham jail, "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds." So there needed to be, across the board, justice for all. And that was always my takeaway from this very, very famous letter.

Jeffrey Rosen: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Thank you for highlighting that language. After flagging justice there, he goes on to say, "In any non-violent campaign, there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustice exists, negotiation,

self-purification, and direct action." And then there's a remarkable invocation of St. Augustine, "An unjust law is no law at all." And then, to put it in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, "An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law." Professor Jeffries, your thoughts about this theme of justice, Augustine, Aquinas, and the letter from the Birmingham jail.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Well, audiences...it's critically important, I think, when trying to make sense of anything that anyone is writing, but certainly with Dr. King, and in this instance, as Professor Brooks rightly pointed out, this is a response. Certainly, he's in jail, but he's responding to sort of what's happening in the movement, but specifically, he's responding to what would be called then "white moderates." These were the good white people in Alabama who were critical of Dr. King because they said he was pushing too hard, too fast. Just allowed time to pass and things would improve.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And they write this sort of op-ed that's published in ... that he's responding to. And they have a series of criticisms. And one of the criticisms that they level at Dr. King is that he's an outsider. That he has no place in Birmingham, Alabama. And so, his response to that is, "No, no, no. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. I have a right to be here. These are my people. Not only was I invited, but as an African-American, as an American, I am not an outsider." I am touched by this even if it is only indirect."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, his response to... I think this is- this is King at his best. His response to this criticism of "You have no business being here," is "No, no, no, injustice is here." Going back to that theme of justice. "Injustice is here. Therefore, I have a duty and obligation to be here, as well." And I would add that I think one of the things that is so powerful about letter from Birmingham jail that is of- that is different than so many of the other King speeches or written pieces is that this is his argument. Not only the response and the critique of the criticism of him, but this is his argument for what to do about racial discrimination. What to do about injustice.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And so, his invocation of St. Augustine, this idea of "an unjust law is no law at all," is his justification, offering a justification for non-violent civil disobedience. He says, "We have a moral obligation to put our bodies on the line. To contest, to challenge, these unjust laws. We are not duty bound at all to live in a society that says that these are laws that we ought to abide by." Now, he also says, "You gotta be ready to suffer the punishment," right? He says, "All right. If this is an unjust law but you have to go to jail as a result of it, then you got to go to jail"

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: But he says that should not keep us, that should not keep you, uh, from- from- from challenging or being afraid of challenging injustice. So, I think part of the power of letter from Birmingham jail is that it makes this very powerful and compelling argument for the use of civil disobedience, for embracing non-violence to transform society. This was the weapon of the weak that was his choice.

Jeffrey Rosen: You so powerfully call our attention to this Christian argument for civil disobedience, and indeed, Dr. King says he was initially disappointed at being called an

extremist, but "Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel? Was not Martin Luther an extremist, and Bunyan? And Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment." Professor Brooks, tell us more about this- this Christian theme of extremism on behalf of justice and civil disobedience.

Christopher Brooks: Well, I want to just say something else, and maybe I can come to this Christian theme in civil disobedience, but something ironic in a not so funny way was the following year, in 1964, when King is arrested, it's in St. Augustine, Florida. So, him quoting St. Augustine, there's some really thick irony to that. But, to the question, I think that if one looks at the example of Christian history, or the history of looking at the Bible and looking at all the violence that Jesus suffered, that ... And I was- it's funny, I was just having this conversation with somebody about how one can look at King as being Christ like. As somebody who knew his place in the world, his role before he passed. And I want to give you a concrete anecdotal that to illustrate this.

Christopher Brooks: One of my mentors, Charles Jones, who was a civil rights attorney in the late '60s before he went on to teach law at Rutgers, recalled a meeting that he attended, and King was there. And he said, and Jack Greenberg was the head of the Legal Defense Fund by that point. And King asked, "Well, what's the plan when I die? When they kill me?" I remember when I first heard this story, my hairs on my arms stood up. I mean, this man knew he was going to die. Think about the conviction, the sense of self and purpose one must have. Unarmed, to say, "I know this is going to happen, but the cause is greater than I." I just think that's magnificent.

Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. Extraordinary. Professor Jeffries, more thoughts on the Christian theme on the letter from the Birmingham jail and on this powerful suggestion of King as Christ-like?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Yeah, again, the context is so important, right? King is responding nine or so white ministers, and he's saying that it's not enough for people within the body of Christ to simply stand on the sidelines. So, this is a religious appeal, and we shouldn't be surprised, of course, because of that intellectual and Christian tradition that he's tapping into. I'm actually reminded, Professor Brooks, as you were talking, I'm reminded by a random, sort of viral five or seven second clip that's been circulated this MLK Day. Perhaps before, but I just saw it.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And it's of a little young white girl. She can't be more than four or five years old. And there's a voice in the background, and she is on film, and it says, "What's today?" And this little white girl says, "It's Dr. King's birthday." It's MLK holiday. And then the voice says, "Who was Doctor King, what did Dr. King do?" And the little white girl says, "He died for our sins." Then you hear the voice, "Wait a minute, that's- no, no, that's Jesus."

Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. Wow.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: But yeah, you get a little confusion there.

Jeffrey Rosen: Yeah.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: But it speaks to the fact that he did. Right? Now he doesn't have a Jesus complex as we would-

Christopher Brooks: No, no. I don't think either one of us are suggesting that he thought he was-

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: No, exactly. Exactly. But the parallels to it, right? To make short. The parallels to what he was doing. He models his life after Christ in that sense. And what you're saying- that story is so powerful because death was not a surprise to him.

Christopher Brooks: No.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: He did not want it, but he almost expected it. He lived with that threat, and yet he kept on. So, those parallels...Was it flawless? Not by any stretch of the imagination. And he knew that. But those parallels to the life of Christ as sacrifice for others. To give up his life for the sins of us, boy - that's really striking.

Jeffrey Rosen: It is indeed. Absolutely remarkable. Well, the letter from a Birmingham jail was April 16th, 1963, and the "I Have a Dream" address on Washington Mall was delivered on August 28th, 1963. Professor Brooks, tell us about "I Have a Dream."

Christopher Brooks: Well, I think if you were to ask the average American on the street "what speech is Martin Luther King most famous for?" They would definitely speak of this very famous speech on the Mall before tens of thousands of people. In this letter, King states that "100 years later, the Negro was still not free," referring to ultimately, Jim Crow and the fact that 15th amendment securing the vote is being challenged by various states. When I say "challenged," it's really, one could say that's an understatement.

Christopher Brooks: This speech, I think the end of it, the last sort of paragraph of it is probably the most famous. I'll just read it. "Let freedom ring when this happens. And when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.'"

Christopher Brooks: I think when he speaks of that freedom, he's not only speaking about Blacks. I think that is, in my estimation, and perhaps, Professor Jeffries has a different take, this is a cry for freedom of everybody. Of true equality. An actual level playing field in the truest sense of the term. And I really think that, to me, that's has always been the essence of this speech.

Jeffrey Rosen: So powerful. As you quote, "Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics can all sing 'free at last.'" And it is a messianic vision. He has as dream today, but it's a dream that one day, all of God's children will be able to sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and also, one day, "every valley shall be exulted, every hill and mountain shall be made low." Quoting from those beautiful words from the prophet Isaiah also sung in Handel's Messiah. Professor Jeffries, your thoughts about the messianic Christian vision of equality in this glorious speech?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Well it's certainly there. I think Professor Brooks is spot on. And I think that is part of why the speech lives on with us today. In, you know, in the moment, people weren't walking home thinking, "Oh, my goodness, you know, I have a dream, too." I mean, it was sort of forgotten until after he's killed; after his death. I think there's also an important component of what people have done with that. I think Professor Brooks has the right of it in terms of what he was saying. This is, in a way, aspirational. This is the end goal.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: This isn't just about a reflection of what the African-American freedom struggle was about. It was about sort of equality for everyone. We're going to move everybody to a better place. And that's the only way everyone can fulfill their sort of human destiny. But that has been re-imagined, reinterpreted, I think is a kind way to say it. Bastardized, some would say. And taken to mean that King believed that that's where America was. Right? We're to be this sort of colorblind society. We see so much of that, I think, today in those who would take not that snippet, but rather, you know, slightly earlier in the speech where he talks about, "One day, our children being judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Again, I think that, that component as well is about one day. Right? Let's get there. Let's do the work to get there. I thought it was very telling, and you may have come across this in- in some of the news. There was a newspaper out of Maine, the *Bangor Daily News*. And they have been, over the years, running on MLK Day, the text of "I Have a Dream." But they have been, over the years, editing it. Taking out sections of the speech, and so someone looked at it most recently, and they said, "Wait a minute, you took out the part about rapid racists. Vicious racists. You took out the part about reparations and a bad check. You took out the part about police brutality."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And I think that's so important. King is dreaming because he's living in a nightmare. And he's laying out what are the problems that Black people are facing. So, the power of the speech, I think can only fully be appreciated by realizing that this aspirational goal of how we should be living, and only if it's understood that we were so far from there. And we still are far from there. So I think the two pieces have to be together in order to appreciate fully the power of the speech.

Jeffrey Rosen: I think that the aspiration is there because, well, it's an aspiration which indicates you're not there. [laughs]...anyone claiming otherwise kind of misses the definition of the word "aspiration," I would think.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And I think, connected to that is also, King is also race-conscious. There's something very specific-

Jeffrey Rosen: [inaudible 00:28:47]

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Right?

Christopher Brooks: Yes.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: About his color blindness. He says, "Yeah, let's get there; but we ain't there."

Christopher Brooks: Sure.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And, and this is where-

Christopher Brooks: This was the dream.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: This was the dream.

Christopher Brooks: This was the dream. Being color blind was the dream. It was the aspiration.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Yep.

Christopher Brooks: And probably should be.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And I would agree. Let's get there. But I think the bad check, the reparations. What he's laying out, and I think we see this in some of his later speeches when he gets more specific; the way to get there is not by ignoring race. Not pretending as though race doesn't exist. Not pretending as though racism isn't real and touches the lives of people. In other words, we have to be race-conscious in order to get to the place where race loses its power to create hierarchy and inequality.

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, this debate, this discussion, this conversation about the legacy of King is of course central today. Was King color blind on the Mall and became race-conscious, or was race-consciousness a pervasive theme throughout his career? And much of this played out in his later speeches. The next speech that we're going to turn to is four years in the future. April 4th, 1967. Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence. Professor Jeffries, you selected this speech, so why don't you introduce it?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, I think in setting up the April '67 speech, I think it's important to ...I'll go back to say, I would argue that King was always race-conscious. It's very hard to grow up in Jim Crow America and not be race conscious. He gives a very powerful sermon in 1959, after Ghana installs Kwame Nkrumah as president. He goes over there and he comes back. And he's offering a different dream, right? He's like, "man, there were Black pilots and Black...this is wonderful."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: He understood, I think, the significance of sort of racial solidarity, Black solidarity. He was saying that in itself is not enough. Right? Because he also believed in these really universals about humankind. But he said, "We can't get to enjoy those universals as long as we continue to ignore the fact that race is being used to oppress."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And so, understanding that, it's not a surprise for me that when you get to April 4, 1967, one year before he's assassinated that Beyond Vietnam speech in which he's saying, "We have to come out as a nation, as citizens of this nation, global citizens, against the Vietnam War." He's non-violent, he says, "I can't be non-violent in individual practice and be silent when states engage in this kind of bloodshed."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So I think one of the powerful things about that speech is, there's- there's no playing around. He says, "Look. There's three really big problems that we got to deal

with. Militarism, this is the Vietnam War. Capitalism - this is also really a long thread in his thinking over time. One of the first public statements that King ever makes is while he's a child, and he delivers this oratorical address during the height of the depression, and he's offering a critique of capitalism. As a 10-year-old, 12-year-old.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And so this is, you know, somebody who self-identifies as a democratic socialist, uh, who- who- who ... and- and so, I think that critique of capitalism and what he had to say, uh, is what makes this, that April 4th speech so important. So, the critique of the Vietnam War and violence, the critique of capitalism, and then the third piece, the critique of racism. Right? He's like, "This is going to be our downfall." Um, and, I mean, those three, for King, uh, are- are kind of like the- the triple [00:33:00] evils that America has to, has to wrestle with, uh, and they can't al- and they also cannot be separated.

Jeffrey Rosen: I'm going to read from the speech. "A true revolution of values will look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, I will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, 'this is not just.'" Professor Brooks, Professor Jeffries says this critique of militarism, capitalism, and racism, uh, stemmed back to when King was 10, and represents his vision in- in 1967. Do- do you think this is consistent with the King of the "I Have a Dream" speech, or is it a new King?

Christopher Brooks: I would say it's a new King. I would agree...I want to go kind of connect the previous discussion with this one. I totally agree with Professor Jeffries. I don't know, personally know any African-American who lived during that period who wasn't or isn't race conscious. I would, juxtaposing their lives to ours now, I think becomes a somewhat tenuous. It's not a one-for-one comparison. On the other hand, that doesn't mean that everything's rosy. The truth is in the middle.

Christopher Brooks: But as far as juxtaposing these two Kings, as you might say. I think it's the same person who's really razor focused on seeing so many African-Americans, and poor whites, but he's not focused on that, because different sociological relationship. But he's seeing these young Black kids, you know, 18, 19. 19 years old being the average age of a Vietnam soldier, being sent off to war and being promised the moon and the stars, and...

Christopher Brooks: ...better, just to encapsulate it all, I distinctly remember ... this is probably from slightly after King's life, from around 1970 or '71. In the course of doing research when I was in grad school, I came across a sort of an editorial comic. And there was a picture of a Vietnam soldier sitting down against a wall reading a letter. And at the top, it said, "I hope you are fighting for freedom of us, as well." So, I think that that's kind of where King's going with this.

Christopher Brooks: As for capitalism, I think we need to...I agree that is definitely attacking capitalism, but capitalism as practice, not capitalism as such. I think we need to make that distinction. So, this is not the capitalism of the moral philosopher, Adam Smith, who scorned slavery. And I won't say he was a total egalitarian, granted, we're talking 1770s. But, certainly

[laughs] he makes the argument in *Wealth of Nations* very clearly that slavery is bad not only morally, but also economically, because it stymies entrepreneurialism and growth. So, it's not good for anybody.

Christopher Brooks: That said, I think what King's looking at, the capitalism King is criticizing is this sort of robber barons capitalism. And I think that that distinction should be made.

Jeffrey Rosen: Professor Jeffries, King is talking about why he become more aware of the capitalism and militarism, and he says, over the last three summers ... before 1967, he's been walking among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, told them Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problem. And then he says that, "It should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity of life in America can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam.' It can't be saved as long as it destroys the deepest hopes of the men." Over. Tell us more about the intellectual, political, and moral influences that led him to connect the struggle against militarism and capitalism with the struggle against racism.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Well, King had always believed that, always. Certainly, during this movement period, this period of activism in the '50s. Montgomery up until now, that if you do not change, and if you do not allow space for non-violent civil disobedience, for non-violent protest, then the- those who are most marginalized, if they don't have that outlet, they will take to the streets. They will resort to violence. He writes about that in Letter from Birmingham Jail.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: He says, "You do what I'm doing, and support what I'm doing, because the brothers in the streets, due to Malcolm, they- they got something different," right? And so, I think this is consistent with what he's saying. He's like, "I've seen this. This is not going to stop anytime soon." This is, of course, 1967. You know, we're three years removed from, uh, two years removed from Watts, three years from Rochester. Newark hasn't happened yet. We're going to have another bloody summer in- in the summer of '67.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, this is a period of urban uprisings and rebellions that are a result of both the frustration of the slow pace of progress and change, but also, things becoming worse. Unemployment going up, de-industrialization and the like. So, he's fundamentally aware of, you know, outlets and the need for responding to the crisis that people are facing.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: But he does very much see it as linked. Because he goes on in that speech to say, "look, why are we spending, you know, billions of dollars on this war in Vietnam, money that is being diverted from the war on poverty? Where if we weren't quite there yet, we were starting to move in the right direction in terms of creating a social safety net to help people, lift people out of poverty. And we need to invest money and time and resources, the riches of the wealthiest nation in the world, into that. And yet, we are being diverted. We are being sidetracked by this war in Vietnam."

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, the problem with the war is both the cost of lives to, as Professor Brooks said these young brothers going over there and being sold a bad bill of goods. But also the to the Vietnamese as well. So, he's just as much concerned about them. But also, the fact that

it shifts our priorities as a nation, moving us away from doing the outreach that needs to be done to help the most marginalized. This goes back to him understanding or recognizing there's sort of that social gospel, and an aversion to interpreting Jesus' life as being about helping the least among us. And he said, "That's where our focus ought to be, and this war is pulling us away from that."

Jeffrey Rosen: So powerful. I there's a strong Buddhist theme in the speech, as well. He says, uh, "The great initiative in this war is ours," and this is the message of the great Buddhist leaders of Vietnam, whom he quotes. And then he goes on to talk about what he calls the powerful Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the Epistle of St. John. "Let us love one another for love is God." Professor Brooks, is there a shift from a Christian to a more ecumenical Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish theme here, or this consistent with Dr. King's earlier writings?

Christopher Brooks: I really think there's- there are definitely parallels, for example, with Mahatma Gandhi. I mean, these, uh, it- it's inescapable. And, ironically, Gandhi, too, died from an assassin's bullet. Interestingly, Professor Jeffries pointed out, if non-violence is not given a path, then, well, some sort of violent nationalist reaction if people are oppressed enough or feel oppressed enough, even if they're not had the sense that they are. There will be a reaction. Gandhi is assassinated by a Hindu nationalist. So, if we look at Malcolm X, who... well, we don't know for sure and all that, but the assumption has always been that he was killed by somebody who was far more radical than he had become.

Christopher Brooks: As he changed towards the end of his life after his trip to Mecca. So, I do see parallels with other denominations, and he sort of- and again, this is more or less about the religiosity than it is about the morality. It has far more to do with the moral message of these various religions and doctrines. About rising above, treating people with...treating others with love. And eventually, love would win. It doesn't mean that it has won. It just means that it was the best tool in the tool shed.

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, we come now to our final speech. Professor Jeffries, you've selected "Where Are We Going?" And it's 1967. Tell us about this important speech.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, uh, really it's- it's- it's King's last book. Uh, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Which draws on, you know, speeches that he had been making over time and- and really, it's- it- it's too often overlooked. I mean, scholars, of course, and activists have been reading this for so long, [00:44:00] but it's one of those, uh, parts of King's life, uh, that gets skipped over, right? So, we'll go from Selma to Memphis, uh, and not look at those critical years in between in which he's talking about the Vietnam War, in which he's- he's talking about Black power.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And so, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* He's offering this question mark. He's like, look, "We've made progress. Right? W- we have some fundamentals that we've- we've gotten rid of segregation, uh, legal segregation, we've made significant progress and change. But we haven't gone far enough. Uh, there needs to be more." And he begins to outline things. Right? Like, what is the role of the government, for example,

uh, that he says. He says, "Government has to be involved in ending poverty," right? He- he advocates not for a minimum wage, because he's talking about labor and economics at this moment. He's saying, "We need, uh, a- a- minimum income," uh, as an example.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And not just enough for people to get by, not just a social safety net income, an income [00:45:00] that would allow people, uh, to live, uh, their- their, uh, their full lives, right? To- to allow artists to be artists, right? To allow architects to be architects. For- for people to tap into their humanity and their genius. And so I- I really like to sit with, um, uh, this- this- this book, especially the last few chapters, because, I mean, he's talking about, you know, the role of government. He's talking about poverty.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: He's like, "We ... I get rid of ... how we- how we- how does poverty still exist in a nation as rich as this?" And- and- and so, it's- it's ... I think it's one of the ... I mean, he certainly in his last chapter, he talks about the love community, so he comes back to the morality, to be sure. Because he's all ... that's the center. But in- in- in the pages in between, he really lay- lays out, I think, some very practical analysis of- of sort of society and its shortcomings and offers, I think, some, uh, some [00:46:00] solutions of some- some possible solutions that, you know, were, uh, not embraced then, that aren't embraced now. Uh, but could really help, uh, us going forward.

Jeffrey Rosen: Thanks for calling our attention to that crucial suggestion. In *The Treatment of Poverty Nationally*, he says, "One fact stands out. There are man- many white poor as Negro poor in the United States. Therefore, I will not dwell on the experience of poverty that derives from racial discrimination but will discuss the poverty that affects white and Negro alike. I'm now convinced," as you said, Professor Jeffries, "that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure, the guaranteed income." Professor Brooks, tell us about this suggestion and the themes that we encounter in this final collection. Where are we going?

Christopher Brooks: Yeah. Well, rightly, it was pointed out by Professor Jeffries that, uh, well, legally, you know, with the congressional acts of '64 and [00:47:00] '65, the words of the 14th amendment and the 15th amendment that are re-codified, enforced. But that doesn't mean that all the healing is done and all, everything's solved. And I think that this turn to, um, looking at things through an economic as opposed to racial lens, um, and, you know, why is there any poverty, as, uh, Professor Jeffries, uh, pointed out. Uh, why does- why does that even exist? Um, yeah. I think King's looking at this and saying, "Well, you know," using, I think he used, uh, Georgism or something, so, having a single tax, and um, as a possible solution to this, uh, problem.

Christopher Brooks: I honestly think that this is a logical conclusion to King's life, and- or, life's work that he had endured so much, and at the end... And again, I use the expression "Christ-like." Again, as Christians, one aspires to be like Christ, even though we never will be Christ. I think King came closer than most people I know. He is then saying, "Okay, well, let's talk about actual equality for everybody. That's, you know, the- the poor whites, you know, they were ... they were also sold the bill goods. How do we join forces here?"

Christopher Brooks: Um, yeah. And that was, uh, how he wanted to ... I- I think may- maybe King's trying to pull people together, right? And to, again, his dream, colorblindness, acknowledging race exists but knowing it's more of a sociological construct than anything else, and wanting to move away from it. Maybe the next step, where we go from here, is colorblindness and looking at things through an economic lens and not a racial one. Maybe this [00:49:00] is the dream and him, he's aspiring to have, you know, realize that dream in some sort of incremental step.

Jeffrey Rosen: Wow, that's such a powerful suggestion, and you invoke that verse from Matthew, "Be perfect, even as your father in Heaven is perfect." And, as you say that, injunction to moral perfection was such a powerful theme in King's work, and of course, as you say, he exemplified it in his life. Well, it's time for closing thoughts in this wonderful discussion.

Jeffrey Rosen: Professor Jeffries, when we convened last year, in honor of Dr. King's birthday, and you were in conversation with Professor Allan, you were both debated, discussing about whether King evolved from colorblindness to race consciousness, from equality of opportunity to equality of result. In this conversation, I hear both of you saying that this theme of m- moral perfection, uh, rooted always in Christianity but also in- in other traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism was consistent throughout. What are your final thoughts on that question as we bring all this together?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: I mean, King believed in humanity. He was a Christian, probably first, first and foremost. But he wasn't a Christian nationalist. He believed in and respected other people's religious beliefs. He was a thinker, he was a philosopher. He said, "We're all going to get there. We're all going to wind up in the same place, although we may take different roads." And I think that is important because he did not feel he had all the answers.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And- and- and if we're thinking about, you know, the end of his life in the midst of the Vietnam War, I don't think it's a surprise that in '67, he's talking about Hinduism. Uh, certainly in the shout-out to Mahatma Gandhi. He's talking about Buddhism. Because there was so much de- there were so many efforts to dehumanize the people who were the enemy. And he's saying, "No, we have to recognize people's humanity." The same way that, in the following year, before he's assassinated, he's in Memphis, Tennessee. "Certainly, all labor has dignity." Working with Black sanitation workers. But he's organizing, through SCLC, the poor people's campaign, which is designed to bring poor people of all races and ethnicities to Washington to draw attention to the problem of poverty. So, it's whites from Appalachia. It's Black folk from the rural south. It's Native Americans from reservations, it's Latinos from the southwest.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And so, he does have a- a universalist understanding of the problems that we face and the solutions. He like, "We're all in this together. I just need people to see it." But I do think he... he's also a bit of a historian. He studies history. And so, that ... I think that precludes him from sort of walking through the world with blinders. He understands that race and racism is central to this problem that we're all facing, and that in order to get to the point, going back to '63, to get the point where we can live in that beloved community that we can

actually be colorblind, get past this thing that is holding us back, this fiction called race, that we're going to have to have these notions of solidarity.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: So, he's like, "Black power?" He's like, "I get it." He says, "I wouldn't choose the slogan because it's going to scare white people, but I get it. I understand the need for this sort of racial solidarity." So, I think he's there. But it's all together. I mean, the Black power and Black solidarity and racial solidarity and Black nationalism coming up in Auburn Avenue, segregated Georgia. That can coexist with a universalist understanding of how we can and should interact as human beings in this world.

Jeffrey Rosen: Wonderful. Professor Brooks, last in word in this great discussion is to you. Your concluding thoughts in consistency and change in the inspiring moral vision of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Christopher Brooks: Well, yeah. The inspiring moral vision of Dr. King is overwhelming. I'll return to it, but I wanted to say something that I stumbled across in a note by UCLA professor Henry McGee. He said that although King was neither a lawyer nor a judge, he surely belongs in the pantheon of American constitutional giants. And I think that's a very powerful statement, and- and maybe it's a good one to close on because, we've spent a good amount of time looking at King as a moral leader, as a social leader, as a social disruptor. But his role in ... and maybe it's sort of a byproduct of everything he did to kind of force America to take a look at the founding documents black letter, textualist reading, as it were, and live up to it.

Christopher Brooks: Even Jack Greenberg had once commented back in the ... he was before Congress. I think it was right before- right after King had passed in 1968. And he talked about how King in his life helped determine the outer reaches and full potential of law in his time. And so, I think it's very powerful. And I think that most of us look at King solely the preacher who's marching and the violence against him, but he does not waver. All of it's true. But the impact on law, I don't think can be underestimated.

Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. He forced America to take a look at the black letter text of the founding documents, as you just said, and to live up to it. What a superb way of encapsulating the inspiring constitutional legacy of Dr. King. And thanks to both of you, Professor Brooks and Professor Jeffries, for forcing us to take a look at the black letter text of Dr. King's inspiring legacy, and closely reading these- these canonical texts with us, selecting them for our *Founders' Library* so that our great listeners and- and learners across America can continue to learn and grow from them for years to come. For a magnificent celebration of the constitutional and moral legacy of Dr. King, Professors Brooks and Jeffries, thank you so much.

Christopher Brooks: Thank you.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Thank you.

Jeffrey Rosen: Today's show was produced by Lana Orrick and Bill Pollock. It was engineered by Dave Staunts and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Liam Curr, Emily Campbell, Sophia Gradell, Sam De Sion, Lana Orrick. Please rate, review, and subscribe to *We The People*

on Apple and recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a deep dive into primary texts and the elevating experience of a civil conversation.

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[00:57:00] King Day, happy ML King week, and on behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffry Rosen.