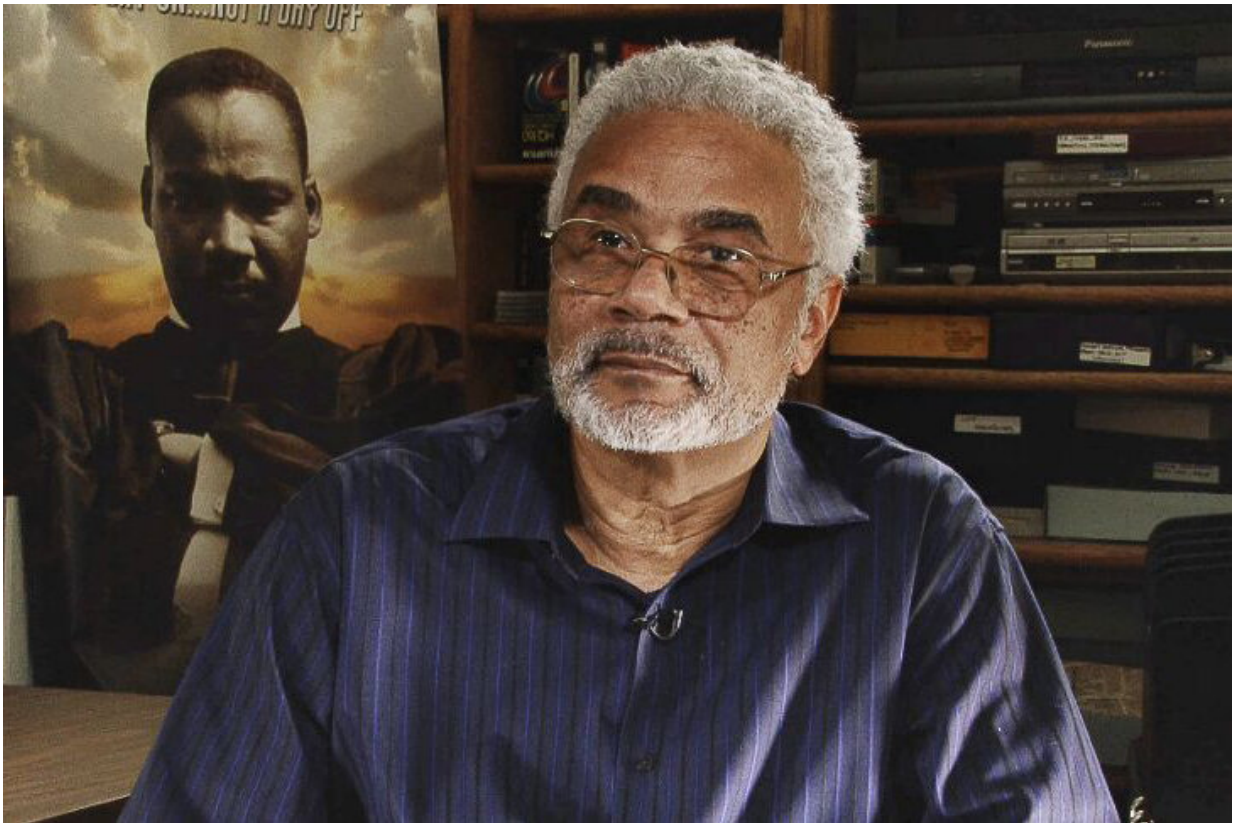


Leaderless protest is a strength and weakness, scholar warns

June 5 2020, by Melissa De Witte



Clayborn Carson is the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of History in the School of Humanities and Sciences and the Ronnie Lott Founding Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Credit: Jack Hubbard

As spontaneous and loosely organized demonstrations against the death

of George Floyd continue to erupt across the world, Stanford historian and civil rights scholar Clayborn Carson has a message to activists: There needs to be some kind of leadership stating objectives of the current movement.

Unless goals are made clear by an articulate spokesperson, the movement may lose control of its messaging, Carson warns.

Here, Carson, a leading expert on the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., reflects on what he has learned over a lifetime of protest and how today's demonstrations differ from the civil rights activism he participated in as a student at UCLA in 1965, including the infamous Watts Rebellion, a six-day riot in Los Angeles that resulted in 34 deaths, over 1,000 injuries, almost 4,000 arrests and \$40 million in property damage.

Carson is the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of History in the School of Humanities and Sciences and the Ronnie Lott Founding Director of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Carson's publications include "In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s," (1981); "Malcolm X: The FBI File," (1991); "The Struggle for Freedom: A History of African Americans," (2005, 2010, co-author); and a memoir, "Martin's Dream: My Journey and the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," (2013).

What distinguishes these demonstrations from protests of the past?

Wherever there is a major stimulus for protest, something that outrages many people—for example, an unnecessary war (like all those during my [adult life](#)), or in this case, another video of a black man being killed by police—then there needs to be a way of expressing that outrage, either

through nonviolent or violent methods. This happened after Rodney King's beating and Martin Luther King's assassination. It's probably the most positive way to spur those with authority to respond with a sense of urgency.

There has been a decade of protest about the issue of police brutality and the failure to punish police misbehavior. Established institutions, the police, the legal system as a whole, have failed. Sometimes justice delayed is [justice](#) denied, and that can fuel feelings of frustration.

For someone my age, who can remember a time when there were no cell phones, it was just me encountering a policeman who had the power to take my life. And whose word was going to be believed? In August 1965, I was in South Central Los Angeles during a rebellion that the press called the "Watts riot." Thirty-four people were killed as a result of "justifiable homicide." Compared to then, the police behaviors during these current protests have been relatively restrained. In that sense, there has been an obscenely modest bit of progress as rubber bullets have displaced lead bullets. But, if someone had told me in 1965 during Watts that my grandkids would still be subject to police executions, I would have thought I had failed in terms of trying to achieve change.

What makes a demonstration successful?

One thing that I think everyone would agree on is that the [young people](#) who are sparking these protests have no single charismatic, supremely articulate leader. One of the consequences is they don't control the messaging of it. I think that is one of the weaknesses of Black Lives Matter. There is no established leadership to articulate messages. What is the goal? Is it simply to express anger or is to achieve reform about police behavior? If it is to bring about reform, then what would that look like? It doesn't have to be one charismatic spokesperson. It could be many leaders, but there needs to be people saying, 'This is what we want'

and clearly articulating that. That's just not happening now with any consistency.

As a scholar of Dr. King, what do you think Dr. King would think about what is unfolding across the country? What advice do you think he would have?

I think he would be very pleased to see that the protests were not simply black people protesting. People who are not black are recognizing the urgency of the moment and the righteousness of the anger. I think he would also caution that some specific objectives should be clearly articulated. At some point, the anger and protest have to be linked to some concrete reforms, but I recognize that the protest organizers are reacting to recent events that could not be anticipated. The very strength of the Black Lives Matter movement is that it is decentralized and a lot of the protest is more spontaneous. But that's also a weakness.

When you put this in the historical context of the demonstrations at the free speech movement and the civil rights demonstration of the mid-60s, the result in California was the election of Ronald Reagan as governor, which was certainly not the goal of the protest. But he presented himself as the law and order governor. It was similar with Richard Nixon. They come into office as the law and order presidents. Law and order is a potent political message, and I think protestors should notice that.

You said protests can be positive. What can be done to ensure they stay that way?

As a person who has probably been in hundreds of protests during my lifetime, I have watched demonstrations turn out badly and I have watched demonstrations turn out very peacefully. I think the main component of a peaceful and effective protest is some kind of

leadership. Someone who can monitor, someone who can say 'No, that's not what we do here.'

But it has to be in conjunction with the police. It takes both sides to make this work. It takes some willingness on the part of demonstrators and the police to exercise restraint. When you have a large group of people who want to peacefully [protest](#), police should facilitate that. You don't focus your effort on setting up barriers around peaceful protestors and having policemen, with their arms folded, standing in the way. This concentrates police attention on the people least likely to cause trouble and then you don't have any leftover [police](#) to catch looters and vandals elsewhere.

Provided by Stanford University

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