

“Unveiling the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project:
Remarks on Studies About Isaiah T. Montgomery”

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Dr. Elaine Baker, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I begin with appreciation to Dr. Baker, and to Attorney Alma Campbell, for their cooperation in setting up tonight’s program. I also wish at once to that Mr. Eugene O. Fisher, who is here tonight with Mrs. Fisher and with his brother, Mr. Shelton Woodley. Mr. Fisher, a true native son of this town, who was among other things Medgar Evers’ paper boy, was Founders’ Day speaker in 2006.

His Founders’ Day Address from last year has been edited and published, by the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc., under the title Voices of Mound Bayou. The Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc., is indebted to Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Fisher for cooperation in bringing this work to completion.

The Founders’ Day Ceremony: A Challenge to Face

This time tomorrow, there will be a respectful progress to the Founders’ grave. Prayers will be said, I expect, and tribute will be paid to Isaiah Thornton Montgomery. But Mound Bayou will not arise, as it should, to stand out in the 21st century world, if it does not study the strengths and the weaknesses of the Founder, the achievements and the failures, and work on the lessons to be learned for the time in which we are, and time yet to come.

I will speak of another famous figure, Oliver Cromwell. Thomas Carlyle (1793-1881) wrote about Cromwell, who led the Puritan revolution in the 1600s. That was almost four hundred years ago. It led to the execution of the King Charles I of England. When Charles’s family was restored to the throne they did all they could to destroy the symbolism of Cromwell.

Carlyle wanted to write about Cromwell and he said, I am told, he said that first “he had to drag out the Lord Protector from under a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion.” (Deutscher, v.)

One Challenge to Face

So I have to tell you something. There are many people who do not like or

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respect Isaiah T. Montgomery. Sidney D. Redmond, a lawyer-physician, a skillful entrepreneur, in Mississippi in the 1940s called him a “Judas.” (This is quoted in the book produced by Ralph Bunche for the Gunnar Myrdal study. Charles Kenyatta Ross, a scholar of African American Studies, does not purport to speak for himself. But he did report what a highly esteemed civil rights advocate on the Mississippi Gulf Coast said. “Montgomery sold us out.” Robert C. Smith, a careful and influential contemporary scholar, has written “Montgomery is a prototypical case of the Uncle Tom in African-American leadership.”

The little that appears in books, even peer-reviewed university press books and books by famous and reputed scholars, about what Montgomery told the white people is sometimes factually or analytically valid and sometimes not. When I began work on this paper, I had not anticipated the intensity of the anti-Montgomery tone and prejudice. Nor did I imagine the evidentiary problems that would give me cause to disagree with so much of the criticism.

I would say that is a load of “dead dogs,” of “calumny.” If it were simply true, we would have to live with it. But it is not true in the way it is said. I cannot go into all the detail tonight, and at the same time talk about the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project itself. But I will say this much. So I set out to study Montgomery. That is strong stuff. Outside of Mound Bayou, in the world of people who write African American history told, I have found that you first must bring out Isaiah T. Montgomery from under a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion.

The Purpose of the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project

The Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc. Is a non-profit corporation. It was created in Virginia because that is where my wife and I lived. The purpose of the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc. The purpose to face the challenge that I have stated. The purpose is to face the challenge by advocating, encouraging, or producing three things:

- (1) studies about Isaiah T. Montgomery himself and about the world that produced him;
- (2) studies of the activities in which Montgomery took part, and
- (3) **examination of issues that arise for policy in the 21st century and a larger world.**

First, there is not any doubt that he went into what I have called a “political surrender.” But Montgomery’s reputation comes up very high once you go into what was really happening. Think of 1945. Two nuclear bombs had been dropped on Japan. Japan surrendered. Japanese representatives went aboard the battleship Missouri and signed the surrender before the world. That is the analogy that counts. Surrender in the hope of future recovery when you are faced with overwhelming power.

I have dealt with this fully in a study paper entitled The Reputation of Isaiah T. Montgomery: The Greatness of a Compromised Man. It was written under memorandum agreement with Mississippi Valley State University. I am making final grammatical corrections now, and it will be ready very soon. I have a same PRE-PUBLICATION COPY of the “Author’s Prefatory Note” for anyone to look at tonight.

Montgomery Comes to the Delta

We here in Mound Bayou know that Montgomery came from Vicksburg, having started his life at Davis Bend. When Isaiah T. Montgomery was two months past his fortieth

birthday he led a group of African Americans—including the ancestors of some of you in this room tonight—into the settlement that became Mound Bayou. He had been studying and planning this since some time in 1886. The settlement became Mound Bayou. The settlement year was 1887.

One year after coming to Mound Bayou, Montgomery was appointed to the Republican County Executive Committee. His friend Joseph E. Ousley from Renova, was also from the Davis Bend area. (Montgomery and Ousley had been groomsmen in the wedding of one of Montgomery's cousins seventeen years before that, which indicates membership in a close network. (Hood, 1910, 71.) Ousley was the Republican County Chairman.

Montgomery and the Constitution

The Constitution of 1890 became the legal bedrock of the rigid racial order in which black voting was reduced to a very low level. That is what people use to besmirch Montgomery's reputation. When the Constitutional Convention was called for 1890, the Republicans nominated Montgomery as a candidate for delegate. Montgomery's reputation has been deeply compromised by his identification with that Constitution.

Seventeen days after the third anniversary of the Mound Bayou settlement (July 29, 1890) Montgomery was elected.

One month after the settlement anniversary, August 12, 1890, Montgomery appeared for the first day of the convention. He participated as a member of the Franchise Committee. One month after he began, he took the floor to speak in favor of the committee's report. (Montgomery, 2004.) . It is one hundred and seventeen years since the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890 was written. The farther away from the realities of the time, the more serious the reputational loss has been. Some persons of repute and achievement express mystification at what he did there, saying such things "I cannot understand why he would do what he did." Others have expressed no mystification and have simply said "sell out" or even "Judas."

The Montgomery experience has been misunderstood, and sometimes misrepresented. It is not a surprise that those who carried on the struggle for freedom in the 1950s and 1960s would be hostile to a man who participated in writing the 1890 Constitution. We can understand that. But it is necessary to think deeper and search deeper. My view is that the Montgomery position can be interpreted, not as some mystery nor as some sellout, but as a strategic surrender (Kecskemeti, 1958)in the face of overwhelming power. The military defeat analogy and violence which were seen both by Frederick Douglass and Frederick Douglass, Jr. They disagreed with him, but they understand the realities.

The overriding reality was physical violence. Montgomery had to decide what to do, having in the background the extraordinary militia-style white violence for the preceding fifteen years. At no time did he say that the black people did not want the right to vote. Nor did he ever say that they should not have the right to vote. Nor, to deal with the worst calumny of all, did he

say they incapable of exercising the right to vote. To get this straight, not from me but from the source, you must read his 1890 Convention speech. (This is in “What Answer?”/Speech in Support of Franchise Committee Report, Mississippi Constitutional Convention, 1890, published by the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc. in 2004.) He said they had to cut back in order to satisfy the “arbitrary” demand - - arbitrary was his word -- of the white people.

In dealing with Montgomery, African Americans, and white people, have profoundly underestimated Isaiah T. Montgomery. From the written record, the argument he put forth as to the problem of the Constitution, was intellectually far above that of his fellow delegates, and dealt with issues that, over time, proved far more important.

Montgomery offered a policy aspiration that “the race problem shall become a thing of the past. The Montgomery argument did defend the proposed restriction on the franchise. Here is where the surrender is overt. But he expressed is a reduction,– not elimination – of the black franchise sufficient. The objective was to guarantee a 60% white majority. He said that even under the restrictions, a third of the blacks could easily qualify and more would qualify, he argued, as time passed and schooling and property increased.

Montgomery’s position was taken in apparent isolation. The other African American political leaders, and there a number more prominent than Montgomery, either went silent or left the state.

In the years thereafter, until his death, Montgomery, whether because he evaluated his tactical needs in Mississippi, or simply by personality, seems always to have avoided letting his discouragement show. But he did grow discouraged over the years.

The clearest illustration is in his 1923 speech to a group called The Committee of One Hundred. less than one year before the end of his own life, he revealed delicately a sense of concern. He referred to his 1890 convention speech. He said “I pictured then that if our new compact, our new constitution, in its administration (emphasis added. MH), failed to be true and just in taking into proper account the race with which I was identified, then the silent conflict would still go on, affecting every phase of his varied occupations.” In this regard, Montgomery showed a realistic grasp that, no matter what concepts are written into a constitution, it is the manner of their administration that determines the actual result.

Finally, Montgomery advocated what, in 21st century words, is now being called “racial reconciliation.” Montgomery returned to his basic theme from years before, namely a biracial coalition in the interest of economic growth. “On the part of the Negro race I have endeavored to make the first move.” He said, in the very next sentence, if someone in the white leadership gadget leadership “make a friendly counter-move?” Montgomery ended this 1923 speech with almost the same words that he had used in 1890, speaking of “each race proving a help to the other to reach the higher and nobler plains of human endeavor.” From 1923 to 1963, we know the answer.

More on The Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc.

I do not claim that Montgomery’s choices in 1890 were right. That is a wholly different subject. I use the Montgomery experience as a means to focus on some of what we have done, and some of what we hope to do, through the Isaiah T. Montgomery I will go back a minute to purpose which has three prongs. Prong # 1 is to see some fresh work about

Montgomery himself, and about the world that produced him. Prong # 2 is to learn some more about the activities in which Montgomery took part, of which Mound Bayou is a critical part, but it is by no means the only part. Montgomery never had in mind, as I pointed out in 2003, merely one small farming town in the Delta. He had in mind an economic region that spread toward what is now I-55 and up toward Tunica. He was a man of big vision, and as well toward an industrial base and a world grounded in science. Prong #3 is examination of issues that arise for policy in the 21st century and a larger world.

The Specific Goals

Within the framework above, The Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc. sets out four goals.

Goal 1. **Continue the publication program already initiated.** I will describe the outlines of how the publication program got started, and how we all handle some of the work details.

We have had to invent our own technique for searching for relevant information. For years the main historical discussion of Montgomery's role in the 1890 Convention was in Vernon L. Wharton's book, The Negro in Mississippi. But all he told you was that to find the speech you had to go to The New York World on a certain date in 1890. No title, no reporter's byline, no page, just The New York World on that date.

The librarians at the University of Virginia finally were able to get for me a spool of microfilm. But it was old, dark, and hard to read. The printing equipment was also primitive. But I got the speech printed in hard copy.

At times I almost forgot that I was still searching for the words of Isaiah T. Montgomery. Eventually I got it done, but by that time I was retired— an emeritus professor with no research account— so I had to retype the whole thing into my personal computer.

I truly appreciated the fifty cents that Mother gave me to pay for the typing course [“asdf/lkj”] at the high school in Mound Bayou.

From that point on, my wife took over the manuscript, chose a designer whose work she had come to know when she was on the United Way board, designed the product, got the document printed, and have it as Isaiah T. Montgomery, “What Answer?”: Speech in Support of Franchise Committee Report (edited by Matthew Holden, Jr.), Charlottesville, VA: Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc., 2004.

For a hundred and fourteen years, neither students nor teachers, nor interested citizens could find this speech, study it for themselves, and decide their own opinions about Isaiah T. Montgomery. We still have a lot to learn about marketing. But it has been used twice at Delta State, it has been cited in Stephen Cresswell's Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race (2006, 119, n. 23).

We have some pride that this small monograph will now be available, around the whole Earth, wherever people who can use Google, the Library of Congress, and other vehicles can see hitherto lost pieces of our history in print. We are learning something new, and we are a nonprofit. But we are “publisher” and we intend to carry forth our publication program. Eugene

O. Fisher's Voices of Mound Bayou is our most recent product. I will mention some others. One is 9-Eleventh Graders at Charlottesville High School- - Essays on Ida B. Wells (2006), about which my wife will make more informative comment. One is free, but like all free things it was soon exhausted. This was George Will, Mel Reynolds, and Mound Bayou.(Working Paper), Revised June 2005].

Goal 2 is to **establish a visitors' research center** in time, domiciled in some suitable place in Mound Bayou. This will enable people around the scholarly world not only to be linked electronically, but also to have on-the-ground research visits in Mound Bayou.

Goal 3 is to **develop co-operative relationships with pertinent academic departments** (political science, history, environmental studies, architecture and planning, public policy, other social science departments, etc.) in Mississippi, in other parts of the United States, and overseas. The aim that such students would, for on-the-ground study in Mississippi, the ITM Project would become the place to go.

Goal 4 is to **generate an independent policy unit (think tank)** for fact finding, data building, and observation oriented toward government, economics, and public policy in Mississippi, and the lower Mississippi valley. It would be similar in structure to three top level entities with which we have some familiarity. These are similar broadly speaking in structure, all having intellectual and technical competence and good research as central, though they are very different ideologically. These are the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute (AE), and CATO. The main purpose is, while standing independent of partisan politics as an organization, the research organization makes materials available to persons and groups who are trying to develop their own constructive options.

These are the four specific goals (publication program; visitor research center; co-operative links with departments; and, ultimately, "think tank"). The spirit of our thinking is represented in a message that I sent to some of my colleagues in the American Political Science Association, after the 2006 meeting of the American Political Science Association.

"You and I have, in some cases, known each other many years. In other cases, we have just met. We had conversations at APSA about what I am, and especially about what Dorothy and I are, doing in Mississippi Some conversations were extensive Some were very brief. In the interest of timely followup, I have put a one page statement of goals into this message.

"I am not giving up the rest of political science -- not by any means! -- but this Mississippi-related activity will take up about 50% of my time for some while. Dorothy and I would be glad to have any comment you may offer. We invite you to contact us if you come this way. We particularly encourage you to come if you have never been this way at all. "The old Mississippi is no more. The new Mississippi is a work in progress."

Mound Bayou, too, is once more a work in progress. Even its being a black community is not as cut and dried, even as black community, as one might think. "We have never objected to whites on the ground of color. . ." BUT "unless they are in sympathy with or can become interested in the underlying principles and purposes of a colony, their fixed presence is very likely to prove detrimental." (Outlook Magazine, November 16, 1904, p. 734) The logic of that statement is clear. Mound Bayou cannot, in accord with this principle of Montgomery, object to whites on the ground of color. . ." if "they are in sympathy with or can become interested in the

underlying principles and purposes.”

Conclusion

This time tomorrow Mound Bayouians will also come from the Founders' grave to hear the powerful sermon of Rev. B. Herbert Martin. Having been at his church just once I can say it will be powerful. We appreciate this opportunity, anticipating that event, to put before the thoughts and aspirations that we entertain in the Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project. We deeply believe not merely in the survival of Mound Bayou, but the potentialities for its regeneration and new growth with fresh recognition of the determination, the thoughtfulness, and the forward-lookingness of Montgomery himself. The Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, Inc. looks for ways not merely to enjoy the remembrances of Mound Bayou, but to find ways to cooperate with purpose to go as far achievement for a new age.