



# The Heavens Might Crack

## UNH historian publishes book about the death and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

Monday, March 12, 2018



JASON SOKOL SAYS MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. WAS A GLOBAL FIGURE AND INTERNATIONAL LEADER WHO WAS THOUGHT OF BY MANY "AS A LEADER IN STRUGGLES AGAINST RACISM AND IMPERIALISM, COLONIALISM — STRUGGLES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE." SOKOL IS THE ARTHUR K. WHITCOMB ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT UNH. HIS NEWEST BOOK DETAILS KING'S DEATH AND LEGACY.

In "THE HEAVENS MIGHT CRACK: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.", Jason Sokol, Arthur K.

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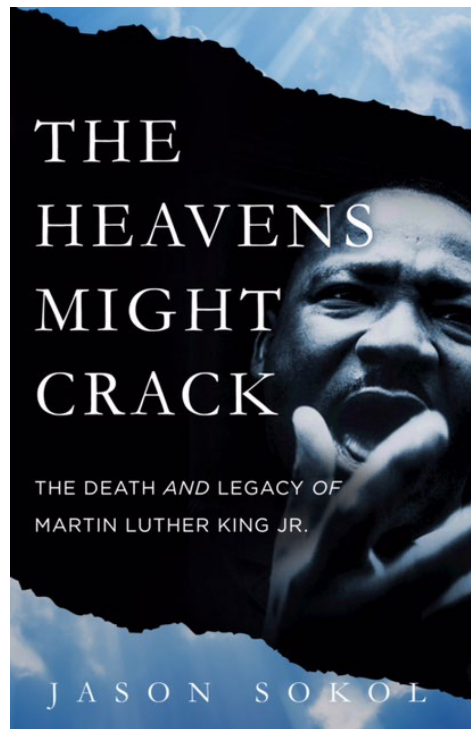
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Whitcomb Associate Professor of History at UNH, gives context to how Americans and others around the world, grappled with King's death in the days, weeks and months afterwards. He reveals how the consequences surrounding King's assassination shaped not only his legacy but the course of the Civil Rights Movement and race relations in America.



Published March 20, 2018, to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King's assassination on April 4, 1968, the book revisits that turbulent time. Even though it was only a few years after the enactment of landmark civil rights laws, King's murder sparked riots that shook America's cities, contributed to a rising militancy among African Americans and exposed continued white racism. Still, many African Americans held onto the hope that one day the country might embrace King's rhetoric for freedom and equality.

Sokol details how, in the spring of 1968, King was both idolized and despised. Many white Americans loathed King, not only in the South but across the country. They perceived him as an agitator, and some celebrated his death. Even among African Americans, King's views drew skepticism and frustration as much as awe and adulation. Many African Americans viewed his messages of nonviolence and interracialism as outdated and irrelevant.

Sokol reminds us that the shooting death of King played a crucial

role in the history of gun control politics. He writes, “King’s assassination set in motion a dynamic that ultimately led to the passage of the Gun Control Act later in 1968.” Sokol outlines how the murder of King, together with the murder of Robert F. Kennedy two months later, pushed Congress to pass the first major piece of gun control legislation since the 1930s.

Today, King is seen as an unthreatening figure who supposedly transcended race. His funeral, and the accompanying tributes, started a longer process of canonization. How so many Americans changed from loathing to loving is less about diminishing racism and more about the ways King’s legacy has been shaped over time. THE HEAVENS MIGHT CRACK shows how King’s death impacted our nation’s broader racial history, and how it made the struggle toward a multiracial America that much more difficult, dashing dreams for harmony both within the black freedom struggle and between whites and blacks.

Sokol specializes in 20th century American politics, race and civil rights. He is the author of “There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights” and “All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn.”

*Hear Sokol discuss his book and Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy in this [video](#).*

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