

The Washington Post Book World
November 03, 1996, Sunday

To Be Young, Gifted And Black

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PAGE 4; LENGTH: 923 words

AN EASY BURDEN: The Civil Rights Movement and The Transformation of America

By Andrew Young. HarperCollins. 550 pp. \$ 27.50

ANDREW YOUNG was one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest colleagues between 1961 and 1968. Initially a junior aide responsible for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's citizenship education program, by 1963 Young had become King's de facto chief of staff and one of the three or four people who knew King best. Expected by King to play the role of house conservative in an organization of unpredictable free spirits, Young left the SCLC two years after King's death and in 1972 won election to an Atlanta-area seat in the U.S. Congress.

This autobiographical memoir ends with that 1972 victory and does not address Young's subsequent public service as U.N. ambassador and mayor of Atlanta, but *An Easy Burden* offers a poignant personal account of the challenges and obstacles that King and Young confronted during the peak years of the civil rights struggle.

Perhaps the most winsome parts of the book are the pre-King chapters where Young recounts his New Orleans upbringing and almost happenstance decision to become a Congregational minister. A New York job with the National Council of Churches led to Young's initial affiliation with the SCLC, but his citizenship education responsibilities were quickly supplanted by King's pressing need for a dependably calm deputy who could keep the organization afloat during difficult and dangerous protest campaigns in cities like Birmingham and Selma, Ala.

Young's portrait of King is straightforward and honest. King "wasn't the easiest person to get to know intimately," and never sought either the leadership responsibilities or the celebrity that came his way. King did not like riding herd on wild yet productive SCLC organizers like James Bevel and Hosea Williams but fully accepted -- as did those around him -- how his public role undeniably guaranteed his eventual assassination.

An Easy Burden breaks little if any new ground with regard to the basic history of the movement, but it is especially valuable on the personal dynamics among those closest to King, particularly concerning the complex relationship between King and his dearest friend, the late Ralph D. Abernathy. Young never makes reference to Abernathy's own 1989 memoir, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, but he frankly recounts how "resentful" and "jealous" Abernathy became over King's media coverage and honors. When Abernathy's anger peaked over King's Nobel Peace Prize, which also stimulated a further intensification of FBI animus toward King,

"Ralph's estrangement was much more worrisome to Martin than anything he thought J. Edgar Hoover might do."

Young avows that "Martin's private sexual behavior was not relevant to the movement" and acknowledges "the raucous laughter and raunchy humor present in our meetings," but his comments on the FBI's campaign against King are less than comprehensive. He never even mentions the FBI's principal informant within the SCLC, comptroller James A. Harrison.

An Easy Burden features relatively little personal score-settling (one former colleague was "authoritarian" while another was "not too dependable"), and Young does not hesitate to dispense credit for the SCLC's accomplishments: "The ideas and strategies came up to Martin from his staff, rather than from Martin down." An Easy Burden nonetheless consistently misspells the names of three of Young's friends (Fred Bennette, Robert L. Green and Stuart Eizenstat), and likewise garbles the names of the seminary King attended as well as several movement opponents, but readers interested in Young's personal story rather than historical detail will come away with a warm regard for Young's humanity and frankness. He accords his wife, Jean, now deceased, and their four children far more attention than is common in political memoirs, and he is sometimes extremely candid: Following Robert Kennedy's 1968 assassination just two months after King's, "I sank into a depression so deep it was impossible for me to go on."

YOUNG'S ONLY serious misstep comes in his seemingly careless and unconsidered comments about King's assassination. Saying he believes "there was an element of conspiracy and a degree of involvement by some segment of the U.S. government," Young then goes on to opine that President Lyndon Johnson's well-known anger over King's criticisms of the war in Vietnam "could have given some elements within his government a sense that the death of Martin Luther King would not be unacceptable to the president."

These statements lack any factual foundation in the heavily investigated and widely available historical record concerning King's death and are dismayingly irresponsible. What the FBI and other police intelligence agencies did do to King and other proponents of social change is already damningly well-known; Young's apparent willingness to provide careless fodder for conspiracy theorists (choose your own favorite federal "segment" or "elements" -- FBI, CIA, ATF, etc.) with loose moorings on both ends of the ideological spectrum is both disappointing and embarrassing.

But An Easy Burden is otherwise a generally warm and impressive book, one that will offer readers an instructive and sometimes moving account of what life inside the movement actually was like.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Liberty and Sexuality" and "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King Jr.