

the outskirts of Selma. The police assault on the marchers quickly increased national support for the voting rights campaign. King arrived in Selma to join several thousand movement sympathizers, black and white. President Lyndon B. Johnson reacted to the Alabama protests by introducing new voting rights legislation, which would become the VOTING RIGHTS ACT of 1965. Demonstrators were finally able to obtain a court order allowing the march to take place, and on March 25 King addressed the arriving protesters from the steps of the capitol in Montgomery.

After the successful voting rights campaign, King was unable to garner similar support for his effort to confront the problems of northern urban blacks. Early in 1966 he launched a major campaign in Chicago, moving into an apartment in the black ghetto. As he shifted the focus of his activities north, however, he discovered that the tactics used in the South were not as effective elsewhere. He encountered formidable opposition from Mayor Richard Daley, and was unable to mobilize Chicago's economically and ideologically diverse black populace. He was stoned by angry whites in the suburb of Cicero when he led a march against racial discrimination in housing. Despite numerous well-publicized protests, the Chicago campaign resulted in no significant gains and undermined King's reputation as an effective leader.

His status was further damaged when his strategy of nonviolence came under renewed attack from blacks following a major outbreak of urban racial violence in Los Angeles during August 1965. When civil rights activists reacted to the shooting of James MEREDITH by organizing a March against Fear through Mississippi, King was forced on the defensive as Stokely CARMICHAEL and other militants put forward the Black Power slogan. Although King refused to condemn the militants who opposed him, he criticized the new slogan as vague and divisive. As his influence among blacks lessened, he also alienated many white moderate supporters by publicly opposing United States intervention in the Vietnam War. After he delivered a major antiwar speech at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, many of the northern newspapers that had once supported his civil rights efforts condemned his attempt to link civil rights to the war issue.

In November 1967, King announced the formation of a POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN designed to prod the nation's leaders to deal with the problem of poverty. Early in 1968, he and other SCLC workers began to recruit poor people and antipoverty activists to come to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of improved antipoverty programs. This effort was in its early stages when King became involved in a sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. On March 28, as he led thousands of sanitation workers and sympa-

thizers on a march through downtown Memphis, violence broke out and black youngsters looted stores. The violent outbreak led to more criticisms of King's entire antipoverty strategy. He returned to Memphis for the last time early in April. Addressing an audience at Bishop Charles H. Mason Temple on April 3, he sought to revive his flagging movement by acknowledging: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. . . . And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

The following evening, King was assassinated as he stood on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. A white segregationist, James Earl Ray, was later convicted of the crime. The Poor People's Campaign continued for a few months but did not achieve its objectives. King became an increasingly revered figure after his death, however, and many of his critics ultimately acknowledged his considerable accomplishments. In 1969 his widow, Coretta Scott King, established the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, in Atlanta, to carry on his work. In 1986, a national holiday was established to honor his birth.

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CLAYBORNE CARSON

#### Legacy

More than twenty-five years after his assassination, the militant political legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is in eclipse. Simultaneously, King's historical reputation is frequently distorted by the popular misconception that he was primarily a philosophical "dreamer," rather than a realistic and often courageous dissident.

King's true legacy is not the 1963 March on Washington (see CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT; WASHINGTON, D.C.) and his grandly optimistic "I Have a Dream" speech; it is instead his 1968 plan for a massively disruptive but resolutely nonviolent "POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN" aimed at the nation's capital, a protest campaign that came to pass only in a muted and disjointed form after his death.

Some of the distortion of King's popular image is a direct result of how disproportionately he nowadays is presented as a gifted and sanguine speechmaker whose life ought to be viewed through the prism of his "dream." King had used the "I Have a Dream" phrase several times before his justly famous oration, but on numerous occasions in later years King invoked the famous phrase only to emphasize how the "dream" he had had in Washington in 1963 had "turned into a nightmare."

Both the dilution of King's legacy and the misrepresentation of his image are also in part due to the stature accorded his birthday, now a national holiday. Making King an object of official celebration



Coretta Scott King leading the Garbage Workers Parade on April 8, 1967, four days after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s murder in Memphis, Tenn. (© Dennis Brack/Black Star)

inescapably leads to at least some smoothing of edges and tempering of substance that otherwise would irritate and challenge those Americans who are just as eager to endorse "I Have a Dream" as they are to reject any "Poor People's Campaign."

But another facet of King's erroneous present-day image as a milquetoast moderate, particularly among young people, is directly tied to the greatly increased prominence of MALCOLM X. Even before the media boomlet that accompanied Spike LEE'S 1992 movie, *X*, popular appreciation of Malcolm X had expanded well beyond anything that had existed in the first two decades following his 1965 death. Even if young people's substantive understanding of Malcolm X's message is oftentimes faulty or nonexistent, among youthful Americans of all races the rise of Malcolm X has vastly magnified the mistaken stereotype that "Malcolm and Martin" were polar opposites.

Far too many people assume that if Malcolm personified unyielding tenacity and determination, King, as his supposed opposite, was no doubt some sort of vainglorious compromiser who spent more time socializing with the Kennedys than fighting for social change. Hardly anything could be further from the truth, for while Malcolm's courageous self-transformation is deserving of far more serious attention and study than it has yet received, King was as selflessly dedicated and utterly principled a public figure as the United States has seen in this century.

Perhaps King's most remarkable characteristic was how he became a nationally and then internationally famous figure without ever having any egotistical desire to promote himself onto the public stage, as is otherwise the case with virtually every luminary in contemporary America. Drafted by his colleagues in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 to serve as the principal spokesperson for the black community's boycott of municipal buses, King was far from eager to be any sort of "leader," and only a deeply spiritual sense of obligation convinced him that he could not refuse this call.

King's resolutely selfless orientation gave his leadership both a public integrity and a private humility that are rare, if not wholly unique, in recent U.S. history. Perhaps the greatest irony generated by the hundreds upon hundreds of King's ostensibly private telephone conversations that were preserved for history by the FBI's indecently intrusive electronic surveillance—and released thanks to the Freedom of Information Act—is that one comes away from a review of King's most unguarded moments with a distinctly heightened, rather than diminished, regard for the man. Time and again, those transcripts show King as exceptionally demanding of himself and as an overly harsh judge of his own actions. How many other public figures, lacking only an FBI director like

J. Edgar Hoover to preserve their off-the-cuff comments for posterity, could hope to pass such an ultimate test of civic character?

King's remarkable political courage and integrity were just as dramatically visible on the public stage, however, as in his self-critical private conversations. Unlike almost every other public figure in the country both then and now, King had no interest in assessing which position on which issue would be the most popular or the most remunerative for organizational fund-raising before he decided how and when to speak his mind.

Nowhere was this more starkly apparent than in King's early decision to speak out against U.S. involvement in Vietnam (see VIETNAM WAR) at a time when President Lyndon B. Johnson's war still had the support of most progressive Democrats. Many liberal newspapers—and even several "mainstream" civil rights organizations—harshly attacked King for devoting his attention to an issue that did not fall within the "black" bailiwick, and while in private King was deeply hurt by such criticism, he had decided to confront the Vietnam issue knowing full well that just such a reaction would ensue.

"Leadership" to King did not mean tailoring one's comments to fit the most recent public opinion poll or shifting one's positions to win greater acclaim or support. King realized, too, that real leadership did not simply comprise issuing press releases and staging news conferences, and he was acutely aware that most real "leaders" of the southern civil rights struggle—unheralded people who performed the crucial task of encouraging others to stand up and take an active part in advancing their own lives and communities—got none of the public attention and awards that flowed to King and a very few others.

King understood that in our culture of publicity, the recognition of an individual symbolic figure such as he was inevitable and essential to the movement's popular success, but he always sought to emphasize, as in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, that he accepted such applause and honors only as a "trustee" on behalf of the thousands of unsung people whose contributions and aspirations he sought to represent. King realized, better than many people at the time, and far better than some subsequent disciples, that the real essence of the movement was indeed the local activists in scores of generally unpublicized locales. In private, King could be extremely self-conscious about how he personally deserved only a very modest portion of all the praise and trophies that came his way.

King would very much welcome the newfound appreciation of Malcolm X, but King likewise would be intensely discomfited by a national holiday that in some hands seems to encourage celebration of King's

own persona rather than the movement he came to symbolize. King also would rue how our culture of celebrity has become more and more a culture of violence, and how economic inequality in America is even more pronounced in the 1990s than it was at the time of his death in 1968.

King likewise would rue his legacy being too often shorn of his post-1965 nonviolent radicalism, and the celebration of his image by people who proffered him and the movement no support when he was alive. But King would not worry about any decline in his own reputation or fame, for he would greatly welcome increased credit and appreciation for those whom the media and history habitually overlook. If in the next several decades Martin Luther King, Jr.'s individual image continues gradually to recede, King himself would be happy rather than sad, for personal fame and credit were not something that he sought or welcomed either in 1955 or in 1968.

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DAVID J. GARROW

**King, Riley B. "B. B."** (September 16, 1925– ), blues singer and guitarist. Born Riley B. King in Itta Bena, Miss., B. B. King grew up on a plantation, working as a farmhand. He sang in choirs at school and church before teaching himself to play the guitar. He moved to Memphis in 1947 and began singing blues in bars. Following a radio appearance with Sonny Boy Williamson (Alex Miller), King began working on Memphis radio station WDIA as "the Pepticon Boy," advertising Pepticon tonic. He later became a disc jockey for WDIA, being billed as "the Blues Boy from Beale Street," gradually becoming "B. B." He began recording in 1949 and had a few local hits. His recording of "Three O'Clock Blues" (1952) was a national hit and allowed him to begin touring the country as a blues singer. By the mid-1960s he had become known as one of the country's greatest blues performers and a leading figure in the urban blues scene, thanks to the praise of many "British invasion" rock musicians, including Eric Clapton