WALKING
with
PRESIDENTS

Louis Martin and the
Rise of Black Political Power

Alex Poinsett

Introduction by David J. Garrow

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We are pleased that Alex Poinsett, former writer-editor for *Ebony* magazine, was able to undertake this biography. Poinsett had not only covered the civil rights and political reform movements, but had also observed and written about Martin's activities as a journalist and businessman in Chicago. We hope that this book will encourage further study of Louis Martin's remarkable influence on major events of his day.

A large number of individuals made major contributions to this study. Dr. Eleanor Farrar, first as senior vice president and later as project consultant, shepherded the work through its many phases. Dr. Milton Morris, vice president for research, provided intellectual guidance for the study. Pulitzer prize-winning historian David Garrow served as a valuable reviewer of the manuscript and prepared a thoughtful and eloquent introduction; Marc DeFrancis and Kitty Garber applied their considerable skills as Joint Center editors; and Theresa Kilcourse carried out text design and extensive photo research. We are indebted to them and the many others whose contributions helped make this book possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Journalism and history habitually reward self-promoters at the expense of those who are self-effacing. Whenever photos are about to be taken or a television news crew appears on the scene, there are those who literally will use their elbows to insure that they are in the front line—and at the center of that front line. Political figures often focus more on whether their efforts are being "covered" than upon the import and impact of their actions.

These dynamics not only regularly poison potential cooperation between political and organizational allies, they also distort contemporary journalism's chronicling of important developments and historians' later rendering of crucial events. Students of history—like viewers or readers of contemporary media—can be left with a highly misleading view of both the real wellsprings of political influence and what actually constitutes public leadership.

The as-yet underappreciated life and career of Louis E. Martin is just one poignant illustration of these larger dynamics. But Louis (pronounced "Louie") Martin is far from alone; the long history of the black freedom struggle is replete with examples, both individuals and organizations. Recent film and television treatments have rescued from relative obscurity one American martyr, Mississippi's Medgar Evers, who was murdered in 1963. Fresh histories of the southern movement, such as Charles M. Payne's wonderful *I've Got the Light of Freedom,* have drawn attention anew to the crucially creative but sometimes undervalued work in the early 1960s of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's young organizers.

A critical contribution to twentieth century black political activism that has been repeatedly overlooked is that which for decades was made by what was then called "the Negro press." Readers of this biography will quickly realize that once he reached adulthood, Louis Martin was first and foremost a black journalist. Martin's early years as an editor and columnist were not only formative for his own personal political outlook and social vision; they were also the years when the black press became a powerful, indispensable force for social change, creating the awareness and cultivating the convictions that would undergird the activism of the 1950s and 1960s.

Martin no doubt will be best remembered by history as the most influential black political advisor to both Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, but his voice and influence within the Kennedy-Johnson White House should not be thought of as the voice of one lone individual. Rather, his impressive behind-the-scenes involvement in the central political events of the 1960s ought to be viewed through a wider lens. Martin was a well-versed representative of the black protest tradition that African-American newspapers nurtured and sustained both before and after Robert S. Abbott's founding of the *Chicago Defender* in 1905. In his roles at the White House, Martin felt he was speaking up for a whole race.

Martin's journalistic experiences in Chicago and Detroit prepared him for the role he would play between 1960 and 1968 in the uppermost reaches of two Democratic presidencies as perfectly as anything any black American could have experienced during those preceding decades. As editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, he gained a profound appreciation for the tremendous promise that Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs held for black Americans. Likewise, he achieved a deep understanding of the importance that industrial unionism, exemplified in Detroit by Walter Reuther's flourishing United Auto Workers union, would have for a progressive, biracial coalition. Above all, however, his Detroit editorship taught Martin—as he in turn would teach thousands of others—that the struggle for equality and justice was unceasing and that *protest* was the essence of black life in America.

Martin made the *Michigan Chronicle* an explicitly pro-Roosevelt paper, in marked contrast to its local black competitor, the *Detroit Tribune*. Indeed, his crusading journalism played a major role in turning black Detroit away from traditional Republican loyalties and toward a new Democratic coalition. Equally important, for Martin as well as Detroit, were the pivotal affiliations and linkages that grew up between black progressives on the one hand and the tough young leadership of the United Auto Workers on the other. The *Chronicle* was outspokenly pro-labor, and its willingness to attack Henry Ford, the ultraconservative automaker who was Detroit's most dominant citizen, marked both Martin and his newspaper as courageous voices.

Michigan State University historian Richard W. Thomas, whose splendid *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945* draws upon a 1939 Louis Martin editorial for its title, credits Martin and his paper with playing a vital role in black Detroit's political modernization. "Without Martin and the *Chronicle*," Thomas writes, "black social consciousness would not have been able to take the ideological leap from

what many blacks considered the old tried and tested political orthodoxy, with its heavy dependency upon the Republican party... to the Democratic party and industrial unionism."

Any careful perusal of Martin's *Chronicle* editorials also underscores, powerfully and repeatedly, how Martin saw his post as a platform from which he could rally black readers to greater mutual dedication and commitment to community betterment and racial justice. Richard Thomas stresses that the *Chronicle* "had a knack for using bad news to raise the consciousness of the black community and inspire it to struggle on," and in the 1939 editorial earlier referred to, Martin instructed his readers that "we cannot permit ourselves any pessimism in considering either our present or our future." Martin's prose was often movingly elegiac, as that 1939 essay well represents: "We inhabit no vale of tears despite the fact that we represent the most oppressed minority in America.... To some extent, at least, life for us is what we make it."

Making black life better required a nonstop crusade for racial justice, and Martin pursued that quest with energy and forthrightness. Rejecting calls in early 1943 for black workers to "cool off" in their efforts to win better jobs in Detroit's wartime factories, he declared that "if we fall victims to this cooling off technique, we can kiss all of our gains against industry goodbye. Instead of cooling off, we need to get hot and stay hot until effective machinery is established to guarantee equal job opportunities to all Americans regardless of color, creed, or national origin. Let the stooges of Hitler and the Negro-haters do the cooling."

Louis Martin was "hot" in 1943 and still just as "hot" two decades later in 1963, when he vehemently told John and Robert Kennedy that federally mandated desegregation of all public accommodations had to be included in the legislation that a year later would emerge from Congress as the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Martin's voice was an important and unique one within the councils of the Kennedy White House, but students of the civil rights policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations need to appreciate how Louis Martin had perfected his voice during his earlier years of service to the black citizens of Chicago and Detroit. Evaluating Detroit politics in the early 1940s, Richard Thomas concludes that the *Chronicle* "played a leading role in directing black moral indignation and protest against racist forces bent on keeping blacks from benefiting from the prosperity of the war years." Martin was especially outspoken about the widespread racist violence that characterized Detroit's race riots during the summer of 1943. Martin was

steeped in black journalism's legacy of protest, and as Thomas strikingly notes, "few black papers fulfilled this honorable mandate as well as the *Michigan Chronicle*" during Louis Martin's editorship.

The political education Martin received in Detroit during the 1930s and 1940s was not limited to black protest and progressive activism, however. His work there featured the same deeply held, altruistic principles that prompted him later to refrain from seeking personal publicity or rewards during his years of service to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter. Martin understood that self-promotion and credit-claiming work to the detriment, not the benefit, of any cause one might hope to advance. Writing in the *Chronicle* as early as 1939, Martin pointedly asserted that "public men who are doing their utmost for the common good do not have the time to seek personal applause nor indulge in petty jealousies." Five years later, speaking wishfully of how America's and the world's goal ought to be "a unity which stems from the hearts and minds of the great masses of the people," Martin sharply decried how too many citizens leave "the business of shaping the future to those aggressive egotists who lust for power and the glory it brings."

Louis Martin's lifelong vision was of a democratic society where racial and ethnic discrimination no longer held sway. "We of the rank and file," he told his Detroit readers in 1944, "must resolve to take a new view and a new responsibility" for making a better America. The betterment of black America was always Martin's uppermost task, but even when he became a political and personal intimate of successive American presidents, he never stopped speaking for "we of the rank and file." Influence and importance never went to his head, and he never felt a need, or saw any good reason, to advertise his successes and accomplishments to a wider public.

Louis E. Martin's name thus has little of the public resonance that accompanies those of Martin Luther King, Jr., or Thurgood Marshall, or even lesser-known black leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, but Louis Martin's name belongs on the same page with these better known and more celebrated compatriots. Martin's contributions to the historic civil rights triumphs of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations guarantee him a place in the history books of the future, but Martin's entire public career, in journalism as in politics, stands as an even larger monument to how much one person can do when fame and glory are *not* a part of his purpose.

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LEARNING ABOUT RACE

Looks like what drives me crazy
Don't have no effect on you—
But I'm gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.
—Langston Hughes

The receptionist in the medical office on West Bolton Street hurried to waken the doctor, who was napping in a back room. "You've got to get up!" she said excitedly. "It's a white man." Louis E. Martin, Sr., did not rouse himself quickly enough for the anxious black woman. She repeated, "It's a white man!" Jolted awake, Dr. Martin rushed to the waiting room up front.[1]

The doctor's seven-year-old son, Louis, stopped playing with his toys in a corner of the back room. From the receptionist's tone he realized, for the first time, that being white conferred a special status. It had not occurred to the boy that skin color would make a difference to his proud Cuban father, who had a smattering of white patients and counted a white police officer among his friends. As elsewhere in the Deep South, the social and economic life of Savannah, Georgia, in the year 1919 was rigidly segregated. Nevertheless, whites and blacks sometimes lived on the same street, and at St. Mary's Catholic School, which young Louis attended, some black students could barely be distinguished from whites—a telltale reminder that segregation did not always keep the races apart.

For Louis, the experience that day at his dad's office was a peek through a clouded window at a world in which nonwhites were subordinate. Seven decades later, he would look back and say, "I always regretted that my old man got up. It struck me that just being a white man made a hell of a lot of difference. It impressed me so much that I became a civil rights advocate at age seven. From that time forward, I kept looking for signs and studying people closely as I began to understand how crazy this society is."

Only craziness could explain why Louis's father, a well-educated, locally prominent physician, was sometimes called a "monkey-chaser" because of