
At the River I Stand

MEMPHIS, THE 1968 STRIKE,
AND MARTIN LUTHER KING

Joan Turner Beifuss

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Series Editor's Preface

Joan Beifuss' *At the River I Stand* is without a doubt the finest study of the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike yet written. Even in future years it will be a difficult task for any historian to write a better volume on the 1968 crisis there, for Beifuss' book merits the same level of scholarly regard as such rightfully-acclaimed civil rights community studies as William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* on Greensboro and Robert J. Norrell's *Reaping the Whirlwind* on Tuskegee.

At the River I Stand is not only a first-rate piece of writing; it's also a tribute to each of three special acts of dedication. First, Beifuss' book, far more than anything else yet written on the Memphis strike, rightfully and accurately identifies the courage, strength and commitment that the city's black sanitation workers brought to their effort to win municipal recognition for their nascent union, AFSCME Local 1733. Far more so than local civic activists, local black elected officials, or even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it was the sanitation workers themselves who played the most crucial role in belatedly bringing the real impact of the civil rights movement to one of the South's largest, but theretofore largely untouched cities, Memphis.

Second, *At the River I Stand* is a tribute to one of the most remarkable and valuable oral history projects ever undertaken in recent American history, an extensive (364 interviews) effort on the part of more than a score of progressive white Memphians in the immediate wake of the sanitation strike and Dr. King's assassination to document through very wide-reaching taped interviews what had transpired in their city in the first four months of 1968. The resulting archive of transcripts, now housed in the Mississippi Valley Collection of the J. W. Brister Library at Memphis State University, is probably the richest local civil rights oral history collection anywhere in America, and its tremendous scope and detailed recollections are the most valuable resource for the very complete tapestry that Joan Beifuss provides in *At the River I Stand*.

Third, this volume is also a tribute to Joan Beifuss's own dedication and self-confidence in forging ahead with the writing, editing, and eventual self-publication of a first-rate manuscript in the face of a succession of undeserved rebuffs and expressions of disinterest from a number of possible initial publishers. *At the River I Stand's* long road to initial publication is an unfortunate example of how sometimes in American publishing even really first-rate works don't immediately rise to the top, but the accolades that Beifuss's eventual self-published edition received from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and from scholarly publications such as the *Journal of Southern History* accurately reflected its actual, long-term value. I'm very deeply pleased that we are able to republish this library edition of *At the River I Stand* as part of Carlson Publishing's eighteen-volume series, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement*, for it's a book that no library with a serious interest in the history of black Americans' civil rights struggle should be without.

David J. Garrow

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