

# WE SHALL OVERCOME

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND  
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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## *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership*

I FIRST BEGAN STUDYING THE southern civil rights struggle and Dr. King during the summer of 1974, when I was starting work on my undergraduate senior honors thesis at Wesleyan University. A thesis was mandatory, and I had written a junior-year paper that had critiqued a prominent political science argument about the central role of political parties in bringing excluded groups into political participation (Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*); I examined how no southern Democratic or Republican state party (with the possible exception of Winthrop Rockefeller's Arkansas Republicans), had, up through the mid-1960s, manifested the slightest interest in actively enfranchising black voters. Hence I chose to focus my senior thesis on what *had* allowed southern black citizens to join the electoral process in significant numbers, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In the course of the ensuing nine months I quickly came to realize that the emergence and congressional passage of the Voting Rights Act were inseparable from the protest campaign in Selma, Alabama, in early 1965 which had sparked national—and presidential—interest in southern blacks' electoral exclusion. In turn, the Selma demonstrations were inseparable from the conscious strategic plan that Dr. King and SCLC had employed in sponsoring those protests. Hence, the resulting 475-page thesis, "Federalizing a Political Conflict: The Violence of Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965," focused as much on Dr. King and SCLC's efforts in Selma as it did on the Voting Rights Act itself.

I enjoyed the library research for the thesis sufficiently that even by the fall of 1974 I had decided to attend graduate school in political science. Believing it preferable to

go to graduate school in the South, rather than New England, if I was to write on southern politics and civil rights, I chose Duke University where one of my three principal advisors, James David Barber, was kind enough to interest Yale University Press in my Wesleyan thesis manuscript. After taking off a semester to expand its research and to rewrite it, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* was published in the fall of 1978.

In the immediate wake of *Protest at Selma's* publication, I was undecided as to which of its two main figures, King or Lyndon Johnson, I would write something more about. By December 1978 I had settled on King, and I began my research for what eventually became *Bearing the Cross* with a painstaking reading of the very first King biography, L. D. Reddick's extremely useful *Crusader without Violence*. In April 1979, as I continued and expanded my research, I filed my initial Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, for all documents concerning Dr. King and SCLC, with the FBI. Early that fall, shortly after moving from Durham to spend a year at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, I interviewed former Johnson Administration Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. In discussing the attitudes of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations toward Dr. King, Katzenbach emphasized in very strong terms that one of the greatest influences during those years had been the negative materials on

King that the FBI had sent to both administrations in an unceasing flow, and most importantly the exceptionally serious and tremendously sensitive allegations that the FBI's top informant in the communist world had made concerning one of King's closest friends and advisors, New York lawyer Stanley Levison.

Levison was already a familiar name to me, and his legendary closeness to King, along with his extremely low visibility through the years, had led me to write him in late 1978 as one of the very first steps in my King project. He had been kind enough to write me his appreciation of *Protest at Selma*, but his rapidly declining health—he died just a month prior to my conversation with Katzenbach—had precluded us ever meeting. Now Katzenbach's emphasis upon Levison's centrality to the greatest unplumbed mystery of King's career persuaded me to focus initially on the many complicated strands of this story, and I spent much of the balance of the academic year 1979–80 tracking down the many loose ends of Levison's life and of the FBI's pursuit of King. Three major groups of sources emerged—former agents of the FBI who had worked on either the Levison and/or King probes, individuals who had been close friends of Levison wholly apart from his relationship with King, and SCLC aides with whom I wanted to speak for the larger project but who could also shed light on Levison and, potentially, on the FBI's unnamed infor-

mant within SCLC in the years after 1964.

By August 1980 I had, with considerable good luck, solved the Levison mystery and also identified the FBI's informant within SCLC. The Bureau's FOIA releases of the SCLC and King files were also beginning to arrive, and that fall, just after moving to Chapel Hill to join the faculty at the University of North Carolina, I wrote what became *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis*. It was published in September 1981, and also served as my doctoral dissertation at Duke.

With the FBI book complete I returned to intensive research on my larger King and SCLC project, research which had continued at a fairly solid pace even while the FBI book proceeded to publication. In that 1980–81 period, two developments, each more significant than the particulars of my FBI-world research, fundamentally enlarged and enriched my appreciation of King. The first was my rapidly growing interest in interviewing virtually everyone who still survived who had been in any way close to King between 1955 and 1968. Earlier, both in *Protest at Selma* and in my initial 1978–79 work, my presupposition had been that oral history was an inessential luxury. By 1981, however, and even more pronouncedly by 1983 and 1984, I had become quite committed to the belief that it was imperative to meet and talk with as many movement veterans as possible, not so much because of the specific information they could provide but rather for

the emotional texture and sense of personalities that the conversations conveyed.

Second, in mid-1980 I had been lucky enough to obtain, from a West Coast speech professor who once had worked as a transcriptionist in one of SCLC's New York offices, copies of the transcripts of several score of King's unpublished and otherwise totally unavailable sermons. More than any of King's other writings or statements, this trove of sermons (which I subsequently gave to the King Center Library in Atlanta) brought home to me in a very powerful—and almost totally new—fashion how central King's religious faith and spiritual orientation were to any complete understanding of the man. Perhaps nothing else in all the years of my research on King and the movement had as significant and important an impact on me, and my exposure to those sermons determined my focus upon the main theme—one conveyed by the title—that I then explored in *Bearing the Cross*.

The actual writing of *Bearing the Cross* took place during 1983, while I was still teaching at North Carolina, but between 1983 and 1985, while I prepared the footnotes for the manuscript, I continued to enlarge the book's research, mainly by means of more oral interviews. Out of one of those interviews, with Ms. Jo Ann Robinson in Los Angeles in April 1984, came one of the things that I am most proud of, namely my midwifing, at Ms. Robinson's very fervent request, of the University of Tennes-



see Press's publication of her important but long-unpublished memoir of the origins of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Following my move to City College and CUNY Graduate Center in 1984–85, I completed the final work on *Bearing the Cross*; the book was published in December 1986, at much the same time that the important PBS documentary series "Eyes on the Prize" was coming to fruition and broadcast. The success of those shows, for

which I along with other colleagues such as Vincent Harding served as principal advisors, helped draw a tremendous amount of attention to *Bearing the Cross*. One would be hard-pressed to envision a kinder reception for a book than what *Bearing the Cross* received, and its receipt of both the Pulitzer Prize in biography and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award capped a period for me, reaching back to 1974 at Wesleyan, that was as pleasant as it was productive.

Martin Luther King, Jr., began his public career as a reluctant leader, drafted, without any foreknowledge on his part, by his colleagues to serve as president of the newly created Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The organization was set up by Montgomery's black ministers and civic activists to direct the boycott of the city's segregated buses, which had been called by the Women's Political Council (WPC) immediately after the December 1, 1955, arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks.<sup>1</sup> King was only twenty-six years of age at the time, a newly minted Boston University Ph.D. who had passed up possible academic jobs to return to his native deep South as pastor of an upper-middle-class Baptist church. Devoted to his church responsibilities and excited by the mid-November birth of his first child, a daughter, he had declined nomination as president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP on the grounds that his church and family obligations precluded yet another commitment.

Late in the afternoon of Monday, December 5, at the formative meeting of the MIA executive board in the pastor's study at the Mt. Zion AME Church, longtime Montgomery civic activist Rufus A. Lewis, a member of King's own Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, nominated his young pastor as a candidate—the only candidate—for the MIA's presidency. King's best friend, Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy of Montgomery's First Baptist Church, who knew of his NAACP refusal, fully expected King to decline. Instead, after a pause, King told his

colleagues, "Well, if you think I can render some service, I will," and his selection was ratified. After other MIA officers were chosen, the group turned its attention to planning a mass meeting for that evening. There, community sentiment and enthusiasm would determine whether the fabulously successful one-day boycott of Montgomery's buses would be extended, a strategy, it was hoped, that would put additional pressure on white officials to change the racially discriminatory seating practices in the buses.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in a now long-obscure interview focusing upon his leadership of the Montgomery boycott, King told a young questioner that "I was surprised to be elected . . . both from the standpoint of my age, but more from the fact that I was a newcomer to Montgomery." That afternoon, however, King was as much anxious as surprised, for it would be his remarks, as the MIA's newly chosen leader, that would be the centerpiece of the evening's crucial rally. As he sought to gather his thoughts, King later wrote, he became "possessed by fear" that he would not be able to carry it off and "obsessed by a feeling of inadequacy." He turned to prayer to overcome his uncertainties of the moment.<sup>3</sup>

King betrayed none of his self-doubts or fears at that evening's mass meeting. "First and foremost we are American citizens," he told the huge crowd that overflowed the sizable Holt Street Baptist Church. As citizens, they would protest relentlessly for racial justice. As Christians, they would protest in a spirit of love, not one of hate. "Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith," King told his listeners, but he gave equal emphasis to a parallel theme, that of justice. "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action." Action, however—protest, not passivity—was King's principal message. "Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we've got to use tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation."<sup>4</sup>

At first, King and his MIA colleagues mistakenly assumed that a longer boycott would be a relatively brief matter, that white city and bus company officials would be eager to negotiate a quick solution to the dispute. The enthusiastic, overflow crowd at the mass meeting had immediately and affirmatively resolved the question of whether to extend the protest, and what the MIA was demanding from Montgomery City Lines and the elected, three-member City Commission that controlled the bus franchise was very modest indeed. First, the black community insisted that bus drivers begin displaying at least a modicum of courtesy toward black riders and that the heretofore regular use of racial epithets and other insults be terminated. Second, and most important, the MIA demanded the elimination of two extremely troublesome bus

seating practices that the WPC had been protesting for several years prior to Mrs. Parks's arrest. One of these was the reservation of the first ten seats on each bus for whites only, even if it meant that black riders had to stand over fully empty seats; the other was that black riders seated to the rear of that reserved section had to surrender their seats to any newly boarding white riders for whom seats were not available in the front. Instead, the MIA proposed that black riders seat themselves starting at the rear of each bus, and work their way forward, while whites would start from the front, and work their way back. People of different races would not ever share parallel seats, but would sit on a "first come, first served basis," with no reserved seats and no surrendering of seats. Third, and perhaps put forth largely as a bargaining tool, the MIA also asked that blacks, who comprised upwards of 70 percent of Montgomery City Lines' ridership, be allowed to apply for jobs as bus drivers, positions that until then had been reserved for whites.

The MIA leadership initially anticipated little difficulty in achieving its two major demands. Hence, throughout the first few days of his presidency of the new organization, Martin Luther King, Jr., went out of his way to emphasize to the press that the MIA was *not* seeking to end segregation on the city's buses, only alterations in the way that segregation was implemented. Indeed, the MIA argued that its proposals fit well within the strictures of Alabama's existing segregation statutes. "We are not asking for an end to segregation," King told reporters on December 6. "That's a matter for the legislature and the courts. We feel that we have a plan within the law. All we are seeking is justice and fair treatment in riding the buses. We don't like the idea of Negroes having to stand when there are vacant seats. We are demanding justice on that point."<sup>5</sup>

Only on Thursday afternoon, December 8, after the first negotiating session with the city commissioners and bus company officials had ended with the whites evincing absolutely no willingness to compromise with the MIA's requests, did King and his colleagues begin to realize that they had fundamentally misjudged the situation. "We thought that this would all be over in three or four days," Ralph Abernathy explained. Since "our demands were moderate," King admitted, "I had assumed that they would be granted with little question." Jo Ann Robinson, the WPC president and Alabama State professor who actually initiated the boycott in the wake of Mrs. Parks's arrest, soon grasped why the MIA's calculated moderation nonetheless had been greeted by total white obstinacy. "They feared that anything they gave us would be viewed by us as just a start." King soon realized the same fact.<sup>6</sup>

As the MIA began organizing its own car pool system of transportation and digging in for a boycott of more than just a few days, a second and then a third negotiating session produced only continued white obduracy. At that third meeting, King objected strenuously to the addition of a leader of the White Citizens Council, an aggressively segregationist group, to the white delegation. His objection angered several of the whites, who in return accused King himself, the MIA's principal spokesperson, of acting in bad faith. King, still anxious about his role, was taken aback and was left temporarily speechless. At first, none of his MIA colleagues spoke up in his defense. "For a moment," King later wrote, "it appeared that I was alone. Nobody came to my rescue" until Ralph Abernathy, who was fast becoming an even closer friend of King's, began to rebut the whites' claims. Thanks to Abernathy's crucial assistance, King's first moment of particular anxiety since the afternoon of his election passed quickly.<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of that tense session, however, King's doubts about his ability to serve as the boycott's principal leader increased. He later said he felt "a terrible sense of guilt" over the angry exchanges that had occurred at the meeting, and he became painfully aware that white Montgomery, hoping to break the strength of the ongoing boycott, had launched a negative whispering campaign against him personally. Why should older black ministers, including many who had pastored in Montgomery for decades more than King, take a backseat and cede leadership of the Negro community to this brand new, twenty-six-year-old, northern-educated whippersnapper? "I almost broke down under the continuing battering of this argument," King confessed two years later. His MIA colleagues, however, rallied around him and made clear their full support, both to King and to whites who were attempting to practice this divide-and-conquer strategy.<sup>8</sup>

By mid-January 1956, as the boycott entered its seventh week and began to receive increased press coverage, King for the first time became the focal point of substantial public attention. He realized that the MIA's initial strategy had been faulty. "We began with a compromise when we didn't ask for complete integration," he told one questioner. "Frankly, I am for immediate integration. Segregation is evil, and I cannot, as a minister, condone evil." Further, he had come to understand that much more than bus seating practices were at issue in the Montgomery movement. Indeed, King now saw the boycott as "part of a world-wide movement. Look at just about any place in the world and the exploited people are rising up against their exploiters. This seems to be the outstanding characteristic of our generation."<sup>9</sup>

King's increased visibility also made him one of the first targets when Montgomery's city commissioners adopted new, "get tough"



tactics against the MIA during the latter part of January. On Thursday, January 26, while giving several people a lift as part of the MIA's extremely successful car pool transportation system, King was pulled over by two policemen and taken to the city jail on the fallacious charge of going thirty miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone. For the first time since the protest had begun, King feared for his immediate physical safety. Initially, he was uncertain as to where the officers were taking him. "When I was first arrested," he admitted later, "I thought I was going to be lynched." Instead, King was fingerprinted, jailed for the first time in his life, and thrown into a filthy group cell with a variety of black criminals. In just a few moments' time, however, Ralph Abernathy and other MIA colleagues began arriving at the jail, and white officials agreed to King's release. His trial was to be on Saturday.<sup>10</sup>

That arrest and jailing focused all the personal tensions and anxieties King had been struggling with since the afternoon of his election. The increased news coverage had brought with it a rising tide of anonymous, threatening phone calls to his home and office, and King had begun to wonder whether his leadership of the boycott would eventually cost him and his young family much more than he could initially have imagined. The next evening, Friday, January 27, King's crisis of confidence peaked. He returned home late, received yet another threatening phone call, and went to bed, but found himself unable to sleep. He went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and sat down at the kitchen table. "I started thinking about many things," he later explained. He thought about the obstacles the boycott was confronting and the increasing threats of physical harm. "I was ready to give up," he remembered. "With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward"—to hand over the leadership of the MIA to someone else.

He thought about his life up until that time. "The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years," King later recalled.

I didn't have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of their way to provide everything for their children. . . . I went right on through school; I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.

Now of course I was religious, I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher . . . my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher

. . . my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must . . . if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life.

That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he thought about how his leadership of the MIA was fundamentally altering what up until then had been an almost completely trouble-free life.

If I had a problem, I could always call Daddy—my earthly father. Things were solved. But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church down in Montgomery, Alabama, and I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church, it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn't going to take it any longer. . . . It was the beginning of a movement, . . . and the people of Montgomery asked me to serve them as a spokesman, and as the president of the new organization . . . that came into being to lead the boycott. I couldn't say no.

And then we started our struggle together. Things were going well for the first few days, but then, . . . after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making some nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my child. I took it for a while, in a strong manner.

That night, however, in the wake of his arrest and jailing and the continuing telephone threats, King's strength was depleted. Then, in what would forever be, in his mind, the most central and formative event in his life, Martin Luther King's basic understanding of his role underwent a profoundly spiritual transformation.

"It was around midnight," he explained years later in describing what occurred. "You can have some strange experiences at midnight." That last threatening phone call had gotten to him. "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now, and if you aren't out of this town in

three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born. . . . She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken from me any minute.

And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it. . . . I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak."

Then it happened. "And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' . . . I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone, no never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone." That experience, that vision in the kitchen, gave King a new strength and courage to go on. "Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."<sup>11</sup>

Three nights later, when a bomb went off on the front porch of King's parsonage, that strength and courage allowed King, with a calmness that astounded some onlookers, to reassure the large crowd of angry black citizens that gathered. "I want you to love our enemies. Be

good to them. Love them and let them know you love them," King told several hundred onlookers. "I did not start this boycott," he reminded his listeners. "I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. If I am stopped, our work will not stop, for what we are doing is right, what we are doing is just. . . . If anything happens to me," he concluded, "there will be others to take my place."<sup>12</sup>

The vision in the kitchen allowed King to go forward with feelings of companionship, self-assurance, and a growing sense of mission that were vastly greater spiritual resources than anything he had been able to draw upon during the boycott's first eight weeks. It also allowed him to begin appreciating that his leadership role was not just a matter of accident or chance, but was first and foremost an opportunity for service. It was not one King would have sought, but it was an opportunity he could not forsake. His new strength also enabled him to conquer, in a most thorough and permanent fashion, the fear that had gripped him that Friday night in his kitchen. At the same time, it allowed him to appreciate that although his calling might indeed be a unique one, it was that calling, and not he himself, which was the spiritual centerpiece of his developing role. King's emerging understanding of himself came through quite clearly in a late March interview, just after a Montgomery judge formally had convicted him of violating a long-obscure Alabama antiboycotting statute. The reporter asked if he was sometimes afraid. King's answer was clear and firm.

No, I'm not. My attitude is that this is a great cause. This is a great issue that we are confronted with and the consequences for my personal life are not particularly important. It is the triumph for the cause that I am concerned about, and I have always felt that ultimately along the way of life an individual must stand up and be counted and be willing to face the consequences, whatever they are. If he is filled with fear, he cannot do it. And my great prayer is always that God will save me from the paralysis of crippling fear, because I think when a person lives with the fear of the consequences for his personal life, he can never do anything in terms of lifting the whole of humanity and solving many of the social problems that we confront.<sup>13</sup>

That strength and dedication remained with King throughout the duration of the Montgomery protest, which ended successfully with the integration of the city's buses just prior to Christmas 1956—381 days

after the boycott had begun. In the wake of that achievement, however, some whites repeatedly directed acts of violence against the newly desegregated buses, and, in mid-January 1957, a series of bombings struck several black churches and the homes of MIA leaders. The violence weighed heavily on an already exhausted King, for whom the success of the Montgomery protest had resulted in an avalanche of speaking invitations from across the country, opportunities for spreading Montgomery's message that King felt he could not ignore. Then, on Sunday morning, January 27—the first anniversary of King's kitchen experience—twelve sticks of dynamite, along with a fuse that had smoldered and died, were found on the porch of King's parsonage.

The murder attempt deeply affected King. Later that morning, in his sermon to his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church congregation, he explained how his experience a year earlier had allowed him to resolve his fears about his role and his fate. "I realize that there were moments when I wanted to give up and I was afraid but You gave me a vision in the kitchen of my house and I am thankful for it." King told his listeners how, early in the boycott, "I went to bed many nights scared to death." Then,

early on a sleepless morning in January, 1956, rationality left me. . . . Almost out of nowhere I heard a voice that morning saying to me, "Preach the gospel, stand up for truth, stand up for righteousness." Since that morning I can stand up without fear.

So I'm not afraid of anybody this morning. Tell Montgomery they can keep shooting and I'm going to stand up to them; tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I'm going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land and it's going to be here in Montgomery.<sup>14</sup>

Those remarks, uttered in January 1957 and so clearly presaging the very similar and much more widely known comments that King made in Memphis, Tennessee, on the evening of April 3, 1968, bring home a very simple but extremely crucial point: that King's mountaintop experience did not occur in April 1968, nor even in August 1963, but took place in the kitchen at 309 South Jackson St. in Montgomery on January 27, 1956. King's understanding of his role, his mission, and his fate, then, was essentially *not* something that developed only or largely in the latter stages of his public career, but was present in a rather complete form even before the end of the Montgomery boycott—indeed as early as its second month.

Appreciating King's own understanding of his role and responsibilities is as crucial as anything—and really more crucial than anything else, I would contend—for comprehending the leadership contribution that Martin Luther King, Jr., made to the American black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout the late 1950s, and the very slow, gradual effort to build SCLC into what its creators initially had envisioned—a region-wide organization for stimulating and coordinating mass direct action protests in cities and towns all across the South—King continually struggled with his reluctant and ambivalent realization that he was not, in a very fundamental way, in full charge of his own life, and that his increasing obligations to the movement were such that he could not escape from those responsibilities even though the thought often occurred to him.

Several times during those years King, as he himself put it, "reluctantly" turned down offers of professorships or deanships at well-known seminaries. But his tension and his feeling of obligation to a mission far more important than his own life or happiness came through most starkly in late 1959 when, in response to repeated proddings from colleagues such as Fred Shuttlesworth that he devote considerably greater time to building SCLC, King decided to leave Dexter Avenue Church and Montgomery for Atlanta, where he could serve with his father as copastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. One of his explanations for that move captured King's tensions poignantly:

For almost four years now I have been faced with the responsibility of trying to do as one man what five or six people ought to be doing. . . . I found myself in a position which I could not get out of. This thrust new and unexpected responsibilities my way. . . .

What I have been doing is giving, giving, giving and not stopping to retreat and meditate like I should—to come back. . . .

I have a sort of nagging conscience that someone will interpret my leaving Montgomery as a retreat from the civil rights struggle. Actually, I will be involved in it on a larger scale. I can't stop now. History has thrust something upon me from which I cannot turn away.<sup>15</sup>

King's move to Atlanta took place on February 1, 1960—by chance the same day that the sit-in movement was launched when four black students from North Carolina A&T College refused to leave the segregated lunch counter of a Greensboro F. W. Woolworth's store when they were denied service. The rapid spread of the student movement



and the mid-April founding of SNCC quickly guaranteed that King would not have the increased opportunities for rest and reflection that he had hoped his move to Atlanta would provide. The sit-ins, the Atlanta student movement of 1960–61, the Freedom Rides of May 1961, and the protest campaign of the Albany, Georgia, movement during the winter of 1961 and the summer of 1962 all served to draw Martin King deeper and deeper into a struggle that was spreading across the South. Then, in January 1963, in response to repeated requests from Fred Shuttlesworth, King and his SCLC staff agreed to undertake for the first time a protest campaign initiated largely by themselves, rather than by the students of SNCC, by CORE—the originators of the Freedom Ride—or by local activists such as those in Albany.

The Birmingham protests of May 1963 marked a fundamentally new level of achievement for the black freedom struggle in the South; for the first time, the movement and “Bull” Connor’s attempted repression of it succeeded in presenting black demands to a nationwide audience in so dramatically powerful a way that neither the American people nor the Kennedy administration could any longer ignore or avoid them. For Martin King, Birmingham and the March on Washington, which followed closely in its wake, represented a fundamental shift as well, a shift toward an even larger and more demanding leadership role in a movement whose expanding size and scope made increasingly unlikely any chance that King at some future time would be able to retreat to a quieter and less burdensome life. “My notion of it,” Andrew Young has explained, “is that it was almost Birmingham . . . before he took up the mantle of leadership, that from ’57 to ’63 he was being dragged into one situation after another that he didn’t want to be in. . . . He didn’t see himself as being the leader of everything black people wanted to do. He resisted as long as he could the responsibilities and burdens of taking on a whole movement for social change.”<sup>16</sup>

After the 1963 March, however, King increasingly came to accept the destiny that accompanied his growing role, though that destiny, like the role, was not something with which he was at all fully comfortable. King thought regularly about what he once termed “this challenge to be loyal to something that transcends our immediate lives.” “We have,” he explained to one audience, “a responsibility to set out to discover what we are made for, to discover our life’s work, to discover what we are called to do. And after we discover that, we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we can muster.” As Young later expressed it, “I think that Martin always felt that he had a special purpose in life and that that purpose in life was something that was given to him by God, that he was the son and grandson of Baptist preachers, and he understood, I think, the scriptural notion of men of

destiny. That came from his family and his church, and basically the Bible.”

The revelation in the kitchen seven years earlier had given King not only the ability to understand his role and destiny, but also the spiritual strength necessary for accepting and coping with his personal mission and fate. It was also, of course, much more profoundly an ongoing sense of companionship and reassurance than simply a seven-year-old memory of a one-time sensation. “There are certain spiritual experiences that we continue to have,” King stated, “that cannot be explained with materialistic notions.” One “knows deep down within there is something in the very structure of the cosmos that will ultimately bring about fulfillment and the triumph of that which is right. And this is the only thing that can keep one going in difficult periods.”<sup>17</sup>

King’s understanding of his life underwent a significant deepening when he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. A man who belittled most honors, including even his own 1963 *Time* magazine “Man of the Year” designation, King welcomed the Nobel award as a recognition of the international status that the movement, rather than he himself, had attained. At the same time, however, the prize signaled the beginning of a fundamental growth in King’s own sense of mission and willingness to accept a prophetic role. “History has thrust me into this position,” he told reporters the day the award was announced. “It would both be immoral and a sign of ingratitude if I did not face my moral responsibility to do what I can in this struggle.”<sup>18</sup>

Following the landmark 1965 SCLC right-to-vote campaign in Selma, Alabama, which stimulated prompt congressional passage of the powerful Voting Rights Act, King’s expanding sense of duty and mission led him to take on two issues that he had always been cognizant of, but which had never previously been prominent in his public political agenda—the economic aspects of racial discrimination in non-southern and urban parts of the United States, and the increasingly immoral role of American foreign policy in fostering international violence, especially in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. More and more, a harsh edge crept into King’s public comments about the state of American society, the nature of the American economy, the meaning of America’s role in the world, and the basic orientation of most white Americans. The 1966 Meredith March, the advent of the phrase “Black Power,” and SCLC’s protracted and ultimately frustrating 1966 urban organizing campaign in Chicago further magnified King’s growing concern about both the state of the movement and the likely future course of American life.

At a mid-August rally in Chicago, King gave voice to just how drained he felt. “I’m tired of marching,” he told the crowd, “I’m tired of the tensions surrounding our days. . . . I’m tired of living every day

under the threat of death. I have no martyr complex; I want to live as long as anybody in this building tonight, and sometimes I begin to doubt whether I'm going to make it through. I must confess I'm tired. . . . I don't march because I like it, I march because I must."<sup>19</sup>

More and more King thought of his own life in terms of the cross. It was an image he had invoked repeatedly over the years, beginning as early as his 1960 imprisonment in Georgia's Reidsville State Prison. He particularly focused upon it, and upon the memory of his vision in the kitchen, at times of unusual tension and stress. In mid-September of 1966, following a deluge of harsh comments criticizing SCLC's half-alloaf negotiated settlement halting the Chicago protests, and amidst a deteriorating intramovement debate about the desirability or harmfulness of the "Black Power" slogan, King talked in a remarkably revealing fashion to a church convention about how his sense of mission was increasingly also becoming a sense of burden. "We are gravely mistaken to think that religion protects us from the pain and agony of moral existence. Life is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering."<sup>20</sup>

More than anything else, the Vietnam War brought King face-to-face with what was becoming a consciously self-sacrificial understanding of his role and fate. He had spoken out publicly against America's conduct of the war as early as March 1965, and had stepped up his comments during July and August of that year, but had drawn back from further extended public remarks in the face of harsh, Johnson administration-inspired criticism of his foreign policy views. Throughout all of 1966, despite a deepening self-reproach for not publicly criticizing a war whose harmful domestic economic effects were becoming increasingly obvious, King largely kept his peace; he was reluctant to reignite a public debate about the political propriety of the nation's leading civil rights spokesman becoming a head-on critic of one of the incumbent administration's most prominent policies. Then, during a long and peaceful January 1967 vacation in Jamaica, King was particularly affected by some graphic color photos in *Ramparts* magazine showing young Vietnamese children who had suffered severe napalm burns as the result of American bombing, and he vowed to take on Lyndon Johnson's war publicly as never before.<sup>21</sup>

King knew full well that his new, aggressive stance on the war would harm him politically and might well damage SCLC financially. Those considerations, however, were not enough to shake him from

his resolve. "At times you do things to satisfy your conscience, and they may be altogether unrealistic or wrong, but you feel better," King explained over wiretapped phone lines to his long-time friend and counselor, Stanley Levison. America's involvement in Vietnam was so evil, King explained, that "I can no longer be cautious about this matter. I feel so deep in my heart that we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I'm willing to go that road."<sup>22</sup>

Many of King's SCLC colleagues, especially some on the board of directors, as well as other civil rights spokespersons such as NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins, actively opposed King's new stance. King admitted to his board that in 1965 he "went through a lot of bitter and certainly vicious criticism by the press for taking that stand," but popularity was not a consideration for him anymore. He reminded the board about "those little Vietnamese children who have been burned with napalm" and he prepared to deliver what would be his harshest condemnation of America's Southeast Asia war policies, an April 4 address at New York's Riverside Church.<sup>23</sup>

King's statements in that speech, and particularly his denunciation of the United States government as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," brought down a flood of public criticism upon his head. Black newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* joined liberal white ones such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* in rebuking King for his comments, and even some of King's most trusted advisors, including Levison, reproached him for the tone of the speech. King, however, rejected these complaints. "I was politically unwise but morally wise. I think I have a role to play which may be unpopular," he insisted to Levison. "I really feel that someone of influence has to say that the United States is wrong, and everybody is afraid to say it."<sup>24</sup>

King privately considered, and then publicly rejected, overtures from some opponents of the war to run as an independent, third-party anti-Vietnam candidate in the upcoming 1968 presidential election. "Being a peace candidate is not my role," he told one questioner. "I feel I should serve as a conscience of all the parties and all of the people, rather than be a candidate myself." He explained to his Ebenezer congregation that his evolving role was in part a response to the Nobel Prize, which he termed "a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for the brotherhood of man." The burden of that role was substantial, however; public opinion polls told King that 73 percent of Americans disagreed with his opposition to the Vietnam War and 60 percent believed it would hurt the civil rights movement. Even among black respondents, only 25 percent agreed with King's criticisms; 48 percent said he was wrong.<sup>25</sup>

The Vietnam issue helped lead King toward an increasingly radical



critique of American politics and society. "We are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society," he told SCLC's staff during a May 1967 retreat in Frogmore, South Carolina. "We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power" in America. The Vietnam War was "symptomatic of a deeper malaise of the American spirit." The nation required "a revolution of values and of other things. . . . We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together, and you really can't get rid of one without getting rid of the others." In short, "the whole structure of American life must be changed."<sup>26</sup>

As his closest colleagues always knew, King privately was as harsh a critic of himself as he was of the war and the ills of American society. "He criticized himself more severely than anyone else ever did," Coretta Scott King later recalled. "He was always the first to say, 'Maybe I was wrong, maybe I made a mistake.' . . . He would go through this agonizing process of self-analysis many times." Vietnam was only one example of this inclination, as King made clear at the Frogmore retreat when he told his staff how much he now regretted not having continued to publicly condemn the war after 1965. "I had my own vacillations and I asked questions whether on the one hand I should do it or whether I shouldn't." Then, King explained, recalling his *Ramparts* experience, "I picked up an article entitled 'The Children of Vietnam,' and I read it, and after reading that article I said to myself, 'Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam.' "

At that retreat King also spoke to his staff about how he had come to see the war issue in terms of his own understanding of the cross. "When I took up the cross, I recognized its meaning. . . . The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on. The cross may mean the death of your popularity. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut down your budget a little, but take up your cross, and just bear it. And that's the way I've decided to go." No longer did he suffer from any indecision on the question of the war. "I want you to know that my mind is made up. I backed up a little when I came out in 1965. My name then wouldn't have been written in any book called *Profiles in Courage*. But now I have decided that I will not be intimidated. I will not be harassed. I will not be silent, and I will be heard."<sup>27</sup>

King's view of American society became increasingly critical in 1967 and early 1968. "America has been, and she continues to be, largely a racist society," he told a July conference in Chicago. "Maybe something is wrong with our economic system the way it's presently going. . . . There comes a time when any system must be re-evaluated," and

America's time was at hand. "The movement must address itself to restructuring the whole of American society. The problems that we are dealing with . . . are not going to be solved until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power."

King's harsher critique developed hand-in-hand with a more negative attitude toward his own ability, and the ability of the broader movement, to bring about any truly significant alterations in the basic character of American society and governmental policies. Up until 1965 and 1966, King wistfully observed, "We really thought we were making great progress. . . . We somehow felt that we were going to win the total victory, before we analyzed the depths and dimensions of the problem." Then, in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King had begun to realize more and more that the fundamental obstacles confronting the movement and black America were economic rather than legal, and tied much more closely to questions of class than to issues of race.<sup>28</sup>

King's awareness that he and the movement were less and less likely to be able to bring about significant changes in American life, with regard to either Vietnam or domestic economic problems, was a difficult and painful realization to accept. Although he was a fundamentally humble man, in no way overawed by his own gifts and influence, his understanding of the public role into which he had grown over the course of the period from 1956 to 1967 left him with a deep-seated belief that he had to do all that he could, regardless of personal cost. This attitude manifested itself both in his decision in early 1967 to speak out on Vietnam and in his beginning, during the summer of that year, to plan a radical economic movement, which by late that fall he had named the Poor People's Campaign. In part, as Stanley Levison later explained, King's growing inclination to sacrifice himself to his larger mission stemmed from his own discomfiture over the role that he played. King believed, Levison stressed, that he "was an actor in history at a particular moment that called for a personality, and he had simply been selected as that personality." However, King felt that

he had not done enough to deserve it. He felt keenly that people who had done as much as he had or *more* got no such tribute. This troubled him deeply, and he could find no way of dealing with it because there's no way of sharing that kind of tribute with anyone else: you can't give it away, you have to accept it. But when you don't feel you're worthy of it and you're an honest, principled man, it tortures you. . . . If he had been less humble, he could have lived with this kind of acclaim,



but because he was genuinely a man of humility, he really couldn't live with it. He always thought of ways in which he could somehow live up to it.<sup>29</sup>

Coretta Scott King understood this aspect of her husband, terming him "a guilt-ridden man" who "never felt he was adequate to his positions." In the late summer of 1967, she remembered, "he got very depressed," a depression that "was greater than I had ever seen it before. . . . He said, 'People expect me to have answers and I don't have any answers.' He said, 'I don't feel like speaking to people. I don't have anything to tell them.' " One August day King was supposed to fly to Louisville for an address, but failed to make his airplane and called his wife from the airport. "I know why I missed my flight; I really don't want to go. I get tired of going and not having any answers." He had begun to take this very personally," Coretta later explained. "People feel that nonviolence is failing," King had told her. "I said, 'But this is not so. You mustn't believe that people are losing faith in you; there are millions of people who have faith in you and believe in you and feel that you are our best hope. . . . Somehow you've just got to pull yourself out of this and go on. Too many people believe in you and you're going to have to believe that you're right.' He said, 'I don't have any answers.' I said, 'Well, somehow the answers will come. I'm sure they will.' " Seven hours late, Martin King did indeed arrive in Louisville.<sup>30</sup>

King's depression continued throughout the fall and winter of 1967. "These have been very difficult days for me personally," he told one audience. "I'm tired now. I've been in this thing thirteen [sic] years now and I'm really tired." Nonetheless, even at his darkest moments, faith in God gave King the inner equilibrium to face life's problems and "conquer fear," as he explained to his Ebenezer congregation. "I know this. I know it from my own personal experience."<sup>31</sup>

King's increased focus on organizing the Poor People's Campaign became his principal means to avoid despondency. "The decade of 1955 to 1965, with its constructive elements, misled us," he told the SCLC staff at a late November retreat that marked the actual beginning of work on the campaign. True, the movement had won many battles, "but we must admit that there was a limitation to our achievement," he declared. "The white power structure is still seeking to keep the ways of segregation and inequality substantially intact," and was deflecting the movement's efforts. However, King stressed, "I am not ready to accept defeat. . . . We must formulate a program, and we must fashion new tactics which do not count on government good will. . . . The movement for social change has entered a time of temptation to despair, because it is clear now how deep and how systematic are the evils it

confronts." Thus, "we in SCLC must work out programs to bring the social change movements through from their early and now inadequate protest phase to a stage of massive, active, nonviolent resistance to the evils of the modern system. . . . Let us therefore not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all the existing values of American society," but as one that would alter those values.<sup>32</sup>

King's mixture of determination and depression appeared repeatedly throughout early 1968. The upcoming Poor People's Campaign protests in Washington would have to be "dislocative and even disruptive" because "pressureless persuasion does not move the power structure" and rioting "doesn't pay off," King told one audience. "I wish we could have it a different way because I'm frankly tired of marching. I'm tired of going to jail." In one Sunday sermon he spoke even more plaintively. "Living every day under the threat of death, I feel discouraged every now and then and feel my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again." In Washington, trying to drum up support for a campaign that was drawing very little enthusiasm, even from some of SCLC's own staff members, King gave voice openly to his growing despair. "I can't lose hope. I can't lose hope because when you lose hope, you die."<sup>33</sup>

During February and March of 1968 many colleagues and observers saw a wistful and melancholic attitude in King. Long-time friend and companion Ralph Abernathy, back from a lengthy trip to Asia, found him "sad and depressed." King told his Ebenezer congregation that "life is a continual story of shattered dreams," and even when Abernathy talked King into going to Acapulco for a quick, three-day vacation, King remained "troubled and worried" about the future in general and the uncertain prospects of the Poor People's Campaign in particular.<sup>34</sup>

"In our low moments, when the pressures build, you look for a graceful way out; you have periods when you feel overwhelmed and want to retreat," Jesse Jackson has said in characterizing King's last several months of life. Andrew Young made a similar point: "Fatigue was not so much physical with him as it was emotional. He had the constitution of a bull. He could go on and on and on when things were going well. It was when he didn't have a clear sense of direction that he got very tired."<sup>35</sup>

In early 1968 it was clear to everyone around him that King was very tired indeed. Those who knew him best, in reflecting back upon the changes they had witnessed in him, identified the onset of those changes with King's early 1967 decision to tackle the Vietnam war issue. Long-time SCLC staff member Dorothy Cotton, who understood him as well as anyone, saw April 1967 as the beginning of a new and different "exhaustion," how King "was just really emotionally weary, as well

as physically tired." "That whole last year I felt his weariness, just weariness of the struggle, that he had done all that he could do."<sup>36</sup>

King's despair and worries came to a peak on Thursday, March 28, 1968, when he made his second visit of the month to Memphis, Tennessee, to help boost community support for striking black sanitation men whose demand for recognition of their nascent union had been rejected out of hand by conservative Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb. That Thursday's march, organized by local strike supporters rather than by any of SCLC's experienced staff, ended in considerable turmoil and some looting when young adults, feeling excluded from the movement by the Rev. James M. Lawson, chairperson of the strike support committee, started breaking windows as the procession headed into downtown Memphis.

King and his SCLC colleagues Ralph Abernathy and Bernard Lee left the scene speedily, but King was deeply agitated over the turmoil, angry at Lawson, and extremely fearful of the harm that negative, hostile news media accounts of the Memphis violence could do to the Poor People's Campaign. "I had never seen him so depressed," Abernathy recalled. King phoned Coretta in Atlanta, and told her, too, how upset he was that a march he had been leading had ended violently, with one suspected looter fatally shot by a police officer. "He was very depressed about it and I kept trying to tell him, 'You mustn't hold yourself responsible, because you know you aren't,'" Mrs. King later remembered, but King remained extremely anguished. The next day, after a private meeting with some of the youths and a press conference at which reporters peppered King with hostile questions, he poured out his feelings to Levison in a long phone conversation. Levison refused to accept King's assertions that the Memphis violence was an all-but-fatal blow to his own public status as a nonviolent civil rights leader. King demurred. "All I'm saying is that Roy Wilkins, that Bayard Rustin and that stripe, and there are many of them, and the Negroes who are influenced by what they read in the newspapers, Adam Clayton Powell, for another reason . . . their point is, 'I'm right. Martin Luther King is dead. He's finished. His nonviolence is nothing, no one is listening to it.' Let's face it, we do have a great public relations setback where my image and my leadership are concerned." Levison disagreed, reminding King that the Memphis disruption had been caused by less than 1 percent of the participants, and that he should not accept any media portrayal of himself as a failure if 99 percent of his followers remained totally nonviolent. King acknowledged that, but insisted that the media reaction nonetheless would be extremely damaging, and explained how SCLC would have to stage a second, completely successful Memphis march in order to negate or overcome the damage from the first one.

King went on to tell Levison he was now deeply pessimistic about his own future and that of the Poor People's Campaign. "I think our Washington campaign is doomed." Even though he had long been "a symbol of nonviolence" to millions, in the press coverage of Thursday's disruption "everything will come out weakening the symbol. It will put many Negroes in doubt. It will put many Negroes in the position of saying, 'Well, that's true, Martin Luther King is at the end of his rope.'" Levison again responded that King ought not to accept the media's assumptions and parameters. "You can't keep them from imposing it," King answered. "You watch your newspapers. . . . I think it will be the most negative thing about Martin Luther King that you have ever seen."<sup>37</sup>

King's expectations proved largely correct. The *New York Times*, terming the Memphis violence "a powerful embarrassment to Dr. King," recommended he call off the Poor People's Campaign since it likely would prove counterproductive to his cause. "None of the precautions he and his aides are taking to keep the capital demonstration peaceful can provide any dependable insurance against another eruption of the kind that rocked Memphis."

King's frustration and despair manifested themselves at a tense and emotional Saturday meeting of SCLC's executive staff in Atlanta, where, after some difficulty, he succeeded in convincing his aides as to the necessity of both a second, completely peaceful march in Memphis and their fundamental rededication to going ahead with the Poor People's Campaign, come what may.<sup>38</sup>

On Wednesday, April 3, King returned to Memphis to aid in the preparations for that upcoming second march. That evening, at the cavernous Mason Temple church, before a modestly sized but emotionally enthusiastic crowd, King vowed that both the Memphis movement and the Poor People's Campaign would go forward. Then he turned to an emotional recapitulation of his own involvement in the preceding thirteen years of the black freedom struggle, expressing how happy and thankful he was that he had been given the opportunity to contribute to and live through the Montgomery boycott, the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the Albany campaign, the Birmingham demonstrations, the March on Washington, and the Selma protests. He closed with the same ending he had used more than eleven years earlier in Montgomery when he had first explained how the vision in the kitchen had given him the strength and the courage to keep going forward.

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned with that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, 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. And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, then, the most important thing to grasp and appreciate in seeking to comprehend Martin Luther King's own understanding of his life, his role, his burden, and his mission lies in that spiritual experience that began for him in the kitchen of 309 South Jackson St. on January 27, 1956. Martin King's awareness that his calling was to devote and ultimately to sacrifice his own individual life in the service of a great and just cause ennobled him as a human being, strengthened him as a leader, and allowed him to accept the symbolic role and accompanying fate that helped propel a struggle that the mature Martin King rightly recognized would be neverending.

# Aldon D. Morris

*A Man Prepared for the Times:*

*A Sociological Analysis of the Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

IT IS NO ACCIDENT THAT I have devoted considerable time to studying and writing about the civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was born in Mississippi and spent my early childhood there. I vividly remember the oppression, exploitation, and pain that I, and all black people, had to endure in the South of the 1950s. I knew firsthand how it felt to have yourself and adult role models called niggers and treated like slaves. I heard the low voices of adults crying with grief and fear when young Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi. I attended a resource-starved segregated colored school, but was well aware of the superior schools that my white counterparts enjoyed simply because of their skin color. I knew the grinding poverty of the black sharecropper and the feudal-like system committed to black subjugation. Although I was not sure exactly why, I knew as a young

child that a great injustice engulfed black people from birth to death.

By the time the civil rights movement exploded upon the national scene I, like many other blacks, had moved North seeking the promised land of equality. In the midst of pursuing this elusive goal, I was stunned and electrified by developments in the South as, day after day, television coverage showed black people were openly confronting white racism with determination, dignity, and courage. I identified with each of their triumphs and shared in their setbacks, pain, and noble suffering. My attention was riveted on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for his voice, eloquence, and deeds articulated the oppression of blacks to the world in such clear terms. It became clear to me that Dr. King was a genius at communicating the yearnings for freedom rooted in the very souls of black folks. At



to overcome any form of oppression. So that's why he called for serious study and experimentation with nonviolence in every field of human endeavor. That is what he has charged us with. He completed his work in thirty-nine years, in twelve years and four months of public life. So it has been left to us, although he left the blueprint for us to follow.

In talking to young people today on college campuses, they say to me, "I respect Dr. King. That worked back then, but it just won't work now." And I have to say to them it doesn't work because people don't understand it. They either don't understand it or they haven't tried it. It hasn't worked because not enough people have tried it. Nonviolence *will* work and *has* worked because it's based on those absolutes of eternal truths that have lasted throughout history. Martin found a way to develop them into a program of action because he had studied Gandhi. When he said, "I got my motivation and inspiration from Jesus and my techniques from Gandhi," that's what he meant. I've heard a lot about colonialism, how it shapes a whole mentality. Yes, but Gandhi made nonviolence work. I'm sure colonial oppression in India was pretty bad; if you talk to Indian people they will tell you how bad it was. But Gandhi did it; that's an example in that part of the world. King did what he did in a different part of the world—in the context of Western culture, Western materialistic culture. And more recently—in the Philippines—it was through *nonviolent* political action that one of the world's worst dictators was removed from power. Don't forget that. So I say that there's hope for South Africa, there's hope.

## Notes

### DAVID J. GARROW: "MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE SPIRIT OF LEADERSHIP"

1. For the WPC's crucial role, see David J. Garrow, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Southern Changes* 7 (Oct.-Dec. 1985):21-27, and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson's autobiographical memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville, 1987), as well as the author's interviews with both Mrs. Robinson (5 Apr. 1984, Los Angeles) and the WPC's first president, Mary Fair Burks (29 July 1984, Salisbury, Md.).

2. For fuller accounts of King's selection see David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 20-22, and Ralph D. Abernathy, "The Natural History of a Social Movement: The Montgomery Improvement Association" (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1958), 29-32, as well as the author's interviews with Rufus Lewis (16 Sept. 1979, Montgomery), E. D. Nixon (15 Sept. 1979, Montgomery), and Abernathy (14 Sept. 1979, Atlanta), and the additional oral histories with all three interviewees listed in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 749, 757, 759.

3. Peter C. Mohr, "Journey Out of Egypt: The Development of Negro Leadership in Alabama from Booker T. Washington to Martin Luther King" (B.A. thesis, Princeton University, 1958), 54, and Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York, 1958), 55-58.

4. Martin Luther King, Jr., Address at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 Dec. 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Ga. Also see *Montgomery Advertiser*, 6 and 7 Dec. 1955, and *Birmingham World*, 13 Dec. 1955.

5. *Alabama Journal* (Montgomery), 7 Dec. 1955. Also see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 14–16 and 23–25. On the WPC's earlier efforts, see Garrow, "Origins," and particularly Mrs. Robinson's extremely significant 21 May 1954 letter to Montgomery Mayor W. A. Gayle, in the boycott-related "Complaint File," Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, Montgomery County Courthouse, Montgomery, Ala., which is reprinted in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, A Reader and Guide* (New York, 1987), 41–42.

6. Ralph Abernathy in Dorothy Cotton, "A Conversation with Ralph Abernathy," *Journal* (United Church of Christ) 9 (Nov.–Dec. 1970): 26; Jo Ann Gibson Robinson in Steven M. Millner, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott: A Case Study in the Emergence and Career of a Social Movement," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1981), 199, and King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 113.

7. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 120. Also see *Montgomery Advertiser*, 20 Dec. 1955, and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 30–31.

8. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 121–23; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 51–52.

9. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 Jan. 1956.

10. William Peters, "The Man Who Fights Hate with Love," *Redbook*, 117 (Sept. 1961): 96. Also see King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 127–31, and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 55–56.

11. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Thou Fool," 27 Aug. 1967, Mt. Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, 11–14, King Papers, King Center. Also see idem, *Stride toward Freedom*, 134–35, and idem, *Strength to Love* (New York, 1963), 106–7, as well as James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King: The Source for His Courage to Face Death," *Concilium* 183 (1983): 74–79, and David J. Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Bearing the Cross of Leadership," *Peace and Change* 12 (1987): 1–12, for additional commentary on the centrality of this experience in King's life.

12. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 31 Jan. 1956. Also see *Afro-American*, 11 Feb. 1956; Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1969), 127–32; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 59–61.

13. Transcript of Martin Luther King, Jr., press conference, 23 Mar. 1956, quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 75.

14. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 Jan. 1957; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 Feb. 1957.

15. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Dwight Loder, 5 Aug. 1958, author's files; Fred Shuttlesworth to King, 24 Apr. 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers, Drawer 1, Mugar Library, Boston University; *Jet*, 17 Dec. 1959, 12–17. Also see King to Harold DeWolf, 4 Jan. 1957, Drawer 2, and King to Mordecai Johnson, 5 July 1957, Drawer 1, King Papers, Boston University. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 96, 116, 120–25. Given the exceptionally poor conditions under which the King collection at Boston University has been maintained over the years, citations to the locations of specific documents within it can only be approximate at best, as experienced King scholars have come to realize.

16. Andrew Young interview with Milton Viorst (1 May 1975, Washington, D.C.), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. Also see my interview with Young (27 July 1982, Atlanta), and comments of Young in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested* (New York, 1977), 425–27.

17. Martin Luther King, Jr., briefcase notes, n.d., King Papers, King Center; Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 14 Mar. 1965, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, Chicago, Ill., 5–6, Chicago Sunday Evening Club Papers, Chicago Historical Society; Andrew Young, "Bill Moyers' Journal," 2 Apr. 1979, Show 409, transcript, 7.

18. *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 1964; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 354–55.

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# ALDON D. MORRIS: "A MAN PREPARED FOR THE TIMES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LEADERSHIP OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR."

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