

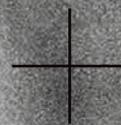
The Atlantic
Presents

The Life and Words
of Martin
Luther King Jr.

Coretta Scott King
and the Movement's
Hidden Women

John Legend and
Jesse Williams on
Art and Activism

January 15, 1929–April 4, 1968



Bernice A. King

John Lewis

Jesmyn Ward

Stokely Carmichael

LaToya Ruby Frazier

Matthew Desmond

Vann R. Newkirk II

Kara Walker

Rev. William J. Barber II

Eve L. Ewing

Jonathan Kozol

Benjamin Mays

Archibald MacLeish

A. Philip Randolph

Clint Smith

...And More



The Atlantic

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

*Creative Direction
The Original Champions of Design*

*Issue Editor
Burt Solomon*

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**DARKNESS CANNOT DRIVE OUT DARKNESS;
ONLY LIGHT CAN DO THAT.
HATE CANNOT DRIVE OUT HATE;
ONLY LOVE CAN DO THAT.**

Martin Luther King Jr.

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The Atlantic



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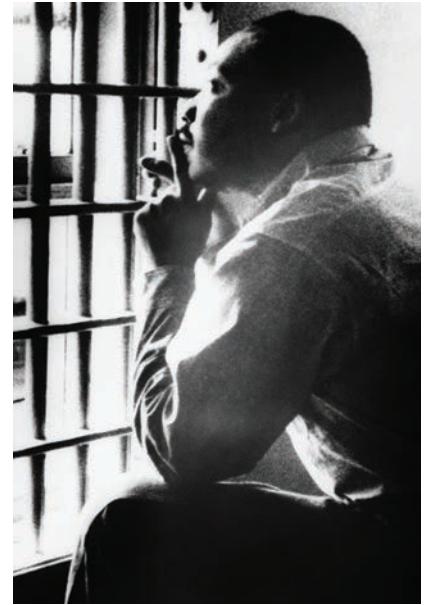
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A Dream Deferred

In 1868, the abolitionist and orator Anna E. Dickinson published *What Answer?*, a novel that explored, in a manner revolutionary for its time, the subject of interracial marriage. *The Atlantic* assigned its assistant editor, William Dean Howells, to review the book. Howells, who would later become the magazine's editor in chief, was, in the years following the Civil War, something of a racial optimist. He opened his review by recounting a story told to him by one of *The Atlantic's* most important contributors:

Mr. Frederick Douglass said the other day that times were when his color would secure him the advantage of a whole seat in a railroad car, but that since the war he was by no means safe from molestation. He told a good story of a citizen with conquered prejudices, who stirred him up out of his nap on the cars recently, and demanded a place beside him. "I'm a nigger," said Mr. Douglass, showing his head from beneath the shawl in which it had been wrapped. "I don't care *what* you are," answered the liberal-minded intruder; "I want a seat."

Howells seems to have derived too much hope from this story. He acknowledged

that some whites—in particular “those low-down Democrats who spell negro with two g’s”—would not allow expediency or reality to mitigate their enmity for black people. But he nevertheless argued that “there is a great deal to be hoped from human selfishness, fortunately, and we shall not despair of mankind while we all continue so full of egotistical desires and interested ambitions. *Pure* cussedness is much rarer than would appear.”

Howells's sanguinity, born of the recent Union victory and the seeming advances of Reconstruction, was premature. Whites would not, in sufficiently meaningful numbers, come to understand either the practical or the moral advantages of racial equality. Thirty-two years after Howells's review, W. E. B. Du Bois would write in these pages that the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” And 62 years after Du Bois made this prediction, *The Atlantic* would publish Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” under the title “The Negro Is Your Brother” (reprinted here on page 74). The letter, one of the immortal documents of American history, could be read as a refutation of post-Reconstruction

hopefulness, and as proof of the accuracy of Du Bois's prediction:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

The hope of well-meaning people is that the color line will not be the chief problem of the 21st century—but the analysis of realists, particularly in the wake of the 2016 presidential contest, indicates that matters of inequality and racism may be with us for decades to come.

When Vann R. Newkirk, one of our staff writers, and Adrienne Green, the magazine's managing editor, proposed that we publish a special edition to mark the 50th anniversary of King's assassination, I was intrigued, but also concerned that such an issue be an exploration of our fraught moment, and not merely a devotional artifact. My colleagues suggested that we use this opportunity to refract King's life through the prism of his three main preoccupations—the “three major evils,” as he called them—of racism, poverty, and militarism. Working with the entire magazine team, including Scott Stossel, the magazine's editor, and Burt Solomon, this project's editor, Newkirk and Green and their collaborators invested this issue with urgency, argument, beauty, and truth.

Howells, in his review of Dickinson's novel, aligned *The Atlantic's* “most earnest and hearty sympathies” with the cause of the “largest individual freedom.” This was Martin Luther King Jr.'s cause as well, and we are proud to advance it with this issue.

— Jeffrey Goldberg

Artist

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

*In a Nonviolent
Movement, Unmerited
Suffering Is Redemptive*

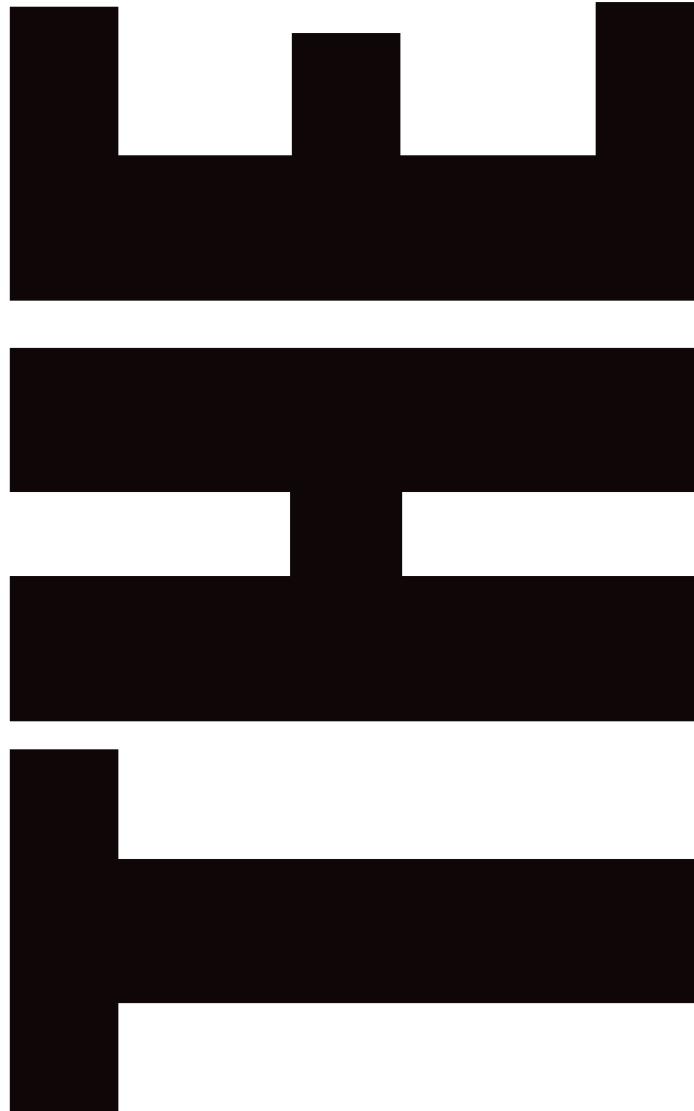
From the installation
“Ain't Gonna Let
Nobody Turn Us Around”
(2015-16)

**“THERE COMES A TIME WHEN
ONE MUST TAKE A POSITION
THAT IS NEITHER SAFE NOR POLITIC
NOR POPULAR, BUT HE MUST
DO IT BECAUSE CONSCIENCE TELLS
HIM IT IS RIGHT.”**

Martin Luther King Jr.

*From “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” a sermon delivered on
March 31, 1968, at the National Cathedral, in Washington, DC.*

Martin Luther King Jr.



MAMA



I.

*“Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can’t give up in life.”
From “A Christmas Sermon,” in 1967, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta*

Martin Luther King Jr. was more than his work and his words. He was a husband, father, pastor, theologian, and leader—a complex man shaped by his relationships even as he helped shape the country. Understanding the influences on his life is vital to decoding his legacy.

My Father Chose Nonviolence

By Bernice A. King

Martin Luther King Jr.'s younger daughter on continuing his legacy

Bernice A. King, the youngest child of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, was 5 years old when her father was assassinated. A mediator, orator, and minister, she has been the CEO of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, in Atlanta, since 2012.

» April 4, 2018, marks the 50th anniversary of the day my father, Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated. Many a historic moment has happened since then, reminding us that humanity will, in my father's words, either "live together as brothers"—and sisters—"or perish together as fools." At the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, we are concerned that humanity is widening the chasms that divide us, instead of building bridges that can move us ahead. This is why the theme for our commemoration of this anniversary is "MLK50 Forward: Together We Win, With Love for Humanity."

Now more than ever, I believe that my father would encourage humanity to join together in love, commit to assisting people around the globe, and travel the path of nonviolence toward the "beloved community"—a society, as he envisioned it, of justice and equal opportunity. Kingian nonviolence is a way of thinking and living, and is not confined to the work of social and systemic change. Nonviolence365, as the King Center now trademarks its program of Kingian nonviolence, strongly and strategically facilitates change, both of systems and of hearts.

Nonviolence365 is love-centered. Love is not a weak, spineless emotion; it is a powerful, moral force on the side of justice. Nonviolence365 seeks not false peace, which accepts injustice as long as there is no physical violence, but true peace, about which my father stated: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Nonviolence365 is not passive. It does act, but with the ultimate goal of a more just, peaceful, and humane world.

Imagine a critical mass of global citizens working together to engage issues and individuals with Nonviolence365. My father imagined. My mother, Coretta Scott King, imagined. I imagine.

Beyond imagining, there are three actions that I believe my father would articulate today to help us harness redemptive goodwill and choose nonviolence.

The first action is to be what he phrased as "creatively maladjusted." We cannot afford to regard as normal the presence of injustice, inhumanity, and

violence, including their verbal and cyber manifestations. We must refuse to adjust to ideals and policies that crush families, lay waste to communities, and yield refugees across the globe. When we decide not to accept what should be unacceptable, we begin to open ourselves up to the mental attitude and spiritual altitude to build the beloved community.

The second action is to serve as a force of light. My father stated, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." This is often quoted, but I'm concerned that we seldom realize he was expressing both a physical and a spiritual truth. When we show up as light in dark places, the darkness must depart. If we become darkness in response to darkness, then we perpetuate a descending spiral of hate and hopelessness. Each of us must decide whether it is more important to be proved right or to provoke righteousness.

The third action is to understand that we inhabit what my father described as a "world house"—a diverse, multicultural, dynamic house in which each nation represents a room. For our house to survive, we cannot look away when one of the rooms is in flames. And certainly we should not exacerbate the fire, or the whole house will eventually burn down.

If we remain in the grasp of nationalism, patriarchy, class conflict, racism, and religious bigotry, we will continue to be dehumanized—and destroyed—by poverty, genocide, slavery, and war. But the realization that we are all connected will make us more engaged in every area of human life, including our community.

I am hopeful. I have no doubt that my father, too, would be hopeful, even as our nation and our world grapple with a resurgence of divisive discourse and polarizing policies. As he told us, "The believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future."

On the evening before he was killed, my father shared his final message. "It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world," he said. "It's nonviolence or nonexistence." As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of his death, I implore us all to choose nonviolence and to embrace the spirit of "Together we win, with love for humanity." 

Before King was King

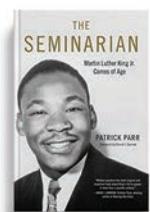
By Patrick Parr

LETTERING BY ADÉ HOGUE

Before Martin Luther King Jr. became a great man, he was a young man, and he often acted like one. In *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age*, to be published this spring, Patrick Parr focuses on the future icon's three years at Crozer Theological Seminary, in Chester, Pennsylvania, from 1948 to 1951. Surrounded by white professors and staff and a predominantly white student body, he became the student-body president. But long before King entered the seminary as a 19-year-old college graduate, this son of a leading black preacher in Atlanta had already felt the humiliations of racial segregation. ¶ The excerpts here reveal competing facets of the young King: the first, as the angry

victim in the incident that inspired his passion for social change; the second, as a fun-loving, chain-smoking, pool-playing student. Throughout the book, Parr refers to his subject as "ML," the nickname his family and most of his friends used at the time.

As a 15-year-old in high school, in 1944, King traveled by public bus with a schoolmate, Hiram Kendall, and their teacher Sarah Grace Bradley from Atlanta to Dublin, Georgia, about 140 miles away, to participate in an oratorical contest. His speech, a modulated yet spirited call for equal rights, did not win, but what happened on the trip home shaped the rest of his life.



**THE
SEMINARIAN:**
Martin Luther
King Jr.
Comes of Age
Patrick Parr
CHICAGO
REVIEW

A

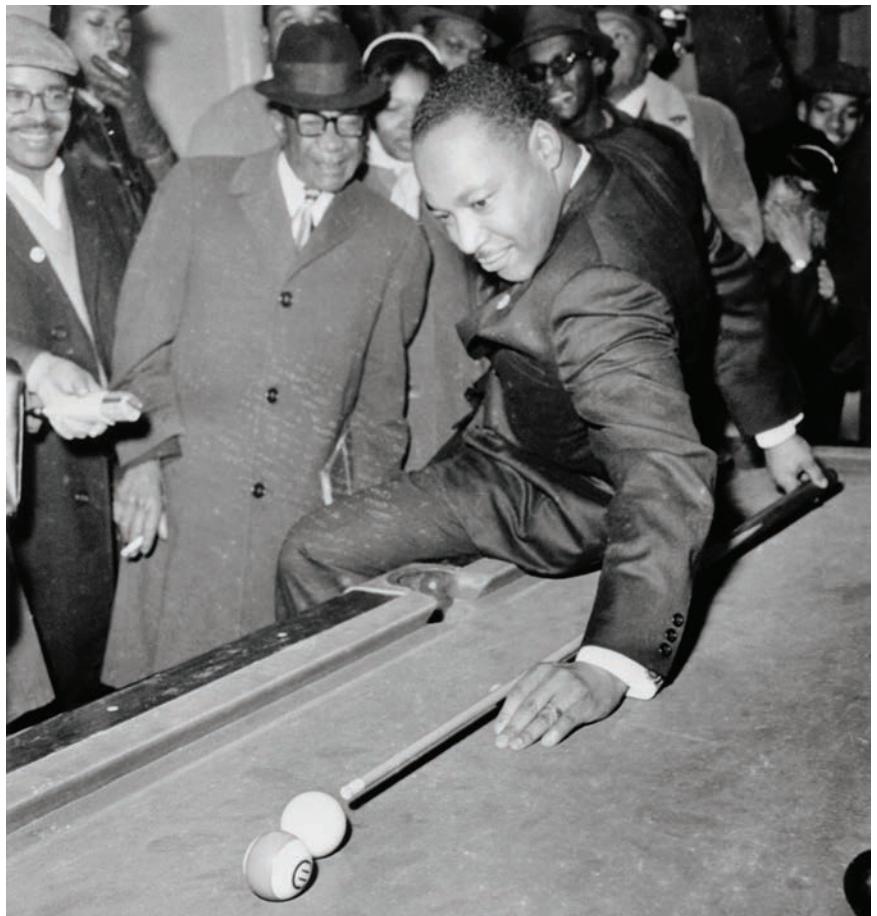
fter an hour of driving, the bus stopped in the city of Macon, and a crowd of white passengers started to board. Before this rush, the black passengers were free to sit anywhere, and ML and Hiram had seated themselves toward the front. But as soon as seats became scarce, the white bus driver stared at ML and Hiram and “ordered us to get up and give the whites our seats,” King later recalled. At first, ML and Hiram did nothing, ignoring the escalating tension. “We didn’t move quickly enough to suit him, so he began cursing us.” With white passengers standing in the aisle, the bus driver demanded ML and Hiram move out of their seats, calling them “niggers” and “black sons of bitches” ...

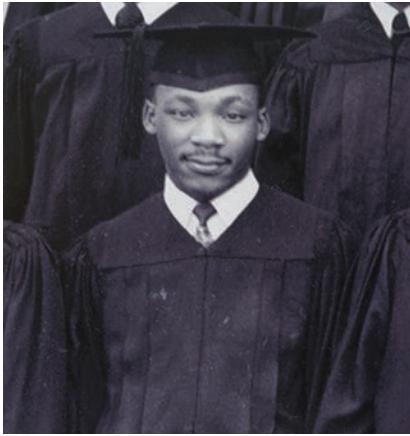
Miss Bradley swooped in to resolve the matter. According to ML, “Mrs. Bradley urged me up, saying we had to obey the law.” Anger boiled within as he was pressed to capitulate to the racist system he had just railed against in his speech. “I refused to go to the back of the bus,” but “the teacher pleaded with me. She said it would be advisable.” Eventually, with passengers looking on and the bus ride at a standstill, ML reluctantly gave in.

ML, Hiram, and Miss Bradley walked to the back of the bus and grabbed a handle. “I had to stand all the way to Atlanta,” King remembered decades later, his anger still there. As the bus went up the rural highway, ML had nothing to look at but seated white people and the darkness outside. “It was late at night and I was tired, but that wasn’t the point. It was the humiliation.” For ninety miles, ML barely

TOP: King (*front row, third from left*) enters Morehouse College at age 15, having skipped two years of high school.

BOTTOM: A pool shark flaunts his technique during a 1966 anti-slum campaign in Chicago.





kept his contained anger at bay. “That night will never leave my memory,” he said. “It was the angriest I have ever been in my life.” Yes, he’d been angry at Miss Bradley for pushing him to leave his seat, but, far more, he resented the “chains” of America that had shackled him to the back of the bus. “Suddenly I realized you don’t count, you’re nobody.”

Embarrassed by the emotionalism—“the shouting and the stomping”—of black religion, the young King considered careers in law and medicine. He enrolled at Morehouse College, in Atlanta, where he wound up majoring in sociology. But his continuing desire to bring social change ultimately led him to enter Crozer, a Protestant seminary near Philadelphia.

In September 1944, fifteen-year-old Morehouse freshman Martin Luther King Jr. needed a haircut. He’d heard about a fellow student who cut hair in the basement of the college’s Graves Hall. The barber, named Walter McCall, was a twenty-one-year-old army veteran. ML heard that he was cutting hair for a dime, so he went to him and gave it a try.

After one cut, McCall asked for the dime. ML explained that he didn’t have a coin on him but that he’d pay him later. This idea of an IOU system did

King graduates from Morehouse as a protégé of its president, Benjamin Mays.

not sit well with McCall. *You and I both know you have a dime*, he insisted. “Man. I haven’t got it now,” ML replied. “So there’s nothing you can do about it, unless you want to go to the grass.” The phrase “go to the grass” was new to McCall, but he knew what it meant: King believed he could take him in a fight. McCall tackled his customer and they wrestled on the floor—a vet fighting a teenager. The pushing and shoving eventually made its way outside onto the lawn, their bout intense enough to attract other students. For those who saw the fight, many expected the older soldier to easily beat up on the smaller, less experienced ML. But for one of the few times in ML’s young life, he fought back, and he earned the vet’s respect.

The two young men quickly became friends. “I always called him ‘Mike’ and he called me ‘Mac,’” said McCall years later. They bonded despite being opposites in almost every way. ML was cautious and reserved, living comfortably ... as the son of a successful preacher. McCall was bolder and louder, and always struggling to make ends meet ... In a way, each friend had what the other wanted: Mac envied ML’s financial situation and parental support, while ML longed for Mac’s hard-earned life experience and his knack for livening up any social encounter.

McCall served as a constant reminder to his friend that there was more to experience than classes and church. During their years at Morehouse, they held secret dance parties at ML’s home while Daddy and Mama King were out. “One night I remember so well—boy, we had a good time going,” said McCall. “The old man [Daddy King] ... stood at the door to listen to the music and he peeped through the keyhole and we didn’t know it. All of a sudden he burst into the house and there we were just swinging away into the night” ...

Though their economic differences caused some tension, ML and Mac were inseparable [at Crozer, where Mac arrived a semester after ML], and Mac’s presence in [the seminary’s central building of] Old Main transformed ML’s social life. In the first term, ML had been reluctant to put himself into social situations on campus, but soon he and Mac were holding court in the recreation room below the chapel. “We

played pool until sometimes three o’clock in the morning,” Mac said. They would turn the ceiling into a cloud of cigarette smoke as they played, getting to know the other students who joined in the game. The pair would also play cards until late at night, Mac’s choice of background music—like Johnny Mercer’s “Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive”—helping to alleviate ML’s stress ...

The Mike and Mac show most definitely had a center of gravity: women. Ever since their days as self-proclaimed “wreckers” at Morehouse College, ML and Mac used their juxtaposed personalities to the benefit of nabbing dates. Quiet yet sophisticated? Talk to ML. Bombastic yet slightly offbeat? Mac could be your kind of man. And with Mac by his side, never judging, ML found it easier to be bold. So when the two briefly worked together washing dishes in the Old Main kitchen, his friend’s presence encouraged him to pursue a possibility he’d previously been too timid to explore ...

ML’s own feelings for Betty [Moitz] were something he tried to keep secret. Though he’d even written to his mother about his other recent dating prospects, he would not have been at all eager to inform Mama King that he was interested in a young white woman. Mac knew, of course, but he saw no harm in helping his best friend separate himself even further from racial norms they both believed were outdated. And though a few other students took note of ML and Betty’s friendly dialogue—it was, after all, a small world inside Old Main—no one seemed too bothered. [Their fellow seminarian] Marcus Wood in particular understood some of what spurred ML’s attraction: “I supposed he thought that, here I am out of the South now, and not back home ... out in the open, nothing illegal, a free place, sure I can go over and talk to this white girl” ...

ML felt at ease with Betty. “He would talk, and talk and talk,” Betty says. More than anything, she enjoyed his rumbling enthusiasm and his sincerity. At first they discussed his time in the South and how different it was from the idealized culture within the seminary. He didn’t yet know how but, according to Betty, “one thing ML knew at age nineteen was that he could change the world.” **A**

The Arc of a Life

Martin Luther King Jr. was just 26 when he came to prominence, by leading a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. He was only 39 when he was killed.

By Eli Lee

“I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’”

From his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon, delivered on April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee

January 15, 1929:

Michael King Jr. is born in Atlanta to Michael King Sr., a prominent local preacher and civil-rights leader, and Alberta King, a former schoolteacher. In 1934, his father changes both of their first names to Martin—by various accounts, to correct a birth-certificate mistake or to honor the theologian Martin Luther. His childhood is comfortable; he excels in school, skipping the ninth and 12th grades. He first becomes conscious of racism at age 6, when a white friend’s father prohibits his son from playing with Martin.



June 8, 1948:

King graduates from Morehouse College, in Atlanta, with a bachelor’s degree in sociology. Later, he earns a bachelor-of-divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary, in Chester, Pennsylvania, and a doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University. (In 1991, a BU committee would determine that King had plagiarized passages of his dissertation, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” from other scholars’ work.)

June 18, 1953:

King marries Coretta Scott, an activist and aspiring singer from Alabama studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. After his death, she would advance her husband’s legacy by founding the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.



1955–56: Activists organize a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks, a black woman, is arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. A former head of the state’s NAACP calls on King, now the 26-year-old pastor of a local black church, to lead the boycott—because he’s “young and intelligent with leadership ability” and has a “wonderful speaking voice.” The protest lasts 381 days, ending in victory after the U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional.

January 10–11, 1957:

Notables in the civil-rights movement form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to coordinate nonviolent protest actions in the South. They soon elect King as the organization’s president.



February 1959:

At the invitation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, King visits India for a month, meeting with social reformers, government officials, and associates of the late Mahatma Gandhi, whose acts of civil disobedience to free the country from British rule inspired King's own approach to bringing about change. "I left India more convinced than ever before," King writes at the time, "that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."



April 4, 1968:

While in Memphis to protest black sanitation workers' poor treatment by the city, King is shot as he stands on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel. He is declared dead about an hour later. The murderer, James Earl Ray, flees the country and is arrested two months later at Heathrow Airport, in London; he is known to be a racist, but his exact motive is never made clear. (Sentenced to 99 years in prison, he dies of natural causes in 1998.) The assassination sparks riots in more than 100 U.S. cities. President Lyndon B. Johnson declares a national day of mourning.



August 28, 1963: At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, then the largest protest in U.S. history, King addresses an estimated 250,000 people on the National Mall. His soaring call for racial justice comes to be known as the "I Have a Dream" speech, after his ad-libbed ending. Today, the speech is seen as both a rhetorical masterpiece and a defining moment of the civil-rights movement.

March 1965:

In response to the continued disenfranchisement of millions of black people across the South, the SCLC and other civil-rights groups demand voting rights in a 54-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery. Local police and white mobs react brutally to the non-violent protest, beating many participants; two white demonstrators are murdered. The march hastens passage of the federal Voting Rights Act later in the year.

April 4, 1967:

In a speech titled "Beyond Vietnam," delivered at Riverside Church in Manhattan, King declares his opposition to the Vietnam War. He publicly criticized the war two months earlier, in a speech to the Nation Institute (see page 92). But the widely publicized Riverside Church speech upsets many of King's usual allies, who accuse him of hurting the cause of civil rights by alienating the American government and public. With this stand, King expands his calls for social justice at home into a broader, pacifist message.



December 10, 1964:
King receives the Nobel Peace Prize. At age 35, he is its youngest recipient so far. He promises to donate the prize's \$54,123 award to the civil-rights movement.

November 2, 1983:

After years of advocacy from labor unions and civil-rights groups, President Ronald Reagan signs legislation to commemorate the slain leader's birthday with a federal holiday on the third Monday in January. Martin Luther King Jr. Day is celebrated nationwide for the first time in 1986.

An interview with John Lewis

King Inspired Me to Get in Trouble

John Lewis, now a Georgia congressman, was the teenage son of Alabama sharecroppers when he first met Martin Luther King Jr., 60 years ago. One of the last surviving members of King's inner circle, the 78-year-old Lewis is an icon of the movement. Here, he recalls what it was like to know King and to hear the messages that shape the world today.

By **Vann R. Newkirk II**

This interview has been edited and shortened for clarity.



RALPH ABERNATHY

JAMES FORMAN

VANN R. NEWKIRK II: Especially for young folks, who know him only from history books, tell us what it was like to know Dr. King.

JOHN LEWIS: I grew up about 50 miles from Montgomery. Growing up there as a young child, I tasted the bitter fruits of racism. I saw the signs that said WHITE MEN, COLORED MEN; WHITE WOMEN, COLORED WOMEN; WHITE WAITING, COLORED WAITING. And I would ask my mother, my father, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents why. They would say, "That's the way it is. Don't go getting in trouble."

But in 1955, at 15 years old, I heard of Dr. King, and I heard of Rosa Parks. They inspired me to get in trouble. I

remember meeting Rosa Parks as a student. In 1957, I wrote Dr. King a letter and told him that I wanted to attend a little [whites-only] college 10 miles from my home—Troy State College, known today as Troy University. I submitted my application and my high-school transcript. I never heard a word from the school, so that gave me the idea that I should write Dr. King.

In the meantime, I had been accepted to a little college in Nashville, Tennessee, so I went off to school there. King heard that I was there and got in touch with me. He told me that when I was back home for spring break, to go and see him in Montgomery.

NEWKIRK: How did that first meeting go?



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

JESSE DOUGLAS

JOHN LEWIS

LEWIS: A young lawyer met me at the Greyhound bus station and drove me to the First Baptist Church—pastored by Ralph Abernathy—and ushered me into the office. I saw Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy standing behind a desk and was so scared that I didn't know what to do. Dr. King said, "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?" And I said, "I am John Robert Lewis"—I gave my whole name. And he still called me "the boy from Troy"! He told me to go back and have a discussion with my mother and my father. He said they could lose their land; their home could be burned or bombed. But if I got the okay from them, we would file a suit against Troy State and against the state



of Alabama, and I would get admitted to the school. I had a discussion with my mother and my father, and they were terribly afraid, so I continued to study in Nashville.

It was in Nashville that I got involved in the sit-ins and, later, the Freedom Rides. We were beaten and left bloody and unconscious at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery during the Freedom Rides in '61. King was there, at the same church where I first met him and Reverend Abernathy. [A white mob] attempted to burn the church or bomb the church, and King made a call to [Attorney General] Robert Kennedy, and [he] intervened and put the city of Montgomery under martial law. That probably

King leads the five-day, 54-mile march for voting rights in 1965, from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery. Lewis was 25 years old at the time.



King and Lewis (left) sing “We Shall Overcome” during a 1966 march from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. The gospel song’s lyrics derive from a 1901 hymn, “I’ll Overcome Some Day.”

“He taught me to be hopeful, to be optimistic, to never get lost in despair, to never become bitter, and to never hate.”

kept us alive and kept people from burning or bombing the church.

I saw King so many times afterward—during the end of the Freedom Rides and during our efforts to desegregate places all across the South. He inspired me. He lifted me. He was a brave and courageous person, and when you would listen to him speak or talk to you, you were ready to go out there and put your life on the line, because he made it so plain and so clear that it was the right thing to do. He taught me to be hopeful, to be optimistic, to never get lost in despair, to never become bitter, and to never hate.

NEWKIRK: You marched with Dr. King at the March on Washington, in 1963, and spoke at the Lincoln Memorial. What was that like?

LEWIS: Some people were concerned about what I had planned to say in my speech. I had a line in there saying something like, “If we do not see meaningful progress here today, the day may come when we do not confine our march to Washington, but we may be forced to march through the South the way Sherman did, nonviolently.” Dr. King said to me, “John, that doesn’t sound like you! Can you change that?” I couldn’t say no to Mr. A. Philip Randolph, who was the dean of black leadership. I couldn’t say no to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We made those changes, but my speech still came across okay.

NEWKIRK: It’s been 50 years since Dr. King was killed. How much further do we need to go in order to achieve the things he hoped for?

LEWIS: There are forces in the South today that are trying to make it harder for

students, young people, senior citizens, and people of color to participate in the democratic process, and there’s still a need to dramatize the issue. There’s still a need to speak up—speak out—and there’s still a need for marches, now more than ever before.

NEWKIRK: Dr. King spoke of the three evils of racism, poverty, and militarism. Which of these do you think presents the biggest challenge today in America?

LEWIS: I’d say all three. There are people in high places today that feel at home saying racist things and trying to sweep some of the problems and issues that we have to confront under the American rug or in some dark corner, and we cannot let that happen.

We have to continue to do what we can to rid the country of racism, and do what we can—and what we must—to end hunger and poverty. It doesn’t make sense to live in a country that is so wealthy, so rich, and their people still lack food and health care. And we have to stop spending hundreds, thousands, millions, and billions of dollars on militarism.

That’s why we have to get people to participate in the democratic process—to register to vote on every occasion when there is an election. I gave a little blood on that bridge in Selma [during the voting-rights march to Montgomery, in 1965]. I almost died on that bridge, and as long as I have breath in my body, I think I will be inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. Forever I’m indebted to him, and I will do what I can to see that all people have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

NEWKIRK: Are you worried that the forces you fought are becoming resurgent and gaining new power?

LEWIS: I’m worried. I’m deeply concerned. We saw what happened [during the white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia]. I thought we had passed that phase of American life. To read about what happened, to watch it on television—it made me sad. It made me cry. I think there’s a climate and environment in America today, and there are individuals in high places that are saying, in effect, “We’re not going to let you go any further. We’re going to stop you here.” And they have been supported by some elected officials and encouraged by a Klan-racist element in our society. We cannot let that happen. **A**

“Women Have Been the Backbone of the Whole Civil Rights Movement”

Coretta Scott King was far more than her husband's helpmate. She was one of many women whose leadership was hidden in plain sight.

By Jeanne Theoharis

The FBI was worried about King. The civil-rights leader was tightening the movement's ties to anti-war activists. So the bureau stepped up its surveillance.

The target was not Martin Luther King Jr. but Coretta Scott King. The FBI's fears about the connections she was forging only increased after her husband was killed. For years, agents closely monitored her activities and read her personal letters, keeping Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and others in Richard Nixon's administration informed.

The popular narrative of the civil-rights movement too often relies on a “great man” version of history—King, Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, Stokely Carmichael, John Lewis. Coretta Scott King illuminates the importance of the women who also organized and led the movement, and shows how their contributions have been sidelined, hidden in plain sight. Remembering Scott King's career also disrupts the tendency to safely relegate Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil-rights movement to a sepia-toned past. Her leadership reminds us that the movement and its visionaries have endured.

Coretta Scott King's popular image has largely been detached from her life-long politics. After she died, in 2006, she was celebrated in the media as “kind and gentle,” “obedient,” and “beautiful”—mainly as her husband's “helpmate” rather than as an activist in her own right. “The media never understood Martin,” she once observed, “so they will never understand Coretta.” The caricatures of them as dreamy leader and beautiful helpmate miss the breadth of their political commitments and the diversity of issues they took on.

Coretta Scott King joins an antinuclear protest on the United Nations Plaza in New York City, in 1963.





Three weeks after her husband's death, Scott King speaks in his place at an anti-war rally in Central Park.

A famous image from King's funeral shows her seated in a pew, dressed in black, stoic and veiled. In many ways, she has been trapped behind that veil, rendered as a sort of martyred mother figure who would redeem the nation by sacrificing her husband. "I am made to sound like an attachment to a vacuum cleaner," a friend recalled her saying, "the wife of Martin, then the widow of Martin, all of which I was proud to be. But I was never just a wife, nor a widow. I was always more than a label."

Her activism started before her marriage, then complemented and influenced her husband's political work, and continued long after his assassination, in 1968. She did more than protect her husband's legacy; she expanded it and kept it relevant. "I am an activist," she said eight years after his death. "I didn't just emerge after Martin died—I was always there and involved." She campaigned for global peace and for racial and social justice until her death, at age 78.

Born in 1927 near Marion, Alabama, Coretta Scott's childhood was marked by racial violence. When she was a teenager, her family's home and her father's

sawmill were burned to the ground by whites who, the Scotts believed, resented the family for its economic independence. She graduated high school as the class valedictorian and attended Antioch College, in Ohio, where she became involved in the campus NAACP and other race- and peace-related activities. She challenged a ban on letting blacks student-teach in local schools and supported Henry Wallace's Progressive Party bid for the presidency in 1948.

When she met her future husband, she was more involved in politics than he was. Part of their mutual attraction was political, as letters between them reveal. Fifteen months after marrying, they moved to Montgomery, Alabama, for his job as a pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. In the boycott he led of the city's segregated buses, his wife played a decisive role. Eight weeks into the 381-day boycott, their house was bombed. Scott King and their 10-week-old firstborn, Yolanda, were at home but escaped uninjured. Terrified by the violence, Scott King's father and father-in-law urged the family—or at least her and the baby—to leave. She refused. "I

realized how important it was for me to stand with Martin," she recalled in a 1966 essay in *New Lady* magazine. Over breakfast, her husband told her, "Coretta, you have been a real soldier. You were the only one who stood with me."

Had she flinched, the trajectory of the bus boycott and the emerging civil-rights movement might have been different. But she stayed on, fielding hundreds of hate calls and helping her husband brave death threats, public condemnation, city officials' harassment, and dissent among the protesters about how to proceed. The boycott's success led the Kings to imagine something grander, which took shape in early 1957 in the form of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Scott King was hardly the only woman who sustained the boycott that catapulted her husband to prominence. The Women's Political Council of Montgomery and its president, Jo Ann Robinson, were the first to call for the boycott, which had begun when Rosa Parks, a civil-rights activist for more than two decades, refused to give up her bus seat to a white man on December 1, 1955. Parks soon lost her job as a department store's assistant tailor, then spent the next year crisscrossing the country, raising money and helping turn a local boycott into a nationally publicized struggle. Two groups of black women held food sales to raise money for the carpools that kept the protest going. Aurelia Browder and three other women signed on as plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit that eventually prompted the Supreme Court's decision desegregating the city's buses.

Far beyond Montgomery, women played important roles in the civil-rights movement. In Boston, black mothers such as Ruth Batson and Ellen Jackson led a decades-long campaign that culminated in a federal judge's 1974 order to use busing to desegregate the city's public schools. In Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson headed a campaign focused on economic rights and desegregation. Ella Baker served as the NAACP's director of branch chapters and then headed to Atlanta to work for the SCLC, where she helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. At SNCC, Diane Nash helped keep the Freedom Rides going, and Fannie Lou Hamer and other women led the fight to register voters in Mississippi.

Asked whether he had educated his wife about anti-war issues, King said, “She educated me.”

“Women have been the backbone of the whole civil rights movement,” Scott King observed in *New Lady*. In Montgomery, after Rosa Parks triggered the bus boycott, it was mostly women—maids, cooks, and such—who found other means of getting to their jobs. “Women have been the ones who have made it possible for the movement to be a mass movement,” Scott King said.

She knew that she, too, had something to contribute to the world, beyond staying home to raise their four children, as her husband expected. And she did. Two of the issues Scott King championed—world peace and economic justice—are often airbrushed from our national celebrations of her husband. She was present at the creation of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1957 and represented Women’s Strike for Peace at a nuclear-disarmament conference in Geneva in 1962. When her husband received the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1964, she impressed upon him the role he must play in pursuing world peace. She considered it her burden, as well.

Notably, she pushed him to come out publicly against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He held back, fearing criticism, but she did not. In 1965, she addressed an anti-war rally at Madison Square Garden, in New York. Later that year, she took her husband’s place when he changed his mind about addressing a peace rally in Washington, D.C. Asked whether he had educated his wife on these issues, he said, “She educated me.” Not until early 1967 did he publicly oppose the war (see “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,” page 92).

Four days after her husband was murdered, she flew to Memphis, where he had gone to support a sanitation workers’ strike, and led a march in his stead. Three weeks later, she delivered his planned speech at an anti-war protest in New York’s Central Park.

She was resolute that the best memorial was continued activism. King’s assassination opened up a more public role for her. Later that spring, she helped lead the Poor People’s Campaign, which he had conceived in hopes of forcing the government—and the nation—to confront the realities of American poverty. From the balcony of Memphis’s Lorraine Motel, where her husband had been shot, she rallied support for the southern

caravan of Washington-bound protesters and declared a dream of her own, “where not some but all of God’s children have food, where not some but all of God’s children have decent housing, where not some but all of God’s children have a guaranteed annual income in keeping with the principles of liberty and grace.” She addressed some 50,000 people in June at the Lincoln Memorial, connecting the scourges of racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War.

After the Poor People’s Campaign ended, her activism continued. She spoke at rallies, lobbied Congress to reject cuts in welfare spending, and advocated a full-employment bill and a guaranteed annual income. In the 1980s, she joined the campaign against apartheid in South Africa, getting arrested outside the embassy in Washington, and met with President Ronald Reagan to press the case. In the late 1990s, she became an advocate for gay rights and same-sex marriage. This drew condemnation from some civil-rights leaders. But she connected the expansion of gay rights to the struggle for racial justice, quoting her late husband: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Adamant until her death that the civil-rights movement wasn’t over, Coretta Scott King saw true freedom as far more than a seat at the front of the bus. It meant addressing the economic, racial, and gender inequalities at the heart of American society. [A](#)

Jeanne Theoharis is a political-science professor at Brooklyn College and the author of a biography of Rosa Parks. Her latest book is *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*.

Eulogy for the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

By Benjamin Mays

1968

*Benjamin Mays was the president of Morehouse College, in Atlanta, while Martin Luther King Jr. was a student there, and the two became friends. King considered Mays his “spiritual mentor” and “intellectual father.” Mays was 70 years old—no longer the college’s president but a civil-rights leader—when he delivered King’s eulogy, at Morehouse, on April 9, 1968. It was later published in *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, by the University of Georgia Press.*



LARRY BURROWS/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY; AP

To be honored by being requested to give the eulogy at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is like being asked to eulogize a deceased son—so close and so precious was he to me. Our friendship goes back to his student days at Morehouse College. It is not an easy task; nevertheless, I accept it, with a sad heart, and with full knowledge of my inadequacy to do justice to this man. It was my desire that if I pre-deceased Dr. King he would pay tribute to me on my final day. It was his wish that if he pre-deceased me I would deliver the homily at his funeral. Fate has decreed that I eulogize him. I wish it might have been otherwise, for, after all, I am three score years and ten and Martin Luther is dead at thirty-nine.

Although there are some who rejoice in his death, there are millions across the length and breadth of this world who are smitten with grief that this friend of mankind—all mankind—has been cut down in the flower of his youth. So multitudes here and in foreign lands, queens, kings, heads of governments, the clergy of the world, and the common man everywhere are praying that God will be with the family, the American people, and the President of the United States in this tragic hour. We hope that this universal concern will bring comfort to the family—for grief is like a heavy load: when shared it is easier to bear. We come today to help the family carry the load.

We have assembled here from every section of this great nation and from other parts of the world to give thanks to God that he gave to America, at this moment in history, Martin Luther King Jr. Truly God is no respecter of persons. How strange! God called the grandson of a slave on his father's side, and the grandson of a man born during the Civil War on his mother's side, and said to him: *Martin Luther, speak to America about war and peace; about social justice and racial discrimination; about its obligation to the poor; and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war.*

Here was a man who believed with all of his might that the pursuit of violence at any time is ethically and morally wrong; that God and the moral weight of the universe are against it; that violence is self-defeating; and that only love and forgiveness can break the vicious circle of revenge. He believed that nonviolence would prove effective in the abolition of injustice in politics, in economics, in education, and in race relations. He was convinced also that people could not be moved to abolish voluntarily the inhumanity of man to man by mere persuasion and pleading, but that they could be moved to do so by dramatizing the evil through massive nonviolent resistance. He believed that nonviolent direct action was necessary to supplement the nonviolent victories won in federal courts. He believed that the nonviolent approach to solving social problems would ultimately prove to be redemptive.

Out of this conviction, history records the marches in Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, Chicago, and other cities.

He gave people an ethical and moral way to engage in activities designed to perfect social change without bloodshed and violence; and when violence did erupt it was that which is potential in any protest which aims to uproot deeply entrenched wrongs. No reasonable person would deny that the activities and the personality of Martin Luther King Jr. contributed largely to the success of the student sit-in movements in abolishing segregation in downtown establishments; and that his activities contributed mightily to the passage of the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965.

Martin Luther King Jr. believed in a united America. He believed that the walls of separation brought on by legal and de facto segregation, and discrimination based on race and color, could be eradicated. As he said in his [Lincoln Memorial] address: *“I have a dream!”*

He had faith in his country. He died striving to desegregate and integrate America to the end that this great nation of ours, born in revolution and blood, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal, will truly become the lighthouse of freedom where none will be denied because his skin is black and none favored because his eyes are blue; where our nation will be militarily strong but perpetually at peace; economically secure but just; learned but wise; where the poorest—the garbage collectors—will have bread enough and to spare; where no one will be poorly housed; each educated up to his capacity; and where the richest will understand the meaning of empathy. *This* was his dream, and the end toward which he strove. As he and his followers so often sang: *“We shall overcome someday; black and white together.”*

Let it be thoroughly understood that our deceased brother did not embrace nonviolence out of fear or cowardice. Moral courage was one of his noblest virtues. As Mahatma Gandhi challenged the British Empire without a sword and won, Martin Luther King Jr. challenged the interracial wrongs of his country without a gun. And he had the faith to believe that he would win the battle for social justice. I make bold to assert that it took more courage for King to practice nonviolence than it took for his assassin to fire the fatal shot. The assassin is

a coward: he committed his dastardly deed and fled. When Martin Luther disobeyed an unjust law, he accepted the consequences of his actions. He never ran away and he never begged for mercy. He returned to the Birmingham Jail to serve his time.

Perhaps he was more courageous than soldiers who fight and die on the battlefield. There is an element of compulsion in their dying. But when Martin Luther faced death again and again, and finally embraced it, there was no pressure. He was acting on an inner compulsion that drove him on. More courageous than those who advocate violence as a way out, for they carry weapons of destruction for defense. But Martin Luther faced the dogs, the police, jail, heavy criticism, and finally death, and he never carried a gun, not even a knife, to defend himself. He had only his faith in a just God to rely on; and the belief that “thrice is he armed that hath his quarrels just.” The faith that Browning writes about when he said: “One who never turned his back but marched breast forward, / Never doubted clouds would break, / Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph, / Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, / Sleep to wake.”

Coupled with moral courage was Martin Luther King Jr.’s capacity to love people. Though deeply committed to a program of freedom for Negroes, he had love and concern for all kinds of peoples. He drew no distinction between the high and the low; none between the rich and the poor. He believed especially that he was sent to champion the cause of the man farthest down. He would probably say that *if death had to come, I am sure there was no greater cause to die for than fighting to get a just wage for garbage collectors*. He was supra-class, and supra-culture. He belonged to the world and mankind. Now he belongs to posterity.

But there is a dichotomy in all this. This man was loved by some and hated by others. If any man knew the meaning of suffering, King knew. House bombed; living day by day for thirteen years under constant threats of death; maliciously accused of being a Communist; falsely accused of being insincere and seeking the limelight for his own glory; stabbed by a member of his own race; slugged in a hotel lobby; jailed thirty

“I make bold to assert that it took more courage for King to practice nonviolence than it took for his assassin to fire the fatal shot.”

times; occasionally deeply hurt because friends betrayed him—and yet this man had no bitterness in his heart; no rancor in his soul; no revenge in his mind; and he went up and down the length and breadth of this world preaching nonviolence and the redemptive power of love. He believed with all of his heart, mind, and soul that the way to peace and brotherhood is through nonviolence, love, and suffering. He was severely criticized for his opposition to the war in Vietnam. It must be said, however, that one could hardly expect a prophet of Dr. King's commitments to advocate nonviolence at home and violence in Vietnam. Nonviolence to King was total commitment not only in solving the problems of race in the United States, but the problems of the world.

Surely this man was called of God to do this work. If Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century, B.C., Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet in the twentieth century. If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther was called of God to prophesy in his time. If Hosea was sent to preach love and forgiveness centuries ago, Martin Luther was sent to expound the doctrine of nonviolence and forgiveness in the third quarter of the twentieth century. If Jesus was called to preach the Gospel to the poor, Martin Luther King Jr. fits that designation. If a prophet is one who does not seek popular causes to espouse, but rather the causes he thinks are right, Martin Luther qualified on that score.

No! He was not ahead of his time. No man is ahead of his time. Every man is within his star, each in his time. Each man must respond to the call of God in his lifetime and not in somebody else's time. Jesus had to respond to the call of God in the first century, A.D., and not in the twentieth century. He had but one life to live. He couldn't wait. How long do you think Jesus would have had to wait for the constituted authorities to accept him? Twenty-five years? A hundred years? A thousand? He died at thirty-three. He couldn't wait. Paul, Galileo, Copernicus, Martin Luther the Protestant reformer, Gandhi, and Nehru couldn't wait for another time. They had to act in their lifetimes. No man is ahead of his time. Abraham, leaving his country in the obedience to God's call; Moses leading a rebellious people to the



Promised Land; Jesus dying on a cross; Galileo on his knees recanting; Lincoln dying of an assassin's bullet; Woodrow Wilson crusading for a League of Nations; Martin Luther King Jr. dying fighting for justice for garbage collectors—none of these men were ahead of their time. With them the time was always ripe to do that which was right and that which needed to be done.

Too bad, you say, that Martin Luther King Jr. died so young. I feel that way, too. But, as I have said many times before, it isn't how long one lives, but how well. It's what one accomplishes for mankind that matters. Jesus died at thirty-three; Joan of Arc at nineteen ... [Paul Laurence] Dunbar before thirty-five; John Fitzgerald Kennedy at forty-six; William Rainey Harper at forty-nine; and Martin Luther King Jr. at thirty-nine.

We all pray that the assassin will be apprehended and brought to justice. But, make no mistake, the American people are in part responsible for Martin Luther King Jr.'s death. The assassin heard enough condemnation of King and of Negroes to feel that he had public support. He knew that millions hated King.

The Memphis officials must bear some of the guilt for Martin Luther's assassination. The strike should have been settled several weeks ago. The lowest paid men in our society should not have to strike for a more just wage. A century after Emancipation, and after the enactment of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, it should not have been necessary for Martin Luther King Jr. to stage marches in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, and go to

jail thirty times trying to achieve for his people those rights which people of lighter hue get by virtue of their being born white. We, too, are guilty of murder. It is time for the American people to repent and make democracy equally applicable to all Americans. What can we do? We, and not the assassin, represent America at its best. *We* have the power—not the prejudiced, not the assassin—to make things right.

If we love Martin Luther King Jr. and respect him, as this crowd surely testifies, let us see to it that he did not die in vain; let us see to it that we do not dishonor his name by trying to solve our problems through rioting in the streets. Violence was foreign to his nature. He warned that continued riots could produce a Fascist state. But let us see to it also that the conditions that cause riots are promptly removed, as the President of the United States is trying to get us to do. Let black and white alike search their hearts; and if there be prejudice in our hearts against any racial or ethnic group, let us exterminate it and let us pray, as Martin Luther King Jr. would pray if he could: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.* If we do this, Martin Luther King Jr. will have died a redemptive death from which all mankind will benefit.

I close by saying to you what Martin Luther King Jr. believed: *If physical death was the price he had to pay to rid America of prejudice and injustice, nothing could be more redemptive.* And to paraphrase the words of the immortal John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.'s unfinished work on earth must truly be our own. **A**

(Originally titled: “America’s Chief Moral Dilemma”)

The Three Evils

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1967

The Hungry Club Forum began as a secret initiative of the Butler Street YMCA, in Atlanta. It was a place where sympathetic white politicians could meet out of the public eye with local black leaders, who were excluded from many of the city’s civic organizations. King, an Atlanta native, addressed the club on May 10, 1967. He acknowledged that progress had been made in civil rights, but warned that the “evils” of racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War endangered further gains for black Americans.

THREE MAJOR EVILS—the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war. These are the three things that I want to deal with today. Now let us turn first to the evil of racism. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racism is still alive all over America. Racial injustice is still the Negro’s burden and America’s shame. And we must face the hard fact that many Americans would like to have a nation which is a democracy for white Americans but simultaneously a dictatorship over black Americans. We must face the fact that we still have much to do in the area of race relations. Now to be sure there has been some progress, and I would not want to overlook that. We’ve seen that progress a great deal here in our Southland. Probably the greatest area of this progress has been the breakdown of legal segregation. And so the movement in the South has profoundly shaken the entire edifice of segregation. And I am convinced that segregation is as dead as a doornail in its legal sense, and the only thing uncertain about it now is how costly some of the segregationists who still linger around will make the funeral. And so there has been progress. But we must not allow this progress to cause us to engage in a superficial, dangerous optimism. The plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower. And there is no area of our country that can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. Every city confronts a serious problem. Now there are those who are trying to say now that the civil rights movement is dead. I submit to you that it is more alive today than ever before. What they fail to realize is that we are now in a transition period. We are moving into a new phase of the struggle. For well now twelve years, the struggle was basically a struggle to end legal segregation. In a sense

it was a struggle for decency. It was a struggle to get rid of all of the humiliation and the syndrome of depravation surrounding the system of legal segregation. And I need not remind you that those were glorious days. We cannot forget the days of Montgomery, when fifty thousand Negroes decided that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to accept segregation within, in humiliation. We will not forget the 1960 sit-in movement, when by the thousands students decided to sit in at lunch counters, protesting humiliation and segregation. And when they decided to sit down at those counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and carrying the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. We will not forget the Freedom Rides of sixty one, and the Birmingham Movement of sixty three, a movement which literally subpoenaed the conscience of a large segment of the nation to appear before the judgement seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. We will not forget Selma, when by the thousands we marched from that city to Montgomery to dramatize the fact that Negroes did not have the right to vote. These were marvelous movements. But that period is over now. And we are moving into a new phase. And because we are moving into this new phase, some people feel that the civil rights movement is dead. The new phase is a struggle for genuine equality. It is not merely a struggle for decency now, it is not merely a struggle to get rid of the brutality of a Bull Connor and a Jim Clark. It is now a struggle for genuine equality on all levels, and this will be a much more difficult struggle. You see,

the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn't cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn't cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now. Now we're going to lose some friends in this period. The allies who were with us in Selma will not all stay with us during this period. We've got to understand what is happening. Now they often call this the white backlash ... It's just a new name for an old phenomenon. The fact is that there has never been any single, solid, determined commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans to genuine equality for Negroes. There has always been ambivalence ... In 1863 the Negro was granted freedom from physical slavery through the Emancipation Proclamation. But he was not given land to make that freedom meaningful. At the same time, our government was giving away millions of acres of land in the Midwest and the West, which meant that the nation was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor, while refusing to do it for its black peasants from Africa who were held in slavery two hundred and forty four years. And this is why Frederick Douglass would say that emancipation for the Negro was freedom to hunger, freedom to the winds and rains of heaven, freedom without roofs to cover their heads. It was freedom without bread to eat, without land to cultivate. It was freedom and famine at the same time. And it is a miracle that the

Negro has survived. In 1875 the nation passed a civil rights bill, and refused to enforce it. In 1964, the nation passed a weaker civil rights bill and even to this day has failed to enforce it in all of its dimensions. In 1954 the Supreme Court rendered a decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. And even to this day in the deep South, less than five per cent of the Negro students are attending integrated schools. We haven't even made one per cent progress a year. If it continues at this rate, it will take another ninety seven years to integrate the schools of the South and of our nation ... Now let us be sure that we will have to keep the pressure alive. We've never made any gain in civil rights without constant, persistent, legal and non-violent pressure. Don't let anybody make you feel that the problem will work itself out ... The second evil that I want to deal with is the evil of poverty. Like a monstrous octopus it spreads its nagging prehensile tentacles into cities and hamlets and villages all over our nation. Some forty million of our brothers and sisters are poverty stricken, unable to gain the basic necessities of life. And so often we allow them to become invisible because our society's so affluent that we don't see the poor. Some of them are Mexican Americans. Some of them are Indians. Some are Puerto Ricans. Some are Appalachian whites. The vast majority are Negroes in proportion to their size in the population ... Now there is nothing new about poverty. It's been with us for years and centuries. What is new at this point though, is that we now have the resources, we now have the skills, we now have the techniques to get rid of poverty. And the question is whether our nation has the will ... Now I want to deal with the third evil that constitutes

the dilemma of our nation and the world. And that is the evil of war. Somehow these three evils are tied together. The triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. The great problem and the great challenge facing mankind today is to get rid of war ... We have left ourselves as a nation morally and politically isolated in the world. We have greatly strengthened the forces of reaction in America, and excited violence and hatred among our own people. We have diverted attention from civil rights. During a period of war, when a nation becomes obsessed with the guns of war, social programs inevitably suffer. People become insensitive to pain and agony in their own midst ... Now I know that there are people who are confused about the war and they say to me and anybody who speaks out against it, "You shouldn't be speaking out. You're a civil rights leader, and the two issues should not be joined together." Well ... the two issues are tied together. And I'm going to keep them together. Oh my friends, it's good for us to fight for integrated lunch counters, and for integrated schools. And I'm going to continue to do that. But wouldn't it be absurd to be talking about integrated schools without being concerned about the survival of a world in which to be integrated ... For those who are telling me to keep my mouth shut, I can't do that. I'm against segregation at lunch counters, and I'm not going to segregate my moral concerns. And we must know on some positions, cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" Vanity asks the question, "Is it popular?" But conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there're times when you must take a stand that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but you must do it because it is right. A

Martin Luther King Jr.



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“It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic.”

From “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” a sermon delivered on March 31, 1968, at the National Cathedral, in Washington, DC.

Of the “three major evils” that Martin Luther King Jr. believed afflicted America, none is more immediately associated with the civil-rights leader than racism. As King’s generation came into its own, the formal system of Jim Crow was ending. But black people all over America still faced racism at its bloodiest and most desperate. To King, white supremacy accounted for the most-appalling acts of violence and for the most-mundane bigotries.

*In early 1967, on vacation in Jamaica, King; his wife, Coretta; and two aides rented a house with no telephone. There he wrote the first draft of a book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, which described the opportunities for—and obstacles to—eradicating poverty at last. (Coretta wrote the foreword.) In this excerpt from the published book, King predicted that white resistance to racial equality would stiffen when the agenda moved on to far-costlier measures—improvements in jobs, schools, and housing.*

On Equality

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1967



Why is equality so assiduously avoided? Why does white America delude itself, and how does it rationalize the evil it retains?

Integration Must MOVE

Roy Wilkins

March 1958

As the executive director of the NAACP, the nation's oldest civil-rights organization, Roy Wilkins preferred legislation over confrontation in order to bring about progress. Yet he was clear-eyed about the wrongs he hoped to right.

While we were making the world safe for democracy in one war and destroying Hitler's master race theory in another, the Negro rode in the back of the bus, lived in a ghetto across the railroad tracks, sent his children to Jim Crow schools, worked at restricted jobs, enjoyed either inferior or no public recreation, endured daily humiliation and insult, received uneven justice in the courts, and was the victim of violence. He is not overcome with nostalgia for the pre-1954 days; he has bid them a grim and tearless good-by.

» The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class Utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity. Overwhelmingly America is still struggling with irresolution and contradictions. It has been sincere and even ardent in welcoming some change. But too quickly apathy and disinterest rise to the surface when the next logical steps are to be taken. Laws are passed in a crisis mood after a Birmingham or a Selma, but no substantial fervor survives the formal signing of legislation. The recording of the law in itself is treated as the reality of the reform.

This limited degree of concern is a reflection of an inner conflict which measures cautiously the impact of any change on the status quo. As the nation passes from opposing extremist behavior to the deeper and more pervasive elements of equality, white America reaffirms its bonds to the status quo. It had contemplated comfortably hugging the shoreline but now fears that the winds of change are blowing it out to sea.

The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities with whites. Even the psychological adjustment is far from formidable. Having exaggerated the emotional difficulties for decades, when demands for new conduct became inescapable, white Southerners may have trembled under the strain but they did not collapse.

Even the more significant changes involved in voter registration required neither large monetary nor psychological sacrifice. Spectacular and turbulent events that dramatized the demand created an erroneous impression that a heavy burden was involved.

The real cost lies ahead. The stiffening of white resistance is a recognition of that fact. The discount education given Negroes will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The

eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters.

The assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, Hyman Bookbinder, in a frank statement on December 29, 1966, declared that the long-range costs of adequately implementing programs to fight poverty, ignorance and slums will reach one trillion dollars. He was not awed or dismayed by this prospect but instead pointed out that the growth of the gross national product during the same period makes this expenditure comfortably possible. It is, he said, as simple as this: "The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate." Furthermore, he predicted that unless a "substantial sacrifice is made by the American people," the nation can expect further deterioration of the cities, increased antagonisms between races and continued disorders in the streets. He asserted that people are not informed enough to give adequate support to anti-poverty programs, and he leveled a share of the blame at the government because it "must do more to get people to understand the size of the problem."

Let us take a look at the size of the problem through the lens of the Negro's status in 1967. When the Constitution was written, a strange formula to determine taxes and representation declared that the Negro was 60 percent of a person. Today another curious formula seems to declare he is 50 percent of a person. Of the good things in life he has approximately one-half those of whites; of the bad he has twice those of whites. Thus, half of all Negroes live in substandard housing, and Negroes have half the income of whites. When we turn to the negative experiences of life, the Negro has a double share. There are twice as many unemployed. The rate of infant mortality (widely accepted as an accurate index of general health) among Negroes is double that of whites. The equation pursues Negroes even into war ... [From early 1965 to early 1966,] twice as many Negro soldiers died in action (20.6 percent) in proportion to their numbers in the population.

In other spheres the figures are equally alarming. In elementary schools Negroes lag one to three years behind whites, and their segregated schools receive substantially less money per student than do the white schools. One-twentieth as many Negroes as whites attend college, and half of these are in ill-equipped Southern institutions. **A**

The Belief in Our Inferiority Persists

**I WONDER WHY
I AM RAISING MY CHILDREN
IN MISSISSIPPI,
WHICH MAKES THEM FEEL
LIKE THEY ARE
PERPETUALLY LESS.**

By Jesmyn Ward

did not understand how poor my family was until my maternal grandmother told me a story about sackcloth dresses and beans. I was in my 20s, and we were sitting in her kitchen, the tickle of cool air from the window air-conditioning unit barely on us, when she told me that while she was a child, her mother made dresses for her and her siblings from sackcloth, and that she was always disappointed because the sacks with pretty patterns were taken by the time she was given the opportunity to choose. “We ate beans every week when I was little,” my grandmother said. “We didn’t have meat, just some fatback for flavor.” The white wave of her hair fell across her face as she shook her head. “I could do without them now. When I moved out, I bought myself dresses, nice dresses. And I never wanted to eat beans again.” Beans and rice fueled the children through school, through work after school and on weekends, through the hours they spent planting, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting. My grandmother speaks openly of her lasting desire for fancy clothes, but she never mentions hunger. It is the subtext of her stories, the

unspoken thing I imagine following her through the fields, crawling along the rows with her like one of her siblings as she chafes against her dress.

Perhaps I was blind to my poverty because it was so ubiquitous that it was rendered invisible. As a child, I lived in my grandmother’s house with my parents and siblings and our extended family. Thirteen of us shared five bedrooms (one was a converted dining room). We had no central heat, no central air. My grandmother installed gas heaters in the long hallway bisecting the house and, later, a fat wood-burning stove in the living room. During the summer, box fans hummed in all the windows. My mother says we never starved, and this is true. I had it better than my grandparents and my mother did when they were young, but I remember hunger. I think it was the hunger of childhood, the need for fuel to grow, but it was blinding sometimes. Sometimes not even the food in my belly appeased it. I recall eating four hot dogs once and still feeling as if my stomach were filled not with food but with air. The hunger was most insistent during and after

WHITE
WAITING ROOM
and RESTAURANT

✔ Freedom
Riders enter
a segregated
waiting room at
a bus station
in Jackson,
Mississippi,
in 1961, before
their arrests
for breaching
the peace and
disobeying a
police officer.



hurricanes, when crackers and Vienna sausages and sardines were meals. When I was a teen, I read Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, read of him putting his mouth under a water faucet as a child growing up in Mississippi and drinking until he could swallow no more, so that his belly would fill with something, anything. The familiarity of that unquenchable desire flooded me.

As an adult, this is how I carry the poverty of my Mississippi youth forward with me: by remembering the emptiness inside me. By remembering how that emptiness permeated every bit of me. How I was hungry in my belly and ravenous to fill my brain with something that would one day help ensure that I would not be hungry forever. How I was desperate for stories, just as the young Wright had been. This is a legacy of my childhood, of the hopes and dreams of all the people who worked themselves to the grave in fields, hoeing and weeding and harvesting; who worked in homes, cleaning and cooking and caring; who hoped that the children they bore would not have to do backbreaking labor but instead could, through education, become something more, become doctors or lawyers or nurses.

Material poverty is persistent, both for my family and for all black Mississippians: It cleaves to generations, passes from grandmother to mother to child like a genetic trait—like a crooked nose, or detached ears, or freckles. It walks hand in hand with a kind of poverty of the imagination, of what is possible, of what we can grow to be. We are at the southernmost tip of Mississippi, but even so, we saw some of what

Dr. King and other civil-rights activists accomplished. Some aspects of our lives have changed: We can access the same public beaches as everyone else, on the Gulf of Mexico and on Lake Pontchartrain. We attend desegregated public schools; we can attend any college or state university we desire. We can walk into any public restaurant on the coast and ask to be seated and served, and, often without incident, we are. This was not the case for my parents and grandparents. I grew up to be a writer, an artist, but I came to this in spite of my poverty, which insisted that my desire to create was frivolous. Which claimed that it was the natural state of my life, that I and those like me should always want, should always be empty.

The seed of difference, and the belief in our poverty, our inferiority, persists. This seed, present at the beginning of our subjugation as slaves, has sprouted and thrived

as virulently as kudzu. It has strangled us for hundreds of years. Under the thin veneer of mutability, the belief that anyone of African descent is inferior still flourishes: sunk into the soil, springing from the well of the rivers. It made itself known after emancipation, when minor offenses committed by black people led to imprisonment for crimes such as vagrancy and loitering and petty thievery, especially of food, and black men and women were essentially re-enslaved; a century later, some civil-rights activists in Mississippi would be sentenced to the notorious Parchman Farm to suffer torture. The belief made itself known when Mississippi finally ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, banning slavery—on February 7, 2013. Now it makes itself known in the letters to the editor of local papers, where white people excoriate any and all activities associated with black college students' spring-break festivities. It makes itself known when high-school football players take a knee in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, and then the parents of their white classmates call them nigger thugs. It made itself known on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2017, when the city of Biloxi declared that it would celebrate "Great Americans Day" instead.

It makes itself known in all these very vocal, confrontational ways. But perhaps the most tragic manifestation of racist sentiment in Mississippi is silent. Built into the very bones of this place. My state starves its people and, in doing so, actively resists King's legacy. Our Republican lawmakers have made an effort to undercut programs that serve the poor, maybe because so many people of color in Mississippi live in poverty and depend on social programs for help. Thirty-two percent of the state's African Americans, 25 percent of its Hispanic Americans, and 38 percent of its American Indians live in poverty. All of these numbers are higher than the national figures: 22 percent for African Americans, 19 percent for Hispanic Americans, and 26 percent for American Indians. Racist sentiment is built into the fact that the state government squeezes the funds for public schools, which might technically be desegregated but remain very segregated because the whites who have the money send their children to private schools. Built into the fact that Mississippi has the highest rate of child poverty in the nation and some of the lowest test scores. Built into the fact that Medicaid provides health insurance for more than 50 percent of children in the state and many senior citizens as well, and yet our public officials repeatedly vote to deprive the program of resources, to shrink coverage. Built into the fact that, during a recent push to unionize, some black workers at the Nissan plant in Canton, near Jackson, said they were denied promotions and assignments, which resulted in their being paid less than their white counterparts. It's a story familiar to many Mississippians of color.

One of the revolutionary ideas King encouraged was a guaranteed income, apportioned to all poor

Perhaps the most tragic manifestation of racist sentiment in Mississippi is silent.

people, designed to bring poverty to an end. He argued that a government willing to spend billions on an “unjust, evil war in Vietnam” could afford to give its citizens a guaranteed income. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (see page 28), he wrote:

Two conditions are indispensable if we are to ensure that the guaranteed income operates as a consistently progressive measure. First, it must be pegged to the median income of society, not at the lowest levels of income. To guarantee an income at the floor would simply perpetuate welfare standards and freeze into the society poverty conditions. Second, the guaranteed income must be dynamic; it must automatically increase as the total social income grows. Were it permitted to remain static under growth conditions, the recipients would suffer a relative decline.

He argued that such a system of wealth distribution would not only “diminish ... the unjust measurement of human worth on a scale of dollars” but would also free men and women to pursue work that would increase knowledge, encourage literary pursuits, and elevate thought. In King’s estimation, this guaranteed income could solve all the other problems we associate with poverty: the fracturing of the family, the lack of access to quality education, the moral depression that mires folks in darkness when they think the circumstances they were born into are their fault and indicative of their worth. A guaranteed income could even close some of the distance in stature and fortune between black people and white people, a distance created by hundreds of years of subjugation and brutality.

But the Mississippi I grew up in, the Mississippi that I live in now, that I’m raising my children in, resists this broadened understanding of what it means to be a human being. It resists the desire to rise above the circumstance of caste that we are born into and to never worry about the next time you’ll eat or whether your children are hungry. The

desire to avoid having to feed your children the cheapest, most filling food you can—beans and rice one day, hot dogs the next—and still see them openmouthed. This Mississippi insists that there is a natural order to this arrangement, that if you are poor or wanting, you’re to blame if you starve. That you deserve your poverty, your squalor, your suffering, and that you do not deserve help or, as this Mississippi likes to say, “handouts.”

I am raising my children here because so many of my extended family members, more than 200 of them, live in my small hometown. I want my children to understand what it means to belong to such a large family, to grow up in such an intimate community. I live here because my brother died here, and this is where I am closest to his memory.

Yet every day I wonder at living in the kind of place that would have my children understand that they are perpetually less. That would starve them not only of food but also of a sense of what is possible in their lives. I wonder at raising them in a place that has been telling people like them for decades, for centuries, that they are perpetually less. I wonder at raising them in a place that made my mother decorate bricks as baby dolls for want of toys. My grandmother says that when she was a child, she and her siblings entertained themselves by making small graves in their front yard and surrounding them with twig fences. The fun was in decorating them, in building the most ornate, splendid plot. I take my children to our local park, which happens to share space with our ever-encroaching community cemetery, and the only play equipment for little kids consists of four rusted swings. Two of our basketball hoops are collapsed, and the two left standing are netless. A few years ago, county officials decided to put a volleyball net in the park and haul in sand for a court. It is now a large litter box for wild cats. This is the truth of what Mississippi thinks of me and those like me, of all those whom King fought for: *This is your shitty playground. You earned it.* 

Jesmyn Ward won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2011, and again in 2017 for her latest novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. She teaches creative writing at Tulane University, and received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2017.

THE ATLANTIC ARCHIVES

Must We Hate?

Archibald MacLeish

February 1963

In September 1962, riots broke out at the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, when James Meredith enrolled as the school’s first black student. Archibald MacLeish, a poet and dramatist, watched the event unfold on television and described his anguish in a speech at Knox College, in Galesburg, Illinois, adapted for *The Atlantic*.

What shocked me, sickened me was the black pit of public hatred to which I looked. I had known, of course, that racial hatred existed in this country as it exists elsewhere. I could hardly have helped to know it after the events of my own lifetime. But ... I had always thought of this hatred as something exceptional, something transient, something which would disappear with the illiteracy and poverty and ignorance out of which it came ...

I never doubted that in an actual test between these petulant opinions on the one side and the Republic on the other the opinions would wither away in shame and disappear. But what

happened in Oxford was that they did not wither away. They stared back at you out of young men’s faces ugly with spite. They spat back at you out of the faces of middle-aged men whose words would have been incredible if you had not heard them ...

The idea those young men and those old men hated was precisely and literally the idea on which this Republic was founded, the idea that any man may claim his equal manhood in this country, his unalienable right. What the mob at Oxford hated was the intolerable idea that this different human being should claim a manhood equal to their own.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. wasn't the transformational tragedy of a successful movement, as children are taught. It was the premature end of a movement that had only just begun.

By Vann R. Newkirk II

HOW TO KILL A REVOLUTION

“**Woe to you**, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them.” Jesus’s rebuke to the Pharisees descended upon me on a cold January morning in 2017, in West Potomac Park in Washington, D.C. On that Monday, the national holiday dedicated to the man at whose memorial I stood, the capital bustled in anticipation of a more pressing political event. That’s why I was at the park, pondering this granite stone of hope, carved out of a mountain of despair. The memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. cast its shadow over me, its presence just as conflicted as those tombs.

As sure as Jesus’s words proved prescient about the adoption of Christianity in the empire that killed him, so too the modern-day legend of King writes itself in real time. In the official story told to children, King’s assassination is the transformational tragedy in a victorious struggle to overcome. But in the true accounting, his assassination was one of a host of reactionary assaults by a country against a revolution. And those assaults were astonishingly successful.

Revisiting those assaults requires a walk through the pandemonium of the last years of King’s life. There is perhaps no better Virgil for this task than James Baldwin, a man with close friends in every ideological corner of the civil-rights movement. Among them, his prophetic spirit found kinship with King—“young Martin,” Baldwin called him—whom he first met in 1957 in Atlanta.

Baldwin understood viscerally the course that King had to travel. He predicted “the dangerous road before Martin Luther King” in a 1961 article for *Harper’s* magazine, adding that King “has incurred ... the grave responsibility of continuing to lead in the path he has encouraged so many people to follow.” Baldwin noted in the essay that King intended to lead a movement by incorporating the struggles of his constituents into the very fiber of his being, becoming in a religious sense the avatar of a people’s plight. “How he will do this I do not know,” Baldwin continued, “but I do not see how he can possibly avoid a break, at last, with the habits and attitudes, stratagems and fears of the past.”

After the Voting Rights Act was passed, in 1965, the revolution’s center of gravity shifted north, along with the stragglers of the Great Migration—toward de facto as opposed to de jure racism. Baldwin’s frequent premonitions of unrest in the streets began to come true. In his 1966 essay, “A Report From Occupied Territory,” he discussed the “powder keg” of poverty, joblessness, and discrimination in urban ghettos and warned that it “may blow up; it will be a miracle if it doesn’t.” King, by then, had sensed the same trouble brewing in the slums as Baldwin had. In his 1966 campaign against segregated housing in



Chicago, which moved his strategy of nonviolent protest from the South to the North, he tried to wield his activism machine against the social and economic troubles that Baldwin described. He was repaid with violent counterprotests.

King spoke of a “white backlash”—a term he helped popularize—to his movement. But in retrospect, the strength of the reaction he predicted and endured often receives short shrift. The support of white moderates who recoiled at images of Negro children sprayed by hoses and attacked by dogs was instrumental in passing laws that ended legal segregation and protected voting rights. But by 1966, it had become clear that many of these whites chafed against further activism and greater demands for equality. They viewed the Voting Rights Act as a final concession; King saw it as a start. According to Gallup polls, King’s popularity waned in the coda years of his life; his unfavorability rating reached 63 percent in 1966. At the same time, public opinion turned firmly against the civil-rights movement.

As moderates abandoned him, King also faced a resurgence of the more virulent elements of white supremacy. The Klan firebombed the Forrest County, Mississippi, NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer to death in January 1966, and Klan night riders were suspected in the murder of the activist Clarence Triggs in Bogalusa, Louisiana, later that

year. The Klan was joined by newer organizations across the United States that became emboldened in the late 1960s. The National States’ Rights Party, for one, incited a violent riot in Baltimore and spread its organizing arms beyond the South. The visibility of the American Nazi Party increased after the Voting Rights Act was passed, until its leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, was assassinated, in 1967. At King’s Chicago marches, the counterprotesters wore not the familiar hoods of Klansmen but the swastika patches of Nazis.

By 1967, resistance to further change among the white majority had ossified, and the Negro powder keg that Baldwin had mentioned had blown up—and then some. The youth and student movements that King had at times managed to corral were starting to oppose his church-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They gravitated toward the Black Power movement, black nationalism, and violent tactics. That year, the “long hot summer” brought death and destruction in Detroit and riots in at least six other major cities. An article that summer by the legendary journalist Ethel Payne in the black-owned *Chicago Defender* described King’s “race against time to defuse the ticking bombs of impatience in the big cities.” Two months later, King told the same newspaper, “All the signs of our time indicate that this is a dark hour in the life of America.”

Three days after King is murdered in Memphis, soldiers patrol riot-torn Chicago.

The Kerner Commission, established by President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration to investigate the causes of the 1967 unrest, said plainly that racism was a major factor. Its 1968 report, authored by the commissioners, who were firmly rooted in mainstream racial politics, concluded, "Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." But Gallup polls showed that a majority of Americans disbelieved that conclusion, and Johnson largely ignored the report in future policy making. The false tale of victory had sprung to life. White backlash and Johnson's rift with civil-rights leaders who wanted to push further than he did slowed the White House's efforts.

Starting in 1966, government sabotage and obstruction had begun to have an effect on King's campaign. Chicago's mayor, Richard J. Daley, had secured an injunction that August limiting when and how King could protest. The next month, a major housing bill had been allowed to die in the Senate, signaling a renewed pushback in Congress against civil rights. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's fixation on King, and his attempts to discredit the civil-rights leader with salacious reports and gossip, is now well documented; reportedly, the FBI even sent him a letter with allegations about his extramarital sex life and a suggestion that he kill himself to avoid public disclosure. Also documented is the rise of COINTELPRO, the bureau's program dedicated, in Hoover's words, to "neutraliz[ing] the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations." According to FBI documents, the program intensified its focus on King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1968, in response to his nascent Poor People's Campaign.

By 1968, King had emerged from a series of trials with an understanding of the full breadth of white supremacy, and with no small despair at its depth. As he embarked on his Poor People's Campaign, he braved dwindling funds, a loss of public support, and mounting desperation among the people on the margins of America. It became clear that King embodied the final seal of the eschaton—the urban apocalypse—that Baldwin had warned about.

A single bullet fired from a Remington rifle traveled through King's spine on April 4. The revolution died with him; the country caught fire.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the atmosphere across the nation immediately following King's death carried a whiff of the brimstone of end-times. Thousands of black youths in ghettos across more than 100 cities spilled into the streets in sorrow and rage during the Holy Week Uprising. Police arrested more than 20,000

people, and neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore saw millions of dollars in damage; estimates in Baltimore exceeded \$10 million (more than \$70 million today). Nationally, amid pitched battles between cops and communities, reports of sniper fire, and conflagrations that consumed business after business, at least 40 people were killed and more than 3,000 were injured in the gravest unrest in America since the Civil War.

King's assassination was the earthquake among a series of seismic shifts that demolished a certain portion of black intellectual and spiritual movements. Baldwin had been working on a movie script about the life and assassination of his friend Malcolm X, an effort that had been fraught, owing to Baldwin's desire to explore the deep, lingering racial questions left in the activist's wake. King's assassination helped derail that project, and sent many other surviving intellectuals of the civil-rights movement on trajectories that veered away from black activism. The landmark year of 1968 almost saw the death of Baldwin himself; he overdosed on sleeping pills, in what his biographer David Leeming implies was a suicide attempt.

In the immediate aftermath of King's death, the intensity of the cataclysm became clear to all of black America. Three days after King's murder, even as the fires across the country raged, Baldwin and King's friend Nina Simone took to the stage at the Westbury Music Fair, on Long Island. The show had been scheduled long before, but now it had new meaning.

Simone sat down at her grand piano. "Will my country stand or fall?" she sang. "Is it too late for us all?" Her voice wavered between venom and sorrow. "And did Martin Luther King just die in vain?"

The lyrics, written by her bassist and first rehearsed with her band that afternoon, painted a picture of Simone's own deep sorrow as well as her lamentations for the brokenness of the world. Simone paused to reflect on the recent onslaught of black deaths. "Do you realize how many we have lost?" she asked the audience.

Among the martyrs of the movement there had been George Lee, Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, four girls in Birmingham, a trio of Freedom Summer activists in Mississippi, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Wharlest Jackson, and three students at South Carolina State University. More than 120 people had been killed in race riots that broke out from the "long hot summer" through the Holy Week Uprising. W. E. B. Du Bois had died an ancient man in exile in 1963. Lorraine Hansberry had died of pancreatic cancer in 1965, and Malcolm X had been assassinated not long after. John Coltrane had died of cancer in July 1967, and Otis Redding's plane had crashed into Lake Monona, in Wisconsin, that December.

At least 40 people were killed and more than 3,000 were injured in the gravest unrest in America since the Civil War.

“Did Martin Luther King just die in vain?”

The intensity of these losses was staggering, and King’s assassination was the knockout. After a last gasp in 1968, nonviolent resistance receded as a national change-making strategy. Baldwin chronicled the shift in an address to the World Council of Churches in July 1968, saying that leaders such as the Black Panther Party’s Stokely Carmichael had grown “weary of petitioning a heedless population, and said in effect what all revolutionaries have always said: I petitioned you and petitioned you, and you can petition for a long, long time, but the moment comes when the petitioner is no longer a petitioner but has become a beggar.”

Even the ascendant Black Power movement, however, couldn’t withstand the might of the American status quo. In 1969, Chicago police and the FBI killed the Black Panther Party’s deputy chairman, Fred Hampton, dealing another blow to hopes for a visionary leader. The FBI’s continuing program of disruption, along with increasingly hostile public opinion among whites and the rise of “law and order” politics, had effectively destabilized the Black Power movement as a legitimate change-making force by 1970. Ever since, black activists have often been marginalized and widely discredited.

The powers that be decided they no longer wanted any part of Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy or those who would follow in his footsteps, and they carried out that decision with finality, through violence, sabotage, political marginalization, and public antipathy. Those powers included every agent of white hegemony, from protesters who fought against the integration of neighborhoods to police who jailed King’s compatriots for marching in the streets to politicians such as Alabama’s George Wallace, who stood in a schoolhouse doorway to stop black students from entering. King’s work had been titanic, but white supremacy proved even more so. It also proved flexible—able to accommodate changes in public opinion, the erasure of segregation from the law, and the advent of affirmative action, all without ever completely ceding power.

In a 1969 essay for *The New York Times Magazine*, Baldwin reflected on how that flexibility had become the hallmark of the world after King. “If white people are prepared to blow up the globe in order to maintain that faith of their fathers which placed Sambo in chains,” he wrote, “then they are certainly willing to allow him his turn on television, stage, and screen. It is a small price for white people to pay for the continuance of their domination.”

Part of that price included reconciling American values with the fact that whiteness and the state had colluded to end King and the revolution. For white America, hostility toward the civil-rights movement turned into a cherry-picked

celebration of the revolution’s victories over segregation and over easily caricatured, gap-toothed bigots in the South. Embracing King became a way to rejoice in overcoming and to reify white innocence, even while ignoring the cries of those who had certainly not overcome. Accordingly, the life of King past mid-1965, a radical three years spent fighting a tide that had turned against him, is barely mentioned today.

This selective history was cemented in the establishment of Martin Luther King Jr. Day by President Ronald Reagan in 1983. Reagan—it should go without saying—was about as far from King on the ideological spectrum as a politician could get; he worked to erect a new set of boundaries around urban blackness, which Baldwin had foreseen decades earlier. Reagan had bought into the whitewashed version of King, an image rehabilitated for white consumption and black mollification. In his speech announcing the holiday, Reagan mentioned King’s support for “color-blind” justice, and quoted that most quoted portion of the “I Have a Dream” speech.

But Reagan did not mention the remarks he had made as the governor of California on the day of King’s funeral, when he had spoken of “a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they’d break”—in effect, blaming King’s own campaign of civil disobedience for his assassination. Nor did Reagan mention that a majority of whites had felt the same way and that many of them had hated King. No mention, either, of the last three years of King’s life, other than his death.

In a 1978 retrospective article on King, Baldwin looked back at his friend’s life and at how the country had changed since his murder. “A vast amount of love and faith and passion—and blood—have gone into the attempt to transform and liberate this nation,” Baldwin wrote. “This is not the land of the free, is only very unwillingly and sporadically the home of the brave, and all that can be said for the bulk of our politicians is that, if they are no worse than they were, they are certainly no better.”

How much has changed in the 40 years since that retrospective? Have politicians improved? If King were alive today, would he bask in the glow of achievement, or would he gird himself again to march?

I pondered those questions on that January morning in Washington. Just a few days later, the manicured National Mall would be trampled by onlookers who’d come to see American democracy’s quadrennial spectacle, this time for a man who’d been endorsed by the Klan. And I considered one last question: Is this what victory looks like? 

Vann R. Newkirk II is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, where he covers politics and policy.

The Senate had passed its version of the Voting Rights Act but the House Rules Committee was holding up the legislation when King wrote an editorial in the black-owned *New York Amsterdam News* on June 19, 1965. The House panel approved the bill 12 days later, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Congress's final rendering into law on August 6, in the Capitol. King was in attendance and received one of the pens that LBJ used.

Let My People

VO

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By Martin Luther King Jr.

1965

In a recent dinner with Vice President Hubert Humphrey at an American Jewish Committee Meeting in New York City, he assured me that we would have a voting bill by the end of June.

The Vice President's assurances have already been reinforced by the Senate's recent passage of a voting bill. Another victory in our hard struggle for equal rights looms before us. For not only is passage of voting legislation by the House expected, it is reliably predicted that the bill will be strengthened in that august Legislative Body.

We cannot rest. Laurels have not yet been earned. We must toil on during the hot sweltering summer months. We must get our long deprived people registered in the South's infamous blackbelt counties.

Voting legislation does not put the names of Negroes on voting lists. We are not so naive as to believe persons who have traditionally opposed our right to vote will now desist from intimidating us.

There must be a change. There will be a change. For to deny a person the right to exercise his political freedom at the polls is no less a dastardly act as to deny a Christian the right to petition God in prayer.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has taken a giant step toward getting more Negro names on southern voting lists.

Many of the frustrations of a politically deprived people will surely be erased by SCLC's Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project (SCOPE).

SCOPE is designed to involve entire communities in a coordinated program of massive voter registration, political education and community organization. There are surely difficult times ahead in the struggle to secure the rights of all Americans and our SCOPE project will be an ambitious effort to change the political structure of the south.

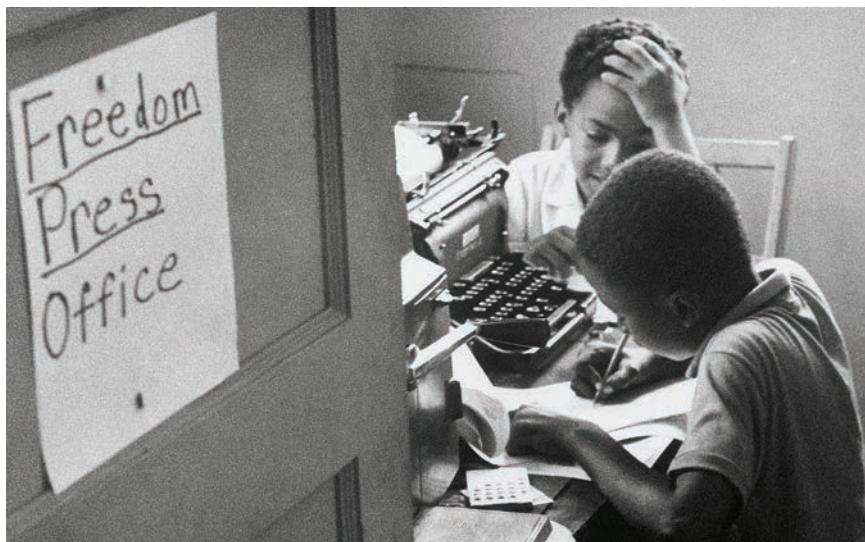
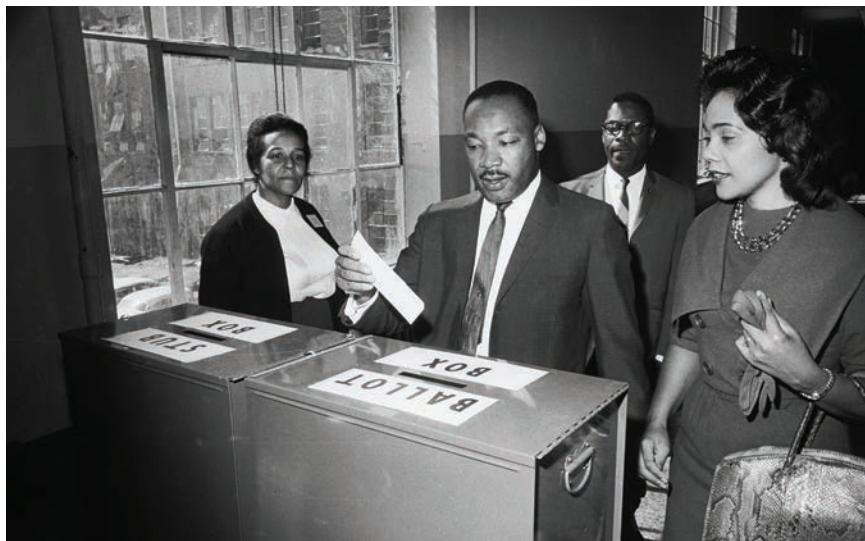
The Freedom Rides Revisited

Victor S. Navasky

July 1968

Ten years before he became the editor of *The Nation*, the journalist Victor S. Navasky retraced the routes of the original Freedom Rides. In the spring of 1961, activists had taken Greyhound and Trailways buses from Washington, D.C., into the South to protest the segregation of the region's interstate bus travel, and had been met with attacks in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and Anniston, Alabama. That September, the federal Interstate Commerce Commission ordered the desegregation of bathrooms and restaurants in public-transportation facilities. But in 1968, Navasky got off the bus in Hammond, Louisiana, and saw a sign for the "White Way Cafe" next door and another for a "Colored Cafe" 100 feet back from the street.

I am sure I found all of this more depressing than did the Negro passengers, whose seats I sometimes shared. For most of them, the fight for equal service has moved from the lunch counter to the rest room—from the esophagus to the bladder. Buses now contain rest-room facilities, although they are usually out of order. But the problem comes while waiting for the bus. In the smaller towns, where there is only one rest facility, the main function of the ICC order, as far as I can figure out, has been to launch an apparently inexhaustible supply of bathroom-door euphemisms for "White." My favorites are "Employees Only," "Private," and "Out of Order." I am still trying to figure out the significance of the sign on the rest room in McComb, Mississippi, which says: "For passengers only. Will open thirty minutes before departure. The management." It strikes me as appropriate that the segregationist's last holdout is the toilet, but actually, given the quality of most bus station food, the lack of rest facilities is no laughing matter.



Through SCOPE we will launch one of the most intensive attacks ever conceived to fight disfranchisement, educational deprivation and poverty.

Our efforts will be concentrated in 75 counties within Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Louisiana.

The SCOPE program will start June 22, just a week before expected passage of the voting bill. When the bill is signed in to law we anticipate having thousands of college and university personnel laboring in our SCOPE program.

A vivid portrayal of the Negro disfranchised is found in voter registration statistics of three Alabama black-belt counties.

In Dallas County where the Negro voting age population hits 51.2 per cent, registration figures level off at 3.3 per cent; Butler County presents a slightly

improved situation, where the Negro voting age population comprises 43.3 per cent, and 4.7 per cent of those Negroes eligible to vote are registered; Wilcox County presents a vivid example of why voting legislation is sorely needed. Here 113 per cent of the white voting age population is registered compared to the 1.09 per cent of the Negro voting age population. Negroes make up 69.9 per cent of the County's voting age population.

These counties are not an exception but rather the rule in an area where Negro disfranchisement is the main instrument for perpetuating racial injustice.

Through the efforts of SCOPE and a strong voting rights bill we are confident of breaking the shackles which so long have crippled the Negro's advancement in the South. Our battle cry is "Let My People Vote." **A**

*An interview with John Legend
and Jesse Williams*

THE INTERSEC- TION OF ART AND ACTIVISM

By **Adrienne Green**

PHOTOGRAPH BY G L ASKEW II

» John Legend and Jesse Williams are known mainly as, respectively, a Grammy-winning R&B singer and a lead actor on ABC's long-running medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*. But they are also outspoken about racial injustice and the continuing struggle for civil rights.

Legend, 39, has headlined benefit concerts and festivals dedicated to social justice. In 2015 he led a nationwide "listening and learning" tour in prisons and immigrant detention centers about problems in the U.S. criminal-justice system. Williams, 36, protested in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 alongside activists and community members after a policeman killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. He has participated in #JusticeForFlint, a charity event for poor Michiganders who lost their access to clean water, and sits on the board of the Advancement Project, a human-rights group. Both have used their creative talents for political projects. Legend co-wrote "Glory," the theme song for the 2014 film *Selma*, which depicted Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 civil-rights march in Alabama. Williams has produced documentaries about the Black Lives Matter movement and the school-to-prison pipeline, and starred



in *Versus*, a short film about the obstacles to love in a time of cultural tension. They comment regularly on politics in their tweets and media appearances.

The two artists have been friends for years. They're set to co-produce a documentary about the Olympic sprinter Tommie Smith, who gave the Black Power salute from the gold-medal podium at the 1968 Summer Olympics. *The Atlantic* brought them together with the magazine's managing editor, Adrienne Green, at a studio in Los Angeles to discuss the racial progress yet to be made since Martin Luther King Jr.'s death—and how artists can help.



This interview has been edited and shortened for clarity.

ADRIENNE GREEN: We're coming up on the 50th year since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. He spoke about everything from education to incarceration to economics to policing, and a new generation is still grappling with these same issues. How much of what he wanted to accomplish remains undone?

Jesse Williams (left) and John Legend, in Los Angeles on December 21, 2017

JOHN LEGEND: It's very frustrating thinking about his agenda and the progress that we've made, or not made, since he was killed. When you think about income inequality, it's gotten worse. School segregation is basically the same as it was before *Brown v. Board of Education*. Our neighborhoods are very segregated. Mass incarceration has gotten worse. The Voting Rights Act has been gutted because [Chief Justice] John Roberts thought that racism was basically over. That's a bit frustrating.

But there are other aspects that give you encouragement. Obviously the black middle class has grown since he died. There are many more black and brown people in positions of

“AMERICA IS COOL BECAUSE OF BLACK PEOPLE. OUR MUSIC IS BLACK. OUR AESTHETIC IS BLACK ... WE ARE AS AMERICAN AS YOU CAN BE, AND WHAT DO WE GET FOR IT?”

power to make change, and so there are a lot of things we can celebrate. But a lot of those core issues haven't made nearly the kind of progress that we should've made in 50 years.

JESSE WILLIAMS: Thinking about Dr. King's legacy and what he had left on the menu and what he was inspired to do next, the first thing that comes to mind is the Poor People's Campaign and the work around poverty—particularly about labor and what it means to be working, to be poor.

GREEN: When did you first engage with social-justice issues?

LEGEND: I started when I was a kid. I was homeschooled for the first few years of grade school, and one of the things we did often was take trips to the county library [in Springfield, Ohio]. Our parents told us to go in there and pick out books we wanted to read.

I always gravitated toward books about social justice, particularly the heroes that made me feel proud to be black and understand the history of my people in America. I would read about Dr. King, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others who put their lives on the line to make big change happen.

I thought that's what it meant to live an important life. Even as a kid, I thought that if I was going to live an important life, I had to do something to make the world more just and more equal, and those were the heroes that I looked to as examples of what I want to emulate.

WILLIAMS: Similarly, I started at a very young age. In a way, I was homeschooled. I went to a public school in Chicago, but when I came home my dad had his own assignments and articles for me to read and write about. I'd have to read a *New York Times* article about the African Burial Ground and write a report about it before I could go out to play.

Any music or entertainment that I had was pretty Afrocentric and centered around black culture and politics—getting an understanding of how we got here, who sacrificed for us to be here, and really having a sense of gratitude and historical context for everything.

GREEN: Jesse, whom did you look to other than your parents?

WILLIAMS: The giant in my life was absolutely Malcolm X. I read any books about him. My dad would make me mixtapes of all of his speeches. I carried *The Last Speeches* around with me in my bag for a decade.

Also, it was a lot of artists as opposed to just straight-up political people. Bob Marley was an incredible activist and voice and prophet in many ways. Fela Kuti, James Brown, Nina Simone, Bob Dylan—just gods among men on this Earth. [Listening to them] really helped me appreciate the dependence that we have on artists and storytellers as our broadcasters, as those who dictate what is reality and what has value.

LEGEND: Those people showed us the way. They showed us how artists can contribute to the conversation. They showed us what it meant to take risks in your career, to bring up these issues that are really important, that may make some people uncomfortable, that may make some people say that they don't want to buy your records anymore, because they don't like your particular political stance.

Paul Robeson said that we are gatekeepers of truth. That's our job as artists. We've seen what it meant for them to put their careers on the line to help support the civil-rights movement financially, artistically, and spiritually. I think we're taking up that torch as young artists.

GREEN: Do you ever get nervous about people rejecting your art because of your politics?

LEGEND: I don't. It's funny, maybe I should be more nervous about it, but what I end up doing is just saying what I believe. It's much easier as an artist to be truthful about how I feel than it is to try to sugarcoat and make everyone feel so comfortable.

WILLIAMS: Life is hard enough [without] complicating it by trying to contort yourself into other shapes for other people. If I was to be fearful, what would I be fearful of? Losing followers on a social-media platform?

LEGEND: Though I do think it's more of a challenge for an actor than it is for a singer.

WILLIAMS: Why is that?

LEGEND: People are seeing you in a role, and it's different. I'm playing myself as a singer—as an artist, I'm not in character. But when people see you in character, they want certain things from you, and they may mix up your character with who you are as an individual.

GREEN: Some people would describe this time in American politics as more and more polarizing. Can you describe what you feel is happening in America with regard to race and racism?

LEGEND: The issue of racism has been such a foundational part of America's history because of slavery and the caste system that slavery established, and almost no institution or historical aspect is free from that stain. There may be different ways of discussing it now because of social media—I think the conversation is more elevated and transparent than it used to be—but we have to realize that this has always been a huge issue of contention and conflict in America. We had the Civil War, the civil-rights movement, decades of lynchings and the KKK—we're not more polarized now than we were in the past.

WILLIAMS: That line of conversation is almost comical. How can you get more polarized than enslaving, torturing, raping, and castrating people?

LEGEND: And then fighting a war that killed [masses] of people over it.

WILLIAMS: Right. It really is a matter of access to information. We can see. We have access to see what is taking place in a way that we never have before, and the white power structure has to work a lot harder to keep convincing people that it's all good and that we're imagining oppression. They have to work harder to weave narratives that make it sound like we're delusional. People are more informed than they've ever been, and at a younger age, across all [backgrounds].

It is a battle of ideas, and more importantly of policies. I'm inspired and energized and confident that we're in a great place. But it's ugly. Nobody wants to look at this guy [Donald Trump]

talk and kick up this fervor and bring out the worst in everybody. That's unpleasant. It's like a body detoxing—the oils come out and the pimples come out, and it stinks and it's nasty, but it's a part of the process of purging our body. I welcome it in that sense, but we have to stay vigilant, because people are still suffering and prisons are still full of black and brown folks.

LEGEND: There's more transparency to the conversation, but it is energizing people to be more active, run for office, and pay attention to our politicians and what they're saying and doing. I think it could produce a better society if we continue to hold our leaders accountable.

GREEN: How were you led to the issues that interest you the most? You both seem to care a lot about incarceration and education.

LEGEND: I think a lot of it is personal. With mass incarceration, I've seen it personally affect my family and close friends in the neighborhoods that I grew up in. When you see the decimation that mass incarceration has wrought on so many black and brown communities, it makes you more passionate when you see the personal toll. Then you read the data and the aggregate of what's happening, in books like *The New Jim Crow*, and you connect the personal to the larger, political story. You're like, "Ugh, we have to do something about this."

WILLIAMS: When things move from the theoretical to the practical, it's very different. Take the transition to tolerance around LGBTQ issues in the public conversation. People might be homophobic or use homophobic terminology, but then their son turns out to be gay or their good friend comes out. Then they're like, "That's Jeff. I love Jeff. I should probably reshape my thinking when painting with a broad brush around homosexuality." Sometimes people need it to be close to home.

The curse of blackness in America is that we all are one sniff away from some kind of horrible abuse or oppression. It's not imagined, it's not a theory, and it's not about "Well, how were you wearing your hair?" or "What were your pants doing?" We know it comes in many shapes and sizes, and it's not about how you were dressed. Malcolm and Martin were both wearing suits when they were shot to death.

GREEN: How do you relate that to people who might not have lived that experience?

LEGEND: I think that's part of our job as artists, especially with media like film and television. Part of your job is to put the viewers in the position of the subject so that they can understand how that person who may be different from them is experiencing life. We're there to help connect people and bring about empathy and help them see these issues from other people's points of view. If we do our jobs correctly, a person might not have to live through that experience to understand what it might be like.

GREEN: When you're thinking about the art you want to create or the projects you want to produce, do you feel a responsibility to keep that in mind?

LEGEND: The challenge of creating great, powerful, meaningful art is being able to draw that connection, to make people feel something, to arouse emotion and passion in people. It is a certain kind of pressure, but it's a good kind of pressure. It's the kind of pressure that creates diamonds.

WILLIAMS: When I think about trying to act and move and create responsibly, not in a reckless manner, I don't ever view

it as a burden. I'm here because I saw value in being able to possibly move narratives in and around black life. It's how [John and I] choose the projects that we choose. It's how we've actually come to know each other, because we're both looking to make work that is meaningful.

Artists in many ways are a barometer for where people's consciousness is. You can't divorce the role of artists from the role of actual activists and organizers. We are inspired by the people that are doing the real work in the streets. We're just reflections of them on our best day.

GREEN: John, your song "Glory" was the theme song for Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* and won an Academy Award. It's been called a protest song. How did that song come to be?

LEGEND: The song isn't protesting in itself. What it's saying is that we should keep fighting because we can win. I love that it's being used by people all around the world that are fighting for justice. We wrote it specifically for that.

We wanted to honor Dr. King's legacy but also to reference what was happening in America at that time. We talked about Ferguson in the song, we talked about other issues that people were rallying around, and we wanted to inspire people that we could win these arguments and battles and struggles for justice.

I think fighting for justice is an act of love. If you look at Marvin Gaye's music, for instance, so much of what he wrote about was love, whether it was sexual and sensual or it was us loving each other as brothers and sisters and neighbors and global citizens.

We have the microphone, we have influence, we have followers, we have people paying attention to what we say. So we have the power to help shape the conversation.

GREEN: Jesse, at the 2016 BET Awards, you said, "We've been floating this country on credit for centuries." The first thing that popped into my mind was Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, where he said, "America has given the Negro people a bad check."

WILLIAMS: We've been told to wait, and America's been telling us that they're good for it—we got you, it's coming, it's in the mail, it'll be there in a few years. *Be patient, be patient, and wait.* That's credit. We're still here, grinding, building, sacrificing, bleeding, suffering. And also, the most profitable gross domestic product is blackness. America is cool because of black people. Our music is black. Our aesthetic is black. The labor that undergirds the entire society is black. We are as American as you can be, and what do we get for it?

LEGEND: We get told to be grateful.

WILLIAMS: And to shut up and wait and get back in your cage and that "it's not about race." Some of the spirit of that line was simply acknowledging the dynamic that we're in. We hit a pivot with the advent of Fox News. When we were kids, you used to assume that to some degree, news was rooted in fact-based thinking. Granted, we are a global empire, an imperialist nation, we're savages and completely corrupt and capitalist—but the way that Edward R. Murrow and Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings spoke about the day-to-day news, you assumed it had been vetted. We've hit a 24-hour news cycle where on Fox News it's okay to just lie all of the time.

In a world where lies are normal, telling the truth becomes radical and revolutionary and dangerous and edgy. We put so many trappings and pageantry around this one hard truth: People are suffering. **A**

Martin Luther King Jr.

III.

“It is obvious that if man is to redeem his spiritual and moral lag, he must go all out to bridge the social and economic gulf between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ of the world. Poverty is one of the most urgent items on the agenda of modern life.”

From “Nobel Lecture,” delivered at the University of Oslo, in Norway, on December 11, 1964

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while he was mustering support for a landmark initiative against the evil of poverty. Even after his death, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Poor People’s Campaign organized a peaceful occupying force in Washington, D.C., of protesters from across America. In the richest country in human history, they saw poverty as a moral failure.

During his life, King often linked global poverty to inequality in the United States. He held the engine of capitalism responsible for both and condemned it in no uncertain terms.

POVERTY

The Crisis in America's Cities

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1967



Three weeks after 43 people were killed in race riots in Detroit—the worst of the more than 150 urban riots during the “long hot summer” of 1967—King addressed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. He delineated the causes of the violence, notably “the white backlash,” black unemployment, racial discrimination, and the war in Vietnam.

A million words will be written and spoken to dissect the ghetto outbreaks, but for a perceptive and vivid expression of culpability I would submit two sentences written a century ago by Victor Hugo:

If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.

The policy makers of the white society have caused the darkness; they created discrimination; they created slums; they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society. When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also declare that the white man does not abide by law in the ghettos. Day in and day out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions for civic services. The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison.

Let us say it boldly that if the total slum violations of law by the white man over the years were calculated and were compared with the lawbreaking of a few days of riots, the hardened criminal would be the white man.

After establishing the general cause of outbursts, it is possible to identify five immediate causes:

1. The white backlash.
2. Unemployment.
3. General discriminatory practices.
4. War.
5. Features peculiar to big cities: crime, family problems, and intensive migration.

I place the white backlash first because the outbursts have an emotional content that is a reaction to the insults and depravity of the white backlash. Many people point out that there have been years of some progress, and this is true. Yet equally true is the fact of an animalistic reaction by a significant

section of the white population. In the midst of progress Negroes were being murdered in the South and cynical white jurors automatically freed the accused. In Chicago last year thousands of vicious white hoodlums with murder in their hearts bombarded Negroes with rocks and bottles because they dared to ask to be neighbors. The white backlash told Negroes that there were limits to their progress; that they must expect to remain permanently unequal and permanently poor. The white backlash said Negroes should not confuse improvements with equality. True equality, it said, will be resisted to the death. The so-called riots in a distorted and hysterical form were a Negro response that said inequality will now be resisted to the death.

The second major cause is unemployment because it furnishes the bulk of the shock troops. Government figures reveal that the rate of unemployment for Negroes runs as high as 15% in some cities—and for youth up to 30–40%! It is not accidental that the major actors in all the outbreaks were the youth. With most of their lives yet to live, the slamming of doors in their faces could be expected to induce rage and rebellion. This is especially true when a boastful nation, while neglecting them, gloats over its wealth, power and world pre-eminence. Yet almost 40% of Negro youth waste their barren lives standing on street corners.

I proposed that a national agency be established to immediately give employment to everyone needing it. Training should be done on the job, not separated from it and often without any guarantee of employment in which to use the training. Nothing is more socially inexcusable than unemployment in this age. In the thirties when the nation was bankrupt, it instituted such an agency, the W.P.A. In the present conditions of a nation glutted with resources it is barbarous to condemn people willing to work to soul-sapping inactivity and poverty.

I am convinced that one massive act of concern will do more than the most massive deployment of troops to quell riots and still hatreds. I am not convinced that the statesmanship exists in Washington to do it. Hugo could have been thinking of 20th century America when he said, “There is always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher classes.”

The third cause is discrimination, which pervades all experiences of Negro life. It pushes the Negro off the economic ladder after he has ascended a few rungs. It stultifies his initiative and insults his being. Even the few Negroes who realize economic security do not attain respect and dignity, because on upper levels discrimination closes different doors to them.

Discrimination is a hell hound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
The riots in Detroit brought fires and looting. The National Guard (upper right) was called in to keep the peace.

The fourth cause is the war in Vietnam. Negroes are not only conscripted in double measure for combat, but they are told the billions needed for remaking their lives are necessary for foreign intervention. Democracy at home is starved to seek a spurious democracy abroad. Dictators, oligarchies, are given our resources to perpetuate their rule at the rate of \$80,000,000 per day, but we cannot afford to spend 10% of this on anti-poverty programs ...

To war against your own people, while warring against another nation, is the ultimate in political and social bankruptcy.

Finally, a complex of causes is found in the conditions of urban life. Crime is well organized in the cities and produces an underclass of great numbers. Rackets are the big business of the ghetto, with masses of employees. In any period of unrest they utilize conditions for advantage. Organized crime has a protected sanctuary in the slums, with police tolerance, if not connivance. It becomes a normal feature of life, poisoning the young and confounding the adult ...

Cities are also victims of the anarchic migrations of Negroes. Although everyone knew in the past decade that millions of Negroes would have to leave the land without schooling, no national planning was done to provide remedies. White immigrants in the 19th century were given free credit and land by the government. In the early 20th century a plethora of social agencies helped them to adjust to city life. The economy readily absorbed white workers into factories and trained them to skills. There were obstacles and privations for white immigrants but every step was upward; care and concern could be found.

When the Negro migrated he was substantially ignored or grossly exploited within a context of searing discrimination. He was left jobless and ignorant, despised and scorned as no other American minority has been ...

To list the causes is to structure the remedial program. A program is not, however, our problem. Our real problem is that there is no disposition by the [Johnson] Administration nor Congress to seek fundamental remedies beyond police measures. The tragic truth is that Congress, more than the American people, is now running amok with racism. We must devise the tactics, not to beg Congress for favors, but to create a situation in which they deem it wise and prudent to act with responsibility and decency.

Some people assert riots are just such a method. Perhaps it would be well to examine the nature of the outbreaks. They reveal in the first place that the time we have is shorter than many of us believed. Patience is running out and the intransigence and hostility of government—national, state and municipal—is aggravating grievances to explosive levels.

The riots are not simply a reign of terror or a splurge of crime, though both elements are partially present. They are also a wildly emotional protest and

a desperate attempt to display the utter desperation that has engulfed many Negroes. The vast majority who actively participated were remarkably discriminating in avoiding harm to persons, venting their anger by appropriating or destroying property. There is an ironic purpose in this choice; to attack a society that appears to cherish property above people, the worst wounds to inflict on it are those to property.

The outbursts cannot be considered an insurrection, because insurrections are organized and can sustain themselves for more than a few days. The riots are powered by spontaneous bitter emotions and therefore die out rapidly.

We have not devised the tactics for urban slum reform. We spent ten years in the South using new tactics of nonviolence that were successful. But in the Northern cities, with time running out, we failed to achieve creative methods of work. As a result, a desperate, essentially leaderless mass of people acted with violence and without a program ...

There is probably no way, even eliminating violence, for Negroes to obtain their rights without upsetting the equanimity of white folks. All too many of them demand tranquility when they mean inequality ...

Nonviolent action in the South was effective because *any* form of social movement by Negroes upset the status quo. When Negroes merely marched in Southern streets it was close to rebellion. In the urban communities marches are less disquieting because they are not considered rebellions and secondly, because the normal turbulence of cities absorbs them as merely transitory drama which is ordinary in city life.

To raise protest to an appropriate level for cities and to invest it with aggressive but nonviolent qualities, it is necessary to adopt civil disobedience. To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer-lasting, costly to the society but not wantonly destructive. Moreover, it is more difficult for government to quell it by superior force. Mass civil disobedience can use rage as a constructive and creative force. It is purposeless to tell Negroes they should not be enraged when they should be. 

“There is probably no way ... for Negroes to obtain their rights without upsetting the equanimity of white folks.”

Good jobs in black communities are gone.
Evictions are the norm. Extreme poverty is rising.
So why aren't cities exploding?

RIOTS ARE THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNHEARD

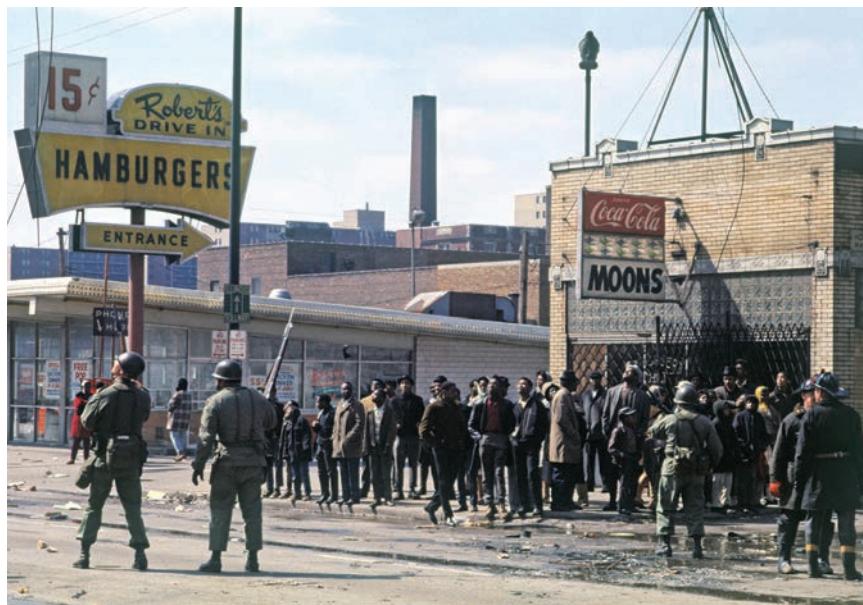
By Matthew Desmond

O

n August 5, 1966, someone struck Martin Luther King Jr. in the head with a rock. The assault happened not in Birmingham or in Memphis but in Chicago. Earlier that year, King had moved into a run-down apartment on the city's West Side to bring national attention to the plight of blacks trapped in slum housing and confined to overcrowded schools. That day, he was marching in a white neighborhood for the right of families like his to live wherever they chose. The rock dropped King to one knee. He stayed like that for a moment, trying to get past the pain. "Aides and bodyguards closed in around King," one account reads, "holding placards aloft to shield him from the missiles that followed." The white onlookers broke into a riot, bloodying dozens of marchers.

While recovering from his injury, King said he needed to appear in public "to bring this hate into the open." In a country that had never been shy about its hatred of black people, this was an odd remark. But King's audience was amnesiac white northerners who had shielded themselves from the racial clash. During the Great Migration, black families fleeing Ku Klux Klan terrorism and dirt poverty in the rural South moved to urban ghettos in the North. As the folk saying went, "The South doesn't care how close a Negro gets, just so he doesn't get too high; the North doesn't care how high he gets, just so he doesn't get too close." When he did get too close, hard and heavy objects rained from the sky. In 1919, a black teenager in Chicago named Eugene Williams drifted to the white side of the Lake Michigan swimming area. White bathers pelted him with rocks. The youngster drowned, and 38 others (23 black, 15 white) died in the week of rioting that ensued.

Historically, whites have been the ones to cast the first stones, inciting and then dominating most American race riots. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1921: Whites



BETTMANN/GETTY

Well-meaning outsiders are increasingly the ones addressing problems in poor communities in place of local residents, who might take matters into their own hands. Or fists.



destroyed a prosperous black community, using machine guns and even dropping bombs from planes. Detroit, 1943: Skirmishes between white and black youths escalated into a full-blown riot that left 34 people dead, most of them black. Milwaukee, 1967: Thousands of whites beat back a crowd protesting housing segregation, hurling rocks and bottles of urine.

But the riotous images that loop in our collective memory are those of Watts and Detroit and Baltimore in the 1960s. The unrest reached an epitome in April 1968, when black anguish over King's murder saw city after city set on fire. King himself was only 39 years old when he died, but many black youths spoke a different language. Theirs wasn't the cadenced, masculine oratory of the southern pulpit but the quick, clean shatter of brick through glass. This was speech that possessed, in the literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick's estimation, "the brutality of the city and an assertion of threatening power at hand, not to come." That power was unleashed in more than 100 cities, where blacks looted and burned white-owned establishments.

Fires break out after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

The Holy Week Uprising, people called it, harking back to Christ's own one-man riot, when he used a whip of cords to cleanse the temple of money changers and merchants. Most white Americans blamed the riots on "looters and undesirables," according to opinion polls; most black Americans saw them as a reaction to "discrimination and unfair treatment." What lawmakers saw was a fast-unspooling crisis. So they acted by providing more educational and welfare services, and by establishing seasonal programs for young people—cheekily referred to as "antiriot insurance." Most important, having long refused to criminalize housing discrimination, Congress pushed through the 1968 Civil Rights Act, commonly called the Fair Housing Act. It was the outcome King had

fought for, brought about by methods he had condemned.

Fifty years later, our cities, in both the North and the South, remain sharp-line segregated. Not only that, but the decades following the Holy Week Uprising have witnessed a surge in mass incarceration that has disproportionately caged poor black men; a loss of manufacturing jobs that has left many black men unemployed; soaring housing costs and an epidemic of evictions, felt most acutely in low-income communities of color; and the gutting of welfare, which has led to a spike in extreme poverty.

By these measures, things have grown worse. Yet the streets, for the most part, have remained clear and quiet. Only two significant riots have broken out since the early 1970s: in Miami in 1980 and in Los Angeles in 1992, both of them in response to the acquittals of police officers who had beaten unarmed black men. Recent years have witnessed spates of unrest protesting police violence in Ferguson, Missouri, and beyond, but these have been short-lived affairs resulting in few serious injuries and restrained arson. The 2015 unrest in Baltimore after Freddie Gray died in police custody resulted in an estimated \$9 million in property damage and no deaths. The 1992 L.A. riots, by comparison, caused more than \$1 billion in property damage and 63 deaths.

Why don't American cities burn like they used to? The late urban historian Michael Katz observed that the federal government's response to the Holy Week Uprising—criminalizing residential segregation—wound up reorganizing city neighborhoods in ways that tempered unrest. For much of the 20th century, riots often erupted after black bodies touched white bodies, were accused of violating white bodies, or even floated into white-claimed waters. In northern cities, riots broke out most frequently after blacks streamed in but before whites packed up and moved. Once housing discrimination was no longer legally protected, middle-class black families began leaving the ghetto; in turn, white families moved to the suburbs. "With so many whites gone," Katz wrote, "boundaries became less contentious, eroding one major source of civil violence."

At the same time, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had a massive impact. In the

15 years after it became law, the number of black elected officials nationwide jumped from 100 to 1,813. Major cities elected their first black mayors, and toothier antidiscrimination laws opened opportunities for black people in business and real estate. Yet just when they were making inroads into positions of influence, white flight eroded cities' tax base, which worsened the plight of poor blacks left behind and muddied who was to blame. "People said that we burned down our community," Tommy Jacquette, a participant in the 1965 Watts riot, recounted in the *Los Angeles Times* four decades later. "No, we didn't. We had a revolt in our community against those people who were in here trying to exploit and oppress us. We did not own this community." But as the years passed and blacks did, in fact, come to own their communities, it wasn't so clear anymore whose windows to smash in response to persistent oppression.

The country also began incarcerating millions of its citizens. From 1970 to 2003, the number of state and federal prisons grew sevenfold. The United States currently has the world's highest incarceration rate (see "Freedom Ain't Free," page 84). The long arm of the law has disproportionately swept up poor black men and Latinos; if they were incarcerated at the same rate as whites, the U.S. prison and jail population would be half of what it is today. When politicians justified tough-on-crime policies by denouncing "violence in our streets" and vowing to enforce "law and order," as Barry Goldwater did in 1964, they weren't talking only, or even primarily, about assaults, robberies, and other typical forms of lawbreaking. They meant civil-rights demonstrations—and riots in particular. Nationwide, funding for riot control spiked, especially in cities that had experienced riots before and had sizable black populations. Urban police departments bought militarized weapons, vehicles, and surveillance equipment. Small towns got in on the action. In 1983, only 13 percent of towns with a population of 25,000 to 50,000 had a SWAT team; by 2005, 80 percent of them did, according to the criminologist Peter Kraska. Disaffected black youths hurled bricks and lit fires. The police bought tanks.

Mass incarceration incapacitated vast numbers of young black men, who in

previous generations had been the main actors in urban uprisings, while police militarization allowed the authorities to meet rioters with a fierce display of force. These moves may well have helped squelch unrest. But rioting was not the only casualty of this war on crime. Other political activity, from civil disobedience to voting, was also affected. Long-standing state laws deprived the growing number of convicted felons of the right to vote. The chilling effect of incarceration spread to neighbors and kin: Research by the political scientist Traci Burch shows that people in communities with high incarceration rates are far less likely to sign a petition or join a protest than people in other communities. Even minor encounters with law enforcement may discourage people from voting. A study by the political scientists Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman found that people who have simply been stopped and questioned by the police are less likely to cast a ballot than their peers who have never had a brush with the law. The nation's criminal-justice system "trains people for a distinctive and lesser kind of citizenship," Weaver wrote in the *Boston Review*.

Something else might be doing that too: social-service providers, like those supplying food and medical care. The rise of the nonprofit sector has been so impressive that social scientists now speak of voluntary organizations making up a "shadow state apparatus," in the words of Jennifer Wolch, a professor of city and regional planning at UC Berkeley. These social-service providers constitute a powerful, widely embraced force for good. But charities may unintentionally steer communities away from political engagement. John McKnight, a former civil-rights organizer and a professor emeritus of social policy at Northwestern, worries that the presence of experts might "push out the problem-solving knowledge and action of friend, neighbor, citizen, and association." The result, McKnight argues, is that poor urban families are socialized to behave more like clients than citizens to get their basic needs met.

Clients stand in line, fill out forms, wait their turn; citizens demand their rights. Social-service providers are pro-innovation, but riots are anti-innovation; primitive tools—rocks, fire—will do. Social-service providers value credentials;

rioters don't care whether letters follow your last name. You need no training to riot, which is why children are often spotted amid the tear gas and rubble. Social-service providers follow a process; riots call for immediate action. The rise of the social-service sector may have had the effect of subduing riots, because well-meaning outsiders are increasingly the ones addressing problems in poor communities in place of local residents, who might take matters into their own hands. Or fists.

"A riot is the language of the unheard," King explained years ago. "And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years."

America fails to hear still. The urban explosions of the civil-rights era are over, but the social evils the rioters seethed about—racism, poverty—remain. Despite the uprisings in Ferguson and elsewhere, a general stillness persists. Riots were terrifying spectacles, as the social order was defied and defended through blood and ruin. But the quiescence we have today is unsettling in its own way. For all their destructive power, the riots of the 1960s at least were bluntly honest, a message that the fight for equality had a long way to go. Whatever the rioters' motives—some rushed in for the cause, others for sport—every riot was inherently political, propelled by a shameful past and the search for a better, if unarticulated, future. The Holy Week Uprising was a grievance, brutally filed. In the torrents was something like hope. [A](#)

Matthew Desmond, a sociology professor at Princeton, specializes in the study of poverty. He received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2015, and his book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction in 2017.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF OPPRESSION

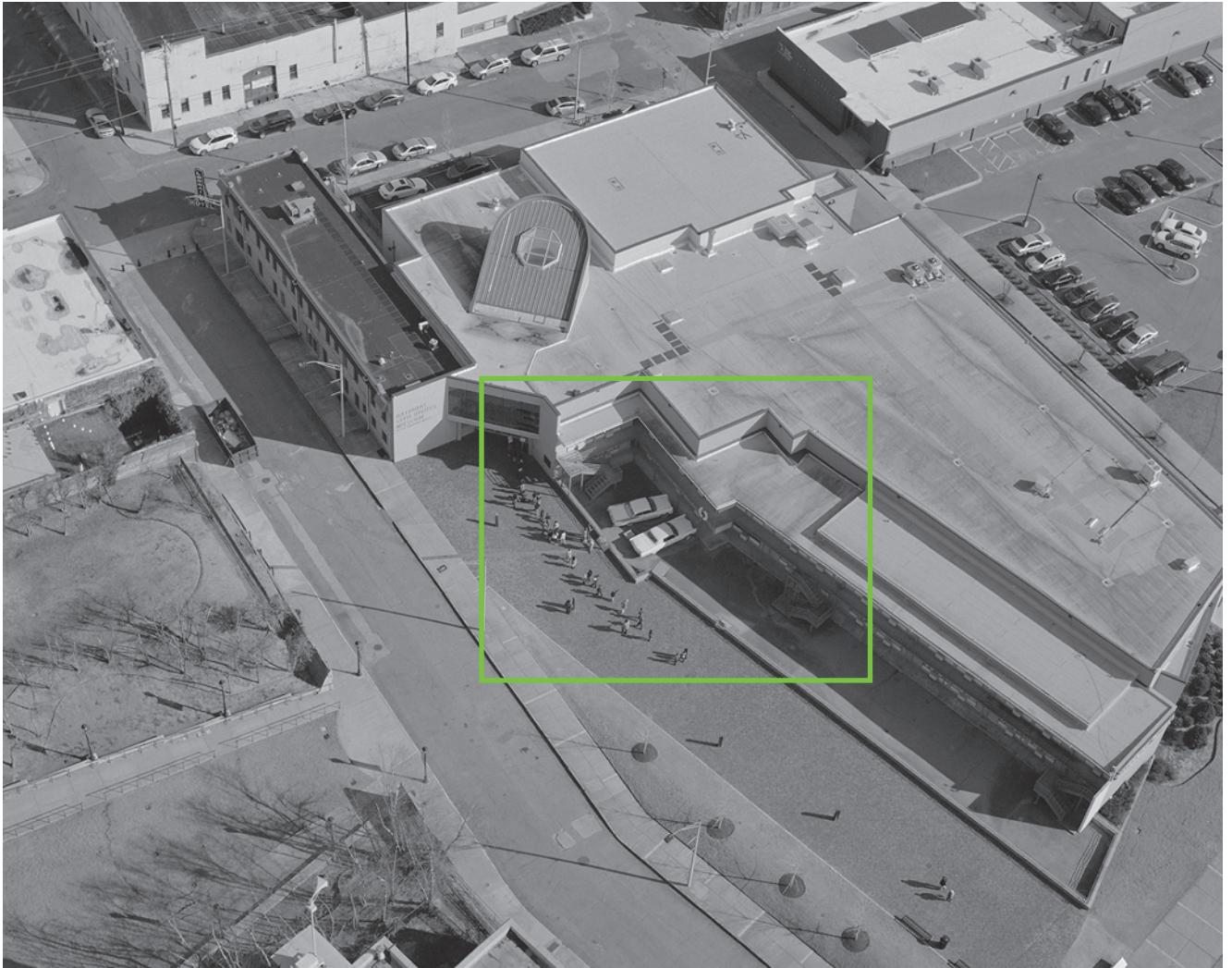
By LaToya Ruby Frazier

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, but his death reverberated across the United States.

Memphis did not feel the full flames of riots in April 1968, in part because of King's organizing apparatus. But his message of nonviolence was not enough to hold back the tide of rage that brought millions of dollars of damage to other major metropolises, including Chicago and Baltimore. King's assassination has influenced how these cities are physically structured, from the gutting of urban neighborhoods to the memorializing of the civil-rights leader in monuments, streets, and schools.

Using techniques and film formats associated with late-20th-century documentary photography, and shooting from a helicopter, LaToya Ruby Frazier revisited Memphis, Chicago, and Baltimore to explore how they have responded to five more decades of oppression.





Memphis

The Memphis Pyramid (*left*), one of Tennessee's most famous buildings, overlooks the Hernando DeSoto Bridge across the Mississippi River. The bridge is an iconic symbol for Memphis, spanning the distance from Tennessee to

Arkansas. That's why Black Lives Matter protesters shut it down in 2016, echoing sanitation workers' demands in 1968 for economic justice and calling for an end to police brutality.

The Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated,

has since been reenvisioned as the National Civil Rights Museum, which preserves many of the exact details from the day of the murder. A Dodge and a Cadillac are parked in the lot below room 306 (*above*); a white wreath on the railing honors the room's most famous occupant (*right*).

The assassin James Earl Ray shot King, who was standing on the balcony, from a flophouse bathroom across the street.



Chicago

The structural inequality of Chicago, which King fought against in 1966, is striking even today. Just west of the Magnificent Mile and the towering skyscrapers of one of America's wealthiest neighborhoods marks the location where the Cabrini-Green public-housing

projects once stood (*right*). Cabrini-Green is currently being redeveloped. But in 1968, rage gripped the ghetto, and snipers reportedly fired on police from the towers.

The New Greater St. John Community Missionary Baptist Church (*below*) still anchors

a mostly black neighborhood in East Garfield Park, on the city's West Side. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used the church, then known as Warren Congregational Church, as their headquarters during their Chicago campaign, building on the strong activist tradition on the West Side. Two years later, after King's death was announced, riots spilled down Madison Street, two blocks behind the church.





The corner of East 41st Street and South Martin Luther King Drive (top), in Bronzeville, a neighborhood historically known as the “Black Metropolis” that has long been considered an economic and cultural hub

of the black community on the South Side.

In 1966, King led sustained demonstrations against housing discrimination around the city. During a march into the Gage Park neighborhood from Marquette Park (left),

protesters were met by white counter-protesters, who pelted King with rocks.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Living Memorial (above), commemorating the incident, was unveiled in Marquette Park in 2016.



On April 19, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old black man, died from an injury suffered in police custody, sparking protests throughout the city. Murals in his honor were created near the Gilmor Homes (above and center), the public-housing project where he had been arrested. Disturbances occurred throughout the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood (far left).

Baltimore



The 2015 Baltimore Uprising saw the city's most extensive protests since 1968's Holy Week Uprising. The 1968 disturbances started on the 400 block of Gay Street (left), where a crowd of people had gathered on April 6. After the windows of a hat shop were smashed, fires and looting broke out along Gay Street.

The CVS drug-store at the corner of North

and Pennsylvania Avenues (opposite page, bottom right) was burned during the 2015 unrest.

The despair of 1968 left an indelible mark on Baltimore's history. As in Chicago, unrest in Baltimore's black neighborhoods cemented white flight to the suburbs and other parts of the city. The divestment and discriminatory lending practices—

infamously associated with Baltimore—increased the segregation and deterioration of black neighborhoods, like the one where Freddie “Pepper” Gray grew up in poverty (below).

LaToya Ruby Frazier is an artist whose work in photography, video, and performance builds visual archives that address industrialism, Rust Belt revitalization, environmental justice, health-care inequity, family, and communal history. She was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2015.



(Originally titled: “Statement by Dr. King re: School Desegregation 10 Years After”)

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION A 10-YEAR REPORT CARD

The Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional in its May 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ten years later, King issued a statement decrying how little had changed in the nation’s classrooms. The report mixed statistics with moral assessments—and a persistent optimism—to build an argument that was hard to refute.

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1964

Any assessment of the extent of progress made in the last 10 years since the Supreme Court’s decision of May 17, 1954, must be done under careful analysis of the real and the imagined. The naive might believe that great strides have been made in school desegregation over the past decade, but this is not at all true.

Today, the tragically real picture of school desegregation, particularly in the South, is still one of stark tokenism or no desegregation at all. In my own hometown of Atlanta, for example, the awful truth is that of 14,159 Negroes enrolled in high schools, only 153 are presently attending classes with whites, and, worse, not a single Negro child attends a desegregated elementary school.

The pattern is the same all over the deep South, and those states which have moved at all in any effort to comply with the Supreme Court’s

decision have done so with a gradualism and tokenism that is shamefully appalling.

The worst offender of all is Mississippi, which has not desegregated a single public school.

If one turns to the North the picture is not much brighter. The Negro ghettos created by the power structures, and tacitly endorsed by unspoken “gentlemen’s agreements,” have kept Negro school children still victimized by the crippling chains of segregated schools. An example is Gary, Ind., where 97 per cent of the city’s 23,000 school children attend schools far removed from any contact with the white population.

The only conclusion to be drawn is that in the past decade school desegregation has moved only at a creeping pace when it has moved at all. But we are still hopeful that the next year or two will bring a marked change in the entire picture. 



THE ATLANTIC ARCHIVES

Dynamite

Stokely Carmichael
and Charles Hamilton

October 1967

Stokely Carmichael, the charismatic 26-year-old ex-chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was (in *The Atlantic's* words) “perhaps the most controversial proponent of the new Negro militancy.” He teamed up with Charles Hamilton, a political scientist at Roosevelt University, in Chicago, to write *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, which included a thoughtful, history-minded explanation of urban riots. *The Atlantic* published an excerpt.

The core problem within the ghetto is the vicious circle created by the lack of decent housing, decent jobs, and adequate education. The failure of these three fundamental institutions has led to alienation of the ghetto from the rest of the urban area as well as to deep political rifts between the two communities.

In America we judge by American standards, and by this yardstick we find that the black man lives in incredibly inadequate housing, shabby shelters that are dangerous to mental and physical health and to life itself. It has been estimated that 20 million black people put \$15 billion into rents, mortgage payments, and housing expenses every year. But because his choice is largely limited to the ghettos, and because the black population is increasing at a rate which is 150 percent over that of the increase in the white population, the shelter shortage for the black person is not only acute and perennial, but getting

increasingly tighter. Black people are automatically forced to pay top dollar for whatever they get, even a 6-by-6 cold-water flat.

Urban renewal and highway clearance programs have forced black people more and more into congested pockets of the inner city. Since suburban zoning laws have kept out low-income housing, and the federal government has failed to pass open-occupancy laws, black people are forced to stay in the deteriorating ghettos. Thus crowding increases, and slum conditions worsen ...

Here we begin to understand the pervasive cyclic implications of institutional racism. Barred from most housing, black people are forced to live in segregated neighborhoods, and with this comes de facto segregated schooling, which means poor education, which leads in turn to ill-paying jobs ...

These are the conditions which create dynamite in the ghettos.

About employment, housing, and the military—institutions central to Americans' social life—Martin Luther King Jr. had plenty to say. But about schools and education, perhaps surprisingly, he said less.

One reason may have been timing. The landmark education battle of the civil-rights movement took place when King was at the beginning of his career. The Supreme Court struck down the legality of “separate but equal” public schools in 1954, the year he became a pastor, one year after he got married, and one year before he completed his doctoral work.

Although many of the educational fights of King's era were local and legislative, we can infer from his writings and speeches that his hope for the educational future of America's black children was more ambitious than desegregation alone. In 1947, as an undergraduate at Morehouse College, King published in the campus newspaper a short treatise on the purpose of education. He argued that to benefit society, high-quality education should focus on developing students' critical thinking and moral compass.

Every year, millions of American students are told that King's hope has come to fruition, and their own technically desegregated classrooms are held up as evidence. This is a lie, one that feels good and makes some sense if you consider that it is predicated on the mid-20th-century image of segregation. Our children are shown pictures of 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford facing the National Guard in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 and of U.S. marshals in New Orleans escorting 6-year-old Ruby Bridges to school in 1960. They learn that this, and only this, is what injustice looks like. The absence of de jure segregation, of furious mobs spitting and screaming at the front door, is heralded as the true test of justice—a low, low bar.

Still Separate and Unequal

By Eve L. Ewing

King's vision for education was far grander than desegregation alone. How disappointed he would be.



But even by this standard, we aren't doing all that well. Public-school segregation has grown worse in the South, where black students' access to majority-white schools has declined since the late 1980s. Across the country, white students are the likeliest to attend schools with classmates mostly of the same race. This point is omitted in many conversations about segregation, but racial injustice doesn't just mean black and Latino students languishing in struggling schools. It also means white students' parents engaging in what the sociologist Charles Tilly has called “opportunity hoarding” and actively separating their sons and daughters from children of color.

Worse, it has also become clear that “integrated” schools are failing us if we assess them based on the way King envisioned equality in the broader social



BETTMANN/GETTY

landscape. He offered us a blueprint for this grander vision in a 1967 address at an Atlanta YMCA (see “The Three Evils,” page 24), in which he argued that the fight for civil rights in America must shift from a “struggle for decency” toward what he called “genuine equality.” And genuine equality, King warned, would be costly. It would require the government to spend many billions of dollars to abolish poverty and provide high-quality education while tolerating an inevitable backlash from white Americans.

This morally ambitious King understood white supremacy as a system that had prevailed in every aspect of our nation’s social life, history, and legislative and judicial practice, and he envisioned the dismantling of that system. He did not simply take sides on policy prescriptions that would lead only to superficial

solutions; he imagined a country in which black people could enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and human potential. If the legacy of this King is our measuring stick, we have failed. [4](#)

Eve L. Ewing is a sociologist of education at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. She is the author of *Electric Arches* and a forthcoming book about the role of race in Chicago’s public-school closures.

THE ATLANTIC ARCHIVES

Where Ghetto Schools Fail

Jonathan Kozol

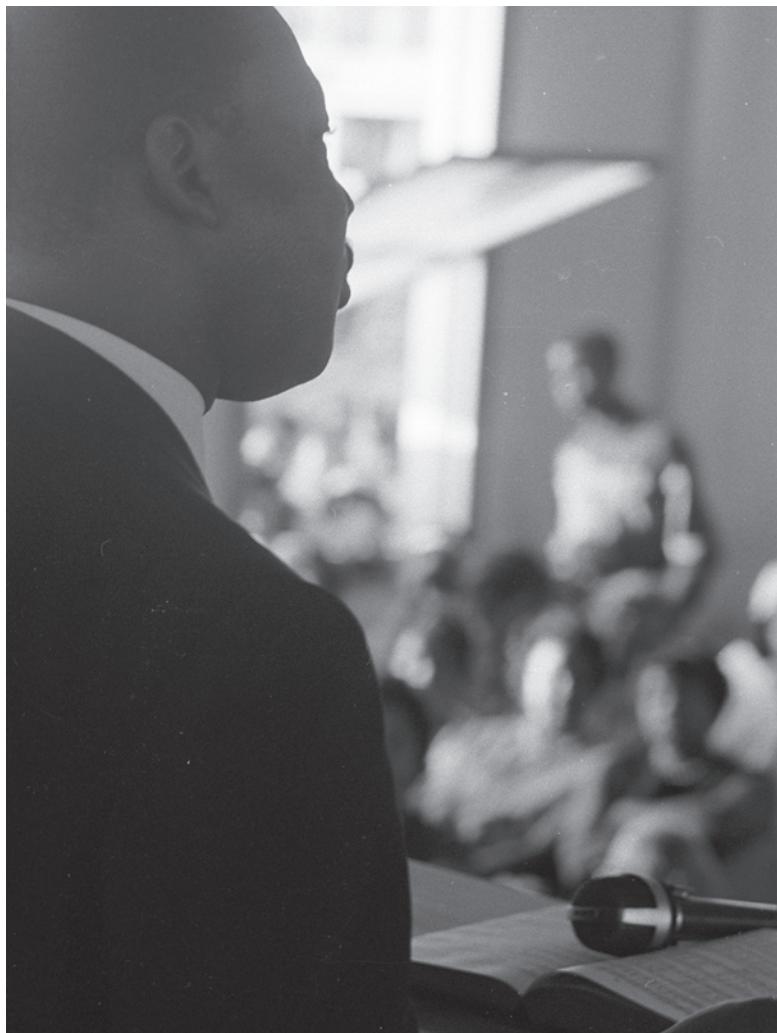
October 1967

*Jonathan Kozol was a fourth-grade teacher in Roxbury, a predominantly black neighborhood of Boston, before he became the best-selling author of *Death at an Early Age*, an indictment of inner-city education. He was fired for teaching the poetry of Langston Hughes. In an excerpt from his book, published in *The Atlantic*, he describes his school’s “unspoken assumption” that it was shameful to be black.*

When my class had progressed to the cotton chapter in our geography book, I decided to alter the scheduled reading. Since I was required to make use of the textbook, and since its use, I believed, was certain to be damaging, I decided to supply the class with extra material in the form of a mimeographed sheet. I did not propose to tell the children any tales about lynchings, beatings, or the Ku Klux Klan. I merely wanted to add to the study of cotton-growing some information about the connection between the discovery of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin and the great growth of slavery.

I had to submit this material to my immediate superior in the school ... Looking over the page, she agreed with me immediately that it was accurate. Nobody, she said, was going to quibble with the idea that cotton, the cotton gin, and slavery were all intertwined. But it was the question of the “advisability of any mention of slavery to the children at this time,” which, she said, she was presently turning over in her mind. “Would it,” she asked me frankly, “truly serve the advantage of the children at this stage to confuse and complicate the study of simple geography with socioeconomic factors?” Why expose the children, she was asking essentially, to unpleasant facts about their heritage?

Then, with an expression of the most honest and intense affection for the children in the class, she added: “I don’t want these children to have to think back on this year later on and to remember that we were the ones who told them they were Negro.”



“There Will Be a Mighty Wrath”

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1968

In the early months of 1968, King toured the South and beyond to drum up interest in, and raise funds for, the Poor People’s Campaign, which he had initiated and was supposed to lead later that spring. On March 20, he addressed a rally in the small, majority-black town of Eutaw, in western Alabama. He called for 1 million people to converge on the nation’s capital to lobby the government’s leaders to help the poor.

Thank you very much my brothers and sisters of Eutaw, Alabama ... Let me announce now that you have already revealed your support for this campaign to gain jobs and income for the poor people of our nation, because you have contributed eighty six dollars and sixty one cents. I think you ought to give yourselves a hand for that ... We are ready to go to Washington. Now we’ve been fooling around in many areas. And we’ve been doing some significant things all across the South. We’ve gotten public accommodations about straightened out. We fought here and all over from Selma right through the black belt of Alabama to get the right to vote. Now we are going to get the right to have three square meals a day. Now we are going to get the right to have a decent house to live in. Now we are going to get the right to have some money in our pockets so that we can buy steak when we want to buy it ... Now we are going to get the right to be able to educate our children. Now we are going to get the right for our wives and our mothers not to have to get up early in the morning, and run over to the white lady’s kitchen and clean and wash her clothes but to be able to stay at home and raise her own children. Now we are fighting for the right. Now we are fighting for the right to get proper medical care. Now we are fighting for the right to have enough money to have our physical-medical examination every year. Now we are fighting for the right to be able to see our dentist every year. Now we are fighting for the right to get the basic necessities of life. And in fighting for this right we aren’t going to stop in Montgomery this time. We aren’t going to stop in Atlanta this time. We aren’t going to stop in Columbia, South Carolina, this time. We’re going through all of them, but we aren’t going to stop. We aren’t going to stop in North Carolina, the city of Charlotte, this time. And we aren’t going to stop in Richmond, Virginia, this time. We aren’t going to stop until we get to the gates of the White House before Lyndon Baines Johnson, and the Congress of the United States of America. Now if we are going to carry on this campaign, this Poor People’s Campaign, this campaign to guarantee jobs and income, we’re going to need people, large numbers of people ... We’re going to build us a town within a town. We’re going to build a shantytown in Washington. That’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to build our own town, and let the world see how we so often have to live back home. We’re going to build our shantytown. We’ve already picked places to build our town. And we’re

“Fire hoses can’t deal with a million people ... Dogs can’t bite a million people.”

going to operate this movement out of there. We get up every morning and eat breakfast together. Then we’ll make a few calls on Congress. Stop by the Department of Labor, present our demands. If Mr. Wirtz, the head of the Department of Labor, won’t do anything about it Monday, we may just say to him we’ll be back Tuesday. Go back Tuesday and talk to him again with our demands. And while some few will go in to do the talking, three or four thousand of us on the outside will just stay on our knees ’til they get back. If nothing is done Tuesday, we’ll let them know we’ll be back Wednesday and do the same thing. We’ll be back Thursday. We’ll be back Friday. And then if nothing is done about Friday, maybe the next Monday all of the three or four thousand of us will just go on in the building and refuse to leave that building. This is what I’m talking about. And then, in the afternoon, we’re going to have festivals of music and art teaching about our own culture. We don’t know ourselves, and consequently so often we end up not loving ourselves. But we are going to teach our children. And you who will come to us and be with us in Washington day after day, that Plato and Aristotle are not the only people who wrote about philosophy. But W. E. B. Du Bois wrote political philosophy. We’re going to let them know that Shakespeare was not the only poet that entered history. But Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes came by. We’re going to let them know that Einstein was not the only scientist, but we’re just going to make it clear to them that George Washington Carver came by here. We’re going to get it over. And then we’re going to have freedom schools for adults and children. Every day we’re going to learn a little more. Learn a little more about our heritage, about our government, about the world. And we’re going to have a mighty time in Washington. And we’re in Alabama to urge you to get ready. All ye who are burdened down, come unto us. All ye who are heavy laden, come unto us. All ye who are unemployed, come unto us. All ye who are tired of segregation and discrimination, come unto us. All ye who are overworked and underpaid, come unto us ... And we will give you the rest of freedom and economic security. Now we want you to come to Washington ... And there will be a mighty wrath. What am I saying? I’m simply saying that something will start out of Mississippi, and connect with Alabama. And then the people from Alabama and Mississippi will connect with the people of Georgia. The people of Georgia will connect with the people of South Carolina. And then all of them will connect with the people of North Carolina. And then all of them will connect with the people of Virginia. And then another group will be moving on out of Boston connecting with New York. And that group connecting with Philadelphia. Hear me this afternoon. And that

group connecting with Baltimore. And then another group pulling on over out of Milwaukee connecting with Chicago. And then they connect with Cleveland. And then they connect with Pittsburgh. And then, one day all of them going to connect together in Washington, D.C. Now that’s what we’re going to do ... We’re not going only to get Los Angeles and New York straight. God knows, they need to be straightened up. But we’re going to get Eutaw straight ... Because I met too many people in Chicago from Eutaw. And they are in Chicago not because Eutaw isn’t potentially beautiful, but because Eutaw has been so exploited. White people have kept us at the bottom so long, and they were trying to run away. And they thought they were going to a promised land, and they discovered that even the pharaohs were up there. But, if we could make the South a decent and livable place, people would migrate back to the South. I look at all this beautiful land around here in Alabama, all this beautiful land in Mississippi. The only thing wrong with it is that the white folk want it all for themselves. They don’t want to share nothing. Now we’re going to make this nation better ... I’m telling all Negroes in America to take their vacation in Washington, D.C., this year. Everybody. You can get up there and come on over to the city of hope, because we’re going to build the city. Come by to see us. And we’ll all break bread together. You know, one thing about it, if we get enough people in Washington, Congress will have to move if for no other reason than to get us out of town. Because we will so tie that town up, that it won’t be able to function. Think about it. Think about the fact that if we could get every week, people just going in. And then one day we come up with a million people in Washington. We would be within the law and at the same time practicing civil disobedience. We wouldn’t even have to organize civil disobedience. You get a million people, everything is automatically tied up. Traffic can’t move or nothing. Now I’m telling you what we can do for this nation. And it’s too many for them to put you in jail. Yes sir. Fire hoses can’t deal with a million people. Yes, the water will give out. Dogs can’t bite a million people. The United States Army wouldn’t know how to deal with a million people. Mace, with its chemical power, can’t get to a million people. I know what I’m talking about. Now this is what we’re going to do in Washington ... And when we get back, we are going to have in our hands a commitment to begin a process to end the long night of poverty and despair that we have known in this nation. So once again we are asking you to put on your walking shoes, and walk together, pray together, struggle together, believe together, have faith together, and come on to Washington. And there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land. 

The nation's problem isn't that we don't have enough money. It's that we don't have the moral capacity to face what ails society.

By William J. Barber II

A New Poor People's Campaign



JILL FREEDMAN/GETTY



In the summer of 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. visited homes in the hamlet of Marks, Mississippi. Later he remembered the hundreds of children who lacked shoes. A mother told King that her children had no clothes for school. The Nobel laureate wept openly. “They didn’t even have any blankets to cover their children up on a cold night,” he recalled. “And I said to myself, *God does not like this.*” Then he vowed, “We are going to say in no uncertain terms that we aren’t going to accept it any longer. We’ve got to go to Washington in big numbers.”

In March 1968, King brought together a group of more than 50 leaders representing Black Belt sharecroppers, Appalachian coal miners, Chicano farmworkers, and American Indians, among others, to join the Poor People’s Campaign. The poor, “both white and Negro, live in a cruelly unjust society,” he said. “If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.”

America’s sickness was spiritual—and would be terminal, King insisted, unless we experienced a “radical revolution of values.” A shift to the left or the right could not save us; only a movement that changed the moral narrative could refocus our priorities on building a society that honored the dignity of every person. This country had to be born again—not only in budgets and policy decisions, but in spirit.

The preacher in King knew that such a moral revival could not simply be spoken into existence. Poor people, who are so often pitted against one another, needed to unite in a national

campaign of direct action to save America’s soul, King told the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Today we face a national crisis that is in many ways an intensifying of the storm that rocked America in 1968. But too often, our attempts to diagnose what ails us cannot get past the tired debates of left-versus-right politics. King’s analysis was that interlocking systems of violence, literal and metaphorical—which he called racism, poverty, and militarism—blinded most Americans to the lives of people in places like Marks. Until a Poor People’s Campaign compelled Americans to see “them” as “us,” the ideal of America would remain beyond reach.

Four diseases, all connected, now threaten the nation’s social and moral health: racism, poverty, environmental devastation, and the war economy—sanctified by the heresy of Christian nationalism. Since the 2016 presidential election, when white rage propelled a candidate endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan into the White House, racism has been more prominent in public life. Nearly every politician in the United States condemned “hate” after the violence by anti-black, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, last summer. Racism and white supremacy, however, are not about hate. They are about power.

The question is not whether politicians condemn hate, but whether they promote the policy agenda of white supremacy. Since 2010, we have seen an assault on voting rights in numerous state legislatures, which the Supreme Court exacerbated in 2013 by gutting a crucial provision of the Voting Rights Act. The states that attack voting rights by using partisan gerrymandering, discriminatory voter-identification requirements, or a rollback of early voting and same-day registration are also home to the lowest wages, the severest poverty, the greatest hostility toward immigrants and the LGBT community, and the deepest cuts in education funding. Politicians who try to suppress voting are using their power to hurt the poor and the working class—white, brown, and black.

In the richest society in human history, nearly half of the population lives in poverty or is struggling to make ends meet. More than half of African American workers and nearly 60 percent of Latino workers are paid less than \$15 an hour. In the South, half of all jobs pay less than \$15 an hour. During the past five years, state legislatures have stepped in to override many of the municipalities where the “Fight for \$15” has succeeded.

Meanwhile, the nation’s economic growth, especially since the Great Recession, has overwhelmingly benefited the wealthiest among us. Wall Street got bailouts while working Americans saw their jobs shipped overseas or outsourced to contractors. The top 400 taxpayers earn an average

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Americans, young
and old, dwell
in Resurrection
City, made of
tents and wooden
shanties, during
the 1968 Poor Peo-
ple’s Campaign in
Washington.

**In the richest
society in
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ends meet.**



of \$97,000 an hour, while people are arrested for protesting because they can't survive on \$7.25 an hour, the minimum that Washington requires.

Environmental dangers also disproportionately hurt the poor. In Flint, Michigan, poor people can buy unleaded gasoline but can't get unleaded water from the tap. Oil companies are drilling for natural gas on Apache lands, penetrating the aquifers. Coal ash has spilled into rivers, and pipelines are being built through sacred territory. Federal deregulation is opening the door to new fossil-fuel exploration and mining in Alaska, contributing to climate change and scarring native lands.

The unending war economy has made everything worse. Out of each discretionary federal dollar spent, 54 cents goes to the military. This is money that is not spent on health care, education, affordable housing, or infrastructure. We've paid more than \$4 trillion since 2001 to fight the War on Terror while claiming that we lack the resources to furnish decent medical care for every American.

Our problem isn't that we don't have enough money. It's that we don't have the moral capacity to face what ails our society.

While a thorough analysis of America's moral malady may tempt us to despair, it also brings us face-to-face with the ethical challenge that inspired the first Poor People's Campaign. The children in Marks made King weep, just as pictures of children burned by napalm in Vietnam had brought him to tears, because he knew that their cruel reality wasn't inevitable. As James Baldwin wrote: "We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over." To King, the Poor People's Campaign was about America's need for another Reconstruction—for an acknowledgment that a system of race-based

slavery had created the inequality that had been passed down to the present day.

This confluence of troubles may seem overwhelming. It suggests, however, that the only way out is for people directly harmed by the economic and political system to fight as one against the few who benefit from it.

In 1968, the idea—a Poor People's Campaign to unite activists from across the nation and bring them to Washington to shut down the government, to bring the issue of poverty compellingly to the fore—looked impossible. Except there was no other way. The tent city in Washington was snuffed out after six weeks by riot police and tear gas. Even so, the campaign had a lasting influence on national policies, as seen in the additional spending for Head Start, subsidized school lunches and food programs in poverty-stricken counties, and the creation of the Children's Defense Fund, which has pushed legislation to help poor children and families for the past half century.

Still, we have never completed the Reconstruction that our federal government admitted was necessary after the Civil War. Just as the Poor People's Campaign proposed, the Reconstruction we need now must arise from the efforts of people harmed directly by racism, poverty, environmental degradation, and the war economy. That is the inspiration for the new Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, which is coordinating direct actions across the country that will begin in May. Activists in at least 32 states and Washington, D.C., will join in 40 days of civil disobedience, including an encampment in the nation's capital, in hopes of building the power of the poor and the working class to reset the national agenda.

Only by joining together and asserting our authority as children of God can we shift the moral narrative in this nation and create a movement that will challenge those in power to form the "more perfect union" to which we aspire. Now as in 1968, this notion looks impossible. Except, again, there is no other way. [A](#)

The Reverend William J. Barber II, a longtime civil-rights activist, is the president of Repairers of the Breach and a co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

There's only one way out: for people directly harmed by the economic and political system to fight as one against the few who benefit from it.

A “Freedom Budget” for All Americans

A SUMMARY

A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin

January 1967

In the fall of 1965, after the Voting Rights Act passed, the coalition of black, socialist, and progressive leaders who had come together to organize 1963’s March on Washington joined together again to create an ambitious policy document with no less a goal than ending poverty in the United States without cost to taxpayers. First released in 1966, it proposed using strong economic growth to provide a federal jobs guarantee, universal health care, and a basic income. This executive summary of the full report, published in 1967, was endorsed by more than 100 signatories and was distributed in black neighborhoods. The Atlantic has annotated the budget to show how its goals have been met or—in more cases—missed in the half century since then.



INTRODUCTION

I believe, and profoundly hope, that from this day forth the opponents of social progress can take comfort no longer, for not since the March on Washington [1] has there been such broad sponsorship and enthusiastic support for any undertaking as has been mobilized on behalf of “The Freedom Budget for All Americans.”

These forces have not come together to demand help for the Negro. Rather, we meet on a common ground of determination that in this, the richest and most productive society ever known to man, the scourge of poverty can and must be abolished—not in some distant future, not in this generation, but within the next ten years!

The tragedy is that the workings of our economy so often pit the white poor and the black poor against each other at the bottom of society. The tragedy is that groups only one generation removed from poverty themselves, haunted by the memory of scarcity and fearful of slipping back, step on the fingers of those struggling up the ladder.

And the tragedy is that not only the poor, the nearly poor, and the once poor, but all Americans, are the victims of our failure as a nation to distribute democratically the fruits of our abundance. For, directly or indirectly, not one of us is untouched by the steady spread of slums, the decay of our cities, the segregation and overcrowding of our public schools, the shocking deterioration of our hospitals, the violence and chaos in our streets, [2] the idleness of able-bodied men deprived of work, and the anguished demoralization of our youth.

For better or worse, we are one nation and one people. We shall solve our problems together or together we shall enter a new era of social disorder and disintegration.

What we need is an overall plan of attack.

This is what the “Freedom Budget” is. It is not visionary or utopian. It is feasible. It is concrete. It is specific. It is quantitative. It talks dollars and cents. It sets goals and priorities. It tells how these can be achieved. And it places the responsibility for leadership with the Federal Government, which alone has the resources equal to the task.

1. The March on Washington, although often remembered for Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, was organized largely by Asa Philip Randolph and his lieutenant, Bayard Rustin, who had advised King on Gandhian tactics of nonviolence. Twenty years earlier, during World War II, Randolph had developed plans—never realized—for a protest against segregation in the armed forces and discrimination in the defense industry by bringing masses of black Americans to Washington; this was a formative moment in the early civil-rights movement.

2. The Freedom Budget was written in the time between two of the most destructive riots in black ghettos in U.S. history—in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1965 and in Detroit two years later.

3. A. Philip Randolph, the socialist leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was one of the most influential black figures in American history. During the Great Migration, he advocated for the labor rights of the southern black workers who resettled in northern and western cities. He catalyzed the first wave of the civil-rights movement,

The “Freedom Budget” is not a call for a handout. It is a challenge to the best traditions and possibilities of America. It is a call to those who have grown weary of slogans and gestures to rededicate themselves to the cause of social reconstruction. It is a plea to men of good will to give tangible substance to long-proclaimed ideals.

A. Philip Randolph [3]
President, A. Philip Randolph Institute
October 26, 1966

FOREWORD

After many years of intense struggle in the courts, in legislative halls, and on the streets, we have achieved a number of important victories. [4] We have come far in our quest for respect and dignity. But we have far to go.

The long journey ahead requires that we emphasize the needs of all America’s poor, for there is no way merely to find work, or adequate housing, or quality-integrated schools for Negroes alone. We shall eliminate slums for Negroes when we destroy ghettos and build new cities for all. [5] We shall eliminate unemployment for Negroes when we demand full and fair employment for all. We shall produce an educated and skilled Negro mass when we achieve a twentieth century educational system for all. [6]

This human rights emphasis is an integral part of the Freedom Budget and sets, I believe, a new and creative tone for the great challenge we yet face.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference fully endorses the Freedom Budget and plans to expend great energy and time in working for its implementation.

It is not enough to project the Freedom Budget. We must dedicate ourselves to the legislative task to see that it is immediately and fully achieved. I pledge myself to this task and will urge all others to do likewise. The Freedom Budget is essential if the Negro people are to make further progress. It is essential if we are to maintain social peace. It is a political necessity. It is a moral commitment to the fundamental principles on which this nation was founded.

Martin Luther King
October 26, 1966

A “FREEDOM BUDGET” FOR ALL AMERICANS

The Freedom Budget is a practical, step-by-step plan for wiping out poverty in America during the next 10 years.

It will mean more money in your pocket. It will mean better schools for your children. It will mean better homes for you and your neighbors. It will mean clean air to breathe [7] and comfortable cities to live in. It will mean adequate medical care when you are sick. [8]

So where does the “Freedom” come in?

For the first time, everyone in America who is fit and able to work will have a job. For the first time, everyone who

can’t work, or shouldn’t be working, will have an income adequate to live in comfort and dignity. And that is freedom. For freedom from want is the basic freedom from which all others flow.

This nation has learned that it must provide freedom for all if any of us is to be free. We have learned that half-measures are not enough. We know that continued unfair treatment of part of our people breeds misery and waste that are both morally indefensible and a threat to all who are better off.

As A. Philip Randolph put it: “Here in these United States, where there can

spearheading the effort to force President Harry Truman to integrate the military in 1948. In 1965, he and Rustin founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute. The collaboration between Randolph and King on the Freedom Budget seemed like a passing of the torch. Randolph, who was 77 years old when the executive summary was issued, was four decades older than King, but he would outlive him by 11 years.

4. When King wrote his foreword, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had become law, along with Medicare and Medicaid.

5. After King’s death, in 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress scrambled to pass the Fair Housing Act, which is often touted as the third of the major Great Society civil-rights reforms.

6. A landmark study by UCLA researchers from 2014 showed mixed results on school desegregation in the 60 years since the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While public schools in the South were less racially segregated than during the pre-*Brown* era, the study found that gains for black students had steadily eroded starting

in 1990. In the Northeast, segregation had actually become worse since King’s death.

7. The environment was never a core topic for Randolph’s or King’s organizations. But concern about clean air presaged the environmental-justice movement that took off in the 1980s, highlighting the disparate impacts of pollution on people of color; currently, asthma rates among black children are almost double those among white children.

8. The full 84-page Freedom Budget unambiguously calls for a “nation-wide, universal system of health insurance,” a goal that civil-rights groups had pushed for. The legislation creating Medicare and Medicaid counted as a victory, but universal coverage would remain elusive. Today, Bernie Sanders and other progressive politicians have picked up many of the Freedom Budget’s recommendations, notably calling for a system of universal health insurance, which the Vermont senator describes as “Medicare for all.”

9. According to the Census Bureau, the poverty rate in the United States fluctuated between 11 percent and 15 percent from 1966 to 2012. Overall, the rate of Americans living in near-poverty has been fairly flat over the past half century.

10. The past 25 years have seen “no change in the level of hiring discrimination against African Americans,” according to a recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. An earlier study concluded that the gap in the participation of black and white young men in the labor force worsened from 1979 to 2000.

11. The idea of a federal jobs guarantee has been carried forward in the work of the economists William Darity Jr. of Duke University and Darrick Hamilton of the New School. They argue that the guarantee would go a long way toward easing racial disparities in wealth and would cost roughly \$750 billion for 15 million adults—half of the Freedom Budget’s \$1.5 trillion price tag in current dollars.

be no economic or technical excuse for it, poverty is not only a private tragedy but, in a sense, a public crime. It is above all a challenge to our morality.”

The Freedom Budget would make that challenge the lever we can grasp to wipe out poverty in a decade.

Pie in the sky?

Not on your life. Just simple recognition of the fact that we as a nation never had it so good. That we have the ability and the means to provide adequately for everyone. That simple justice requires us to see that everyone—white or black; in the city or on the farm; fisherman or mountaineer—may have his share in our national wealth.

The moral case for the Freedom Budget is compelling.

In a time of unparalleled prosperity, there are 34 million Americans living in poverty. Another 28 million live just on the edge, with income so low that any unexpected expense or loss of income could thrust them into poverty. [9]

Almost one-third of our nation lives in poverty or want. They are not getting their just share of our national wealth.

Just as compelling, this massive lump of despair stands as a threat to our future prosperity. Poverty and want breed crime, disease and social unrest. We need the potential purchasing and productive power the poor would achieve, if we are to continue to grow and prosper.

In short, for good times to continue—and get better—we must embark immediately on a program that will fairly and indiscriminately provide a decent living for all Americans ...

The Freedom Budget shows how to do all this without a raise in taxes and without a single make-work job—by planning prudently NOW to use the economic growth of the future, and with adequate attention to our international commitments.

The key is jobs.

We can all recognize that the major cause of poverty could be eliminated, if enough decently paying jobs were available for everyone willing and able to work. And we can also recognize that, with enough jobs for all, a basic cause of discrimination among job-seekers would automatically disappear. [10]

What we must also recognize is that we now have the means of achieving complete employment—at no increased

12. The Freedom Budget would have been financed not with major tax increases but with what essentially would have been a stimulus, fueled by the own effects on economic growth. In the full report, the authors suggest that if higher taxes were to become necessary, the government should “impose the burden where it can easily be borne.” Perhaps today, the authors would be even more inclined to impose that burden on the rich, given that inequality in wealth and income has exploded since 1963. According to the Urban Institute, families in the lowest 10 percent of wealth-holders in 1963 could expect to have about zero net worth, while their counterparts in the 90th percentile had a net worth of just under \$250,000 (in 2016 dollars). In 2016, however, families in the 10th percentile were nearly \$1,000 in debt, on average, while families in the 90th percentile boasted a net worth of more than \$1 million.

cost, with no radical change in our economic system, and at no cost to our present national goals—if we are willing to commit ourselves totally to this achievement. [11]

That is what the Freedom Budget is all about.

It asks that we unite in insisting that the nation plan now to use part of its expected economic growth to eliminate poverty.

Where will the jobs come from? What will we use for money?

If all our nation’s wealth were divided equally among all us Americans, each share would be worth roughly \$3,500. Of this, we grant to the Federal government a slice equal to roughly \$500 in the form of taxes, leaving us an average of about \$3,000 to spend on our other needs.

If our nation’s productivity continues growing at the same rate as in recent years—and it will if the Freedom Budget is adopted—each share will grow to about \$5,000. Thus, the Federal government’s slice will grow to \$700, with the present Federal tax structure, and we will still have \$4,300 left for our other needs. [12]

What the Freedom Budget proposes is this: Budget a fraction of the \$200 increase in Federal tax revenues to provide jobs for all who can work and adequate income of other types for those who cannot.

No doles. No skimping on national defense. No tampering with private supply and demand.

Just an enlightened self-interest, using what we have in the best possible way.

By giving the poor a chance to become dignified wage earners, we will be generating the money to finance the improvements we all need—rich and poor alike. And we would be doing it by making new jobs with new money, so that no one who is now earning his own living would suffer.

The Freedom Budget recognizes that the Federal government must take the lead in attaining the eradication of poverty.

The Federal government alone represents all 200 million American individuals. It alone has the resources for a comprehensive job [guarantee]. And it has the responsibility for fulfilling the

needs which are the basis for the Freedom Budget plan.

First, here's where the jobs would be coming from:

- Right now, the nation should begin budgeting to replace the 9.3 million "seriously deficient" housing units that make living in them a misery and form slums that are a blight upon our land. [13]

The housing program contained in the Freedom Budget would have practically all Americans decently housed by 1975—while providing a wide range of jobs for the unemployed in housing construction and urban redevelopment.

- Critical shortages of water and power persist in many highly populated areas. Air and waters remain polluted. Recreation facilities are unavailable for those who need them most.

The Freedom Budget proposes the creation of millions of jobs in a program that will correct these pressing problems.

- We need, at a conservative estimate, 100,000 new public classrooms a year for the next six years, as well as considerable expansion of our institutions of higher learning.

Only the Federal government can meet the largest share of these needs, as well as providing for the hundreds of thousands of new teachers who also will be needed. [14]

- We must double our rate of hospital construction if we are to keep up with our minimum requirements in this field, and we must expand rehabilitation and outpatient facilities.

As these and other programs swell the number of productive workers, cut down unemployment and increase consumption, the private sector of our national economy will inevitably grow also.

The Freedom Budget recognizes that full employment by itself is not enough to eradicate poverty. Therefore, it also proposes—and budgets for—a \$2-an-hour Federal minimum wage covering everyone within Federal jurisdiction; [15] a new farm program to provide adequate income to the 43 percent of farm families who now live in poverty; and immediate improvements in Social Security, welfare, unemployment compensation, workmen's compensation and other programs designed to support those who cannot or should not work.

13. Even as definitions of poor housing have changed over time, studies have noted slow progress in its improvement, especially for the poor and people of color. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported in 1989 that the nation's total substandard housing units—7.7 million in 1975—had dropped only to 7.4 million by 1985. Black and Hispanic people made up 17 percent of U.S. households in 1985, the group found, but constituted 42 percent of households living in substandard conditions. A 2015 study in the *Journal of Housing Research* found that blacks were 31 percent less likely to live in adequate housing than whites were.

14. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the ratio of pupils to teachers has steadily dropped since the mid-1950s as more teachers have entered the workforce.

Where will the money come from?

The Freedom Budget recognizes that we cannot spend what we do not produce. It also recognizes that we must spend wisely what we do produce.

It proposes that a portion of our future growth—one thirteenth of what can reasonably be expected to be available—be earmarked for the eradication of poverty. The Freedom Budget proposed outlay of \$185 billion in 10 years sounds like a great deal of money, and it is a great deal of money. [16]

But it will come from the expansion of our economy that will in part be the result of wise use of that very \$185 billion. It will build homes and schools, provide recreation areas and hospitals. It will train teachers and nurses.

It will provide adequate incomes to millions who now do not have them. And those millions will in turn buy goods they cannot now buy.

So the wage earner of today will benefit as well. His earnings will go up and his enjoyment of life will be increased. The opportunities for private enterprise will increase.

The breeding grounds of crime and discontent will be diminished in the same way that draining a swamp cuts down the breeding of mosquitoes, and the causes of discrimination will be considerably reduced.

But the Freedom Budget cannot become reality without a national effort. It requires a concentrated commitment by all the people of America, expressed in concrete goals and programs of the Federal Government. These goals and programs must encourage to the utmost the efforts of state and local governments and private enterprise.

It is not lack of good-will that has prevented the achievement of these great goals in the past. All of us, 200 million strong, are united in our willingness to share the abundance of America in equal impartiality with our fellows, and to grant equal opportunities to all.

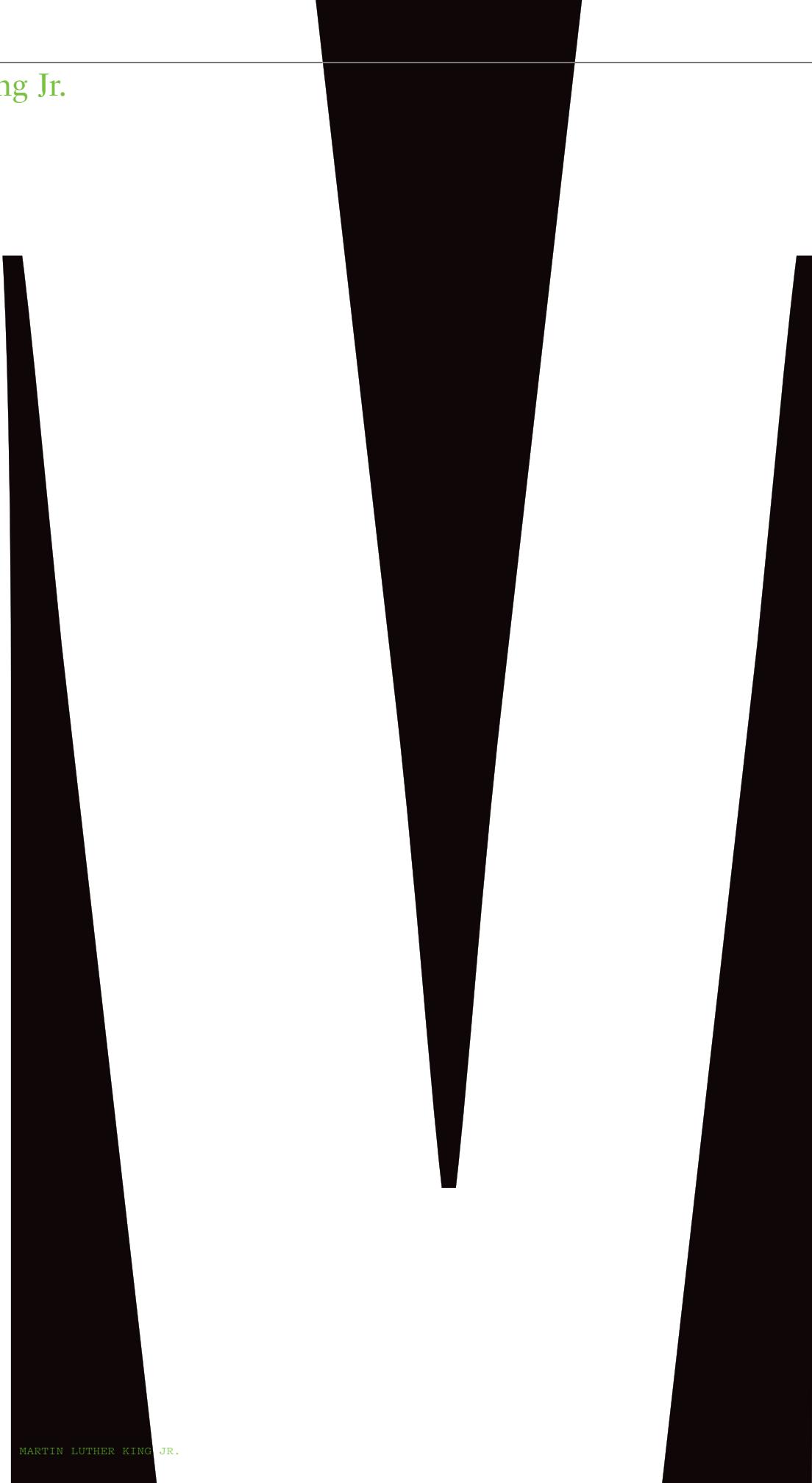
What we must do—and what the Freedom Budget provides—is to express that will in the most direct, quickest and fairest way.

The Freedom Budget, then, is a new call to arms for a final assault on injustice. It is a rallying cry we cannot fail to heed. [17]

15. The federal minimum wage was a relatively new concept for most employees in 1967. In 1974, amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act set a wage floor for federal, state, and local government employees. Over time, further amendments would make the federal minimum wage ubiquitous. (States' minimum wages, if higher, preempt the federal mandate.) The \$2-an-hour wage that the Freedom Budget proposed is almost exactly equal to \$15 in today's dollars. The modern-day "Fight for \$15" movement has cited Martin Luther King Jr. as an intellectual forefather; in 2017, it held dozens of events on the anniversary of King's death.

16. The proposed \$185 billion budget would translate to \$1.5 trillion in 2017 dollars, an amount that, if spread across federal outlays to poverty programs, would just about quadruple the government's welfare budget.

Martin Luther King Jr.



MILITARISM

IV.

“We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation.”

*From “Beyond Vietnam,” a speech
delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City*

Martin Luther King Jr.’s emergence as a full-throated anti-war activist came late in his life, at the urging of his wife, Coretta, and as black radical activism intertwined more and more with Vietnam War protests and peace movements. In his last year, speeches such as “Beyond Vietnam” became his hallmark, making him a face of the anti-war movement—while alienating the White House and a majority of Americans, both black and white.

But King’s stance on Vietnam wasn’t anything new. For his entire career, he argued against American militarism—often citing the horrors of atomic bombs and weapons of mass destruction—and against the use of violence to bring about social change. For King, violence by the state-abroad and at home-constituted a single darkness that could be beaten back only by the light of nonviolent resistance.

**LETTER FROM
BIRMINGHAM JAIL**

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1963

In April 1963, King was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, after he defied a state court's injunction and led a march of black protesters without a permit, urging an Easter boycott of white-owned stores. A statement published in *The Birmingham News*, written by eight moderate white clergymen, criticized the march and other demonstrations. This prompted King to write a lengthy response, begun in the margins of the newspaper. He smuggled it out with the help of his lawyer, and the nearly 7,000 words were transcribed. The eloquent call for "constructive, nonviolent tension" to force an end to unjust laws became a landmark document of the civil-rights movement. The letter was printed in part or in full by several publications, including the *New York Post*, *Liberation* magazine, *The New Leader*, and *The Christian Century*. *The Atlantic* published it in the August 1963 issue, under the headline "The Negro Is Your Brother."

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their

villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation.

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants—for example, to remove the stores' humiliating racial signs. On the basis of these promises, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained.

As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" We decided to schedule our direct-action program for the Easter season, realizing that except for Christmas,

this is the main shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic-withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this would be the best time to bring pressure to bear on the merchants for the needed change.

Then it occurred to us that the March election [for Birmingham's mayor] was ahead, and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that Mr. Connor [the commissioner of public safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor] was in the runoff, we decided again to postpone action so that the demonstration could not be used to cloud the issues. Like many others, we waited to see Mr. Connor defeated, and to this end we endured postponement after postponement. Having aided in this community need, we felt that our direct-action program could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never

voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.," when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

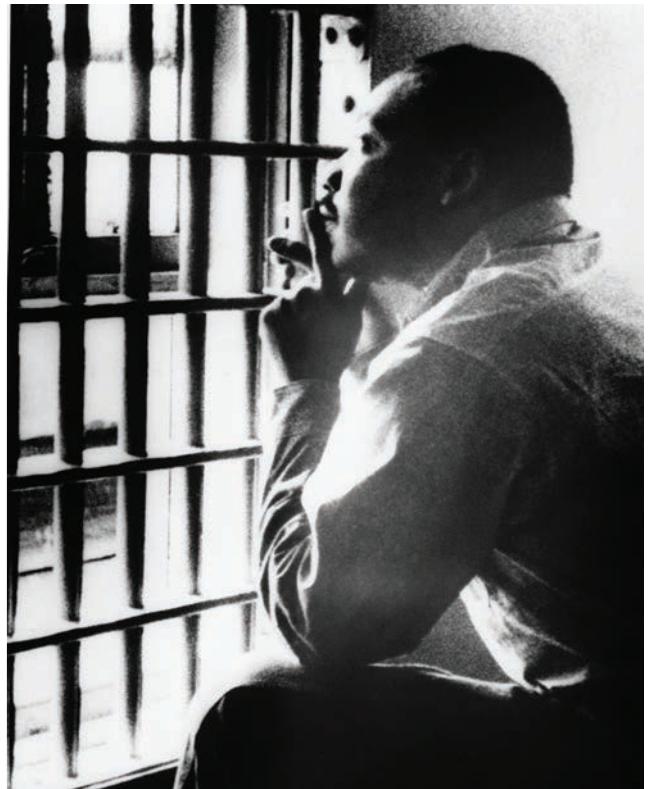
Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is *difference* made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is *sameness* made legal.

Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to



In 1967, King serves out the sentence from his arrest four years earlier in Birmingham, Alabama.

face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree

with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

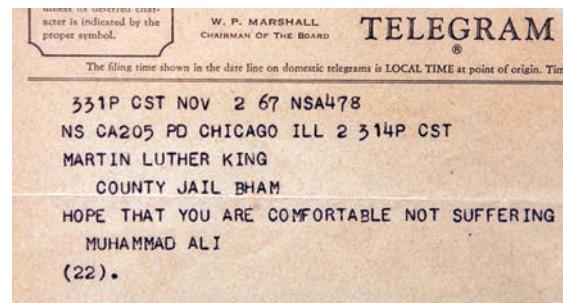
I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that

the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination,



King has a heavyweight in his corner after he is jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1967.

this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle.

If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is

“Wait” has almost always meant “Never.”

what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on Freedom Rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: “Get rid of your discontent.” Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” And John Bunyan: “I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.” And Abraham Lincoln: “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” And Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal ...” So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for

the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some—such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, Anne Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle—have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as “dirty nigger-lovers.” Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Reverend Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a nonsegregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: “Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.” In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.” And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?”

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of

millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true *ekklesia* and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?



A 1964 attempt to integrate a motel restaurant in St. Augustine, Florida, lands King in county jail.

across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department.

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handling the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather “nonviolently” in public. But for what

purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

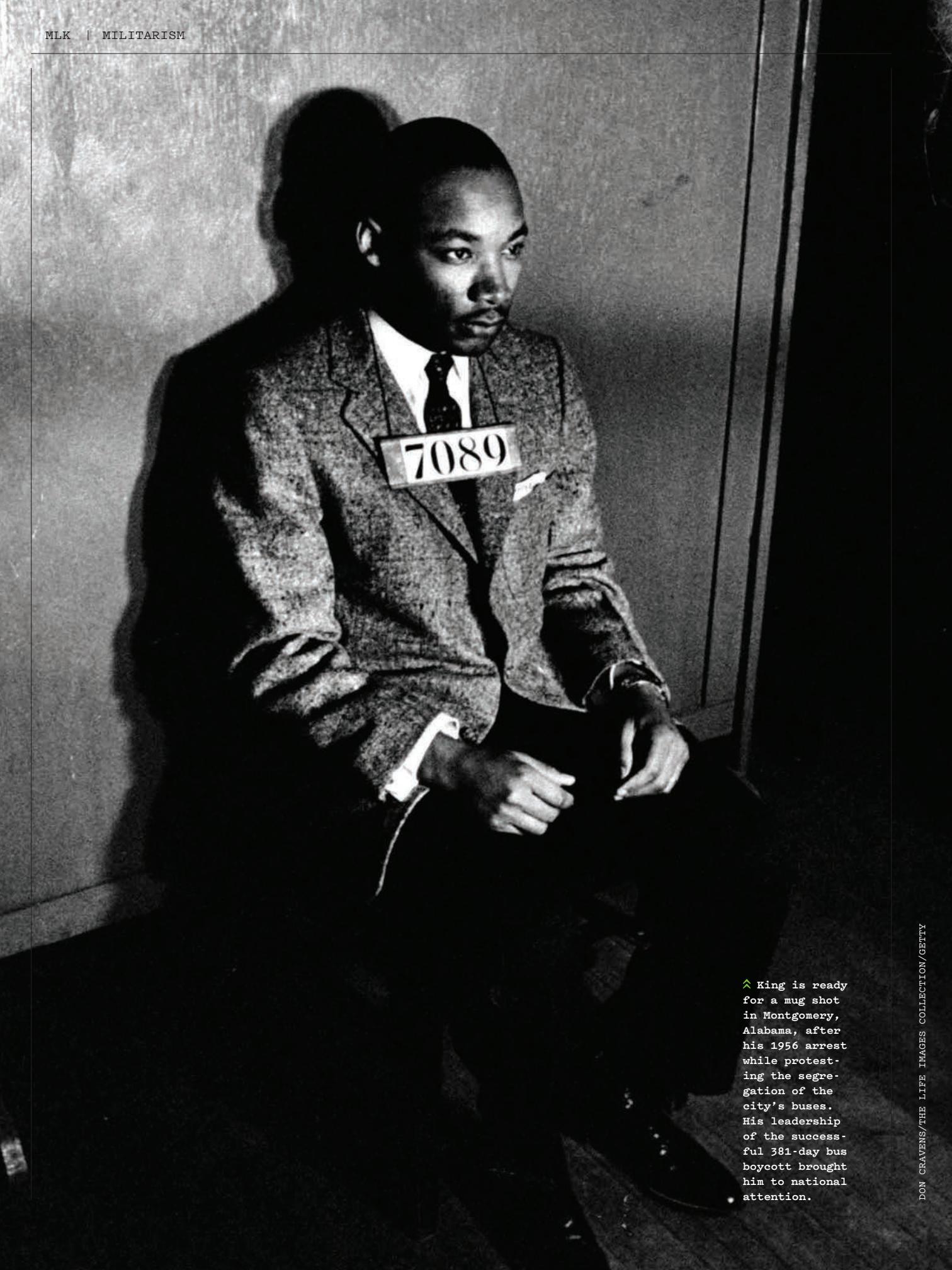
I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: “My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest.” They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I’m afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King Jr.



^ King is ready for a mug shot in Montgomery, Alabama, after his 1956 arrest while protesting the segregation of the city's buses. His leadership of the successful 381-day bus boycott brought him to national attention.

✓ King's fingerprints, taken on June 11, 1964, upon his arrest in St. Augustine, Florida.

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Martin Luther King Jr. was bailed out of Birmingham Jail by the kindness of a millionaire. Incarcerated people today aren't so lucky.

FREEDOM AIN'T FREE

By Clint Smith



ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the course of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested 30 times. Most famously, in April 1963, Eugene “Bull” Connor, the police commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, had King arrested for demonstrating in violation of a court injunction. For that crime, King spent 11 days behind bars, during which he wrote his famous “Letter From Birmingham Jail” (see page 74).

King would likely have stayed in jail even longer but for the intervention of A. G. Gaston, a black millionaire businessman who posted the \$5,000 bail for King and his colleague Ralph Abernathy. King is said to have wanted to continue his political statement by remaining confined. But Gaston, fearing that the civil-rights movement would suffer if left without King’s leadership for too long, persuaded him to accept the assistance.

Having people get arrested and sent to jail was a foundational strategy of the civil-rights movement, meant to illuminate the injustice and immorality of racial inequality. Since 1963, however, the number of people sitting in jail has skyrocketed. Of the approximately 630,000 people held in more than 3,000 local jails across the United States, 70 percent are awaiting trial and therefore are legally innocent, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. The Vera Institute of Justice reports that black Americans are jailed at nearly four times the rate of white Americans.

Being in jail and unable to post bond can create instability in somebody’s life. Research suggests that spending as few as two days in jail can damage a person’s physical and economic well-being and increase the likelihood of cycling back into the criminal-justice system.

Most people, unlike King, can’t find a millionaire willing to post their bail. Throughout the country, however, small organizations are trying to step into that role. In Boston, Chicago, Nashville, New York City, Seattle, and several other cities, community groups are helping people post bond and also, more ambitiously, trying to end the practice of requiring money for bail. This reflects a growing belief that using money to make sure a defendant will show up in court is inherently unfair to the poor—that it not only creates further instability in their lives but simply doesn’t make a lot of sense. Advocates of ending the “money-bail system” would prefer to have a judge assess the risk that defendants might flee before deciding whether to release them pending a trial, rather than automatically relying on money as a guarantee.

Community bail funds work by pooling donations to spring from jail people who cannot afford to pay their way out. Once a fund has posted bail, an individual is free to go home, with the expectation that he will stay out of trouble and appear in court on a scheduled date. After the defendant shows up and the case is resolved, the bail money

is returned to the community fund, to be used for another defendant.

The recent surge in protests that began in Ferguson, Missouri, has brought more attention to bail funds and pushed them to expand the scope of their work. Several community funds aren’t only bailing people out but also trying to dismantle the very system in which they participate, by organizing protests, lobbying state lawmakers, and using social media and op-eds for publicity. “I don’t work with any bail funds who don’t explicitly want to see the end of the money-bail system,” says Pilar Weiss, who leads the National Bail Fund Network.

Since 1992, judges in Washington, D.C., generally have not required money to post bond but instead assess a defendant’s flight risk and the danger he poses to the community when they decide between jail and freedom before trial. This seems to have worked. More than 85 percent of the defendants released from 2012 to 2017 weren’t arrested again before their court cases were settled, according to the city’s Pretrial Services Agency; of the few who got in trouble again, only 2 percent were charged with a violent crime. In more and more states, including Arizona, Kentucky, New Jersey, and parts of Alabama, judges now may evaluate a defendant’s risk of fleeing, by looking at previous arrests, prosecutions, and convictions.

Activists worry that these sorts of assessments may exacerbate racial imbalances among prisoners, unless they take into account that people of color already face discrimination in the judicial system. Even so, the prevailing practice of relying on money to make sure people charged with a crime appear in court doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. Bail, after all, is intended to keep the public safe: Decisions about whether to release defendants who don’t represent any danger to the public shouldn’t depend on how much money they can raise. And people who do represent a threat to public safety shouldn’t be released simply because they can afford an expensive bond. As King wrote before he was bailed out of Birmingham Jail: “An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.” **A**

Clint Smith is pursuing a doctorate at Harvard in the sociology of education and is the author of the poetry collection *Counting Descent*.

There is a growing belief that using money to make sure a defendant will show up in court is inherently unfair to the poor.

“THIS ISN’T A KING-STOKELY SITUATION.”

The reverend’s voice on the telephone was deep and deliberate. He was trying to dissuade us from heading to the Florida statehouse, where a massive sit-in had been organized by young activists protesting the murder of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager, and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. The demonstrators, with their zeal and style—their use of social media, their graphics and videos, their hoodies—appealed to our North Carolina group of politically committed African Americans. I was 28, and we felt that the older, more established civil-rights organizations weren’t showing enough urgency in the current

was in July 2013; four-plus years after the election of the first black president, the national mood had shifted. Instead of debating the notion of a “post-racial America,” we were grappling with the aftermath of a modern-day lynching. Two generations earlier, in 1955, a black teenager from Chicago named Emmett Till had been lynched while visiting relatives in Mississippi, a case that shocked the world and energized the burgeoning civil-rights movement. Trayvon’s murder would also spark a movement, though all we knew at the time was that this moment mattered.

A week before this phone call, my friends and I had been arrested for staging a sit-in at the North Carolina Capitol to protest legislation clearly designed to suppress black voters. In volunteering to be arrested, we’d followed the lead of the reverend, William J. Barber II, who’d been organizing demonstrations at the

maintain it. But some of my colleagues raised a question: Wasn’t Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated while wearing a suit? The idea that changing our clothes would change our circumstances was troubling. Many pundits suggested that Trayvon had been killed not because of racism but because he’d been wearing a hoodie. And so wearing T-shirts, jeans, and hoodies to protests became an intentional act of rejecting “respectability,” instead of trying to look wealthy and white.

An element of class conflict in the movement has become more pronounced in recent years. Middle- and upper-class black Americans have arguably benefited the most from civil rights and Black Power. From the late 1960s into the 1990s, black Americans gained access to jobs that had previously been off-limits in government, universities, and the professions. A black political class ascended

THE MOVEMENT’S GENERATION GAP

Young Black
Lives Matter activists
reject the respectability
politics that older
civil-rights groups pursue.

By Bree Newsome

moment. We had packed our bags, ready to drive south, but the reverend had phoned at the last minute and pressed us not to go. Now we sat huddled around the phone at my friend’s kitchen table.

“This is *absolutely* a King-Stokely situation!” my friend’s father said sharply, from a few feet away. He and the reverend were alluding to a turning point in the late 1960s, when Stokely Carmichael, the young leader of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, issued a philosophical—and generational—challenge to Martin Luther King Jr.’s belief in nonviolence as a tactic and in racial integration as the paramount goal; out of this conflict, the Black Power movement was born. A seasoned activist, my friend’s father wanted us to understand that our disagreement with the reverend reflected a long history of intergenerational tensions among civil-rights advocates. This

statehouse in Raleigh for several months. This evening, though, we’d arrived at an impasse. My friends and I ultimately chose to travel to Florida, because we believed in the need for a movement led by young people. After all, it was primarily black and Latino youths who were being targeted and killed by the criminal-justice system.

The tensions between generations of civil-rights activists have centered largely on a debate over tactics. A feature of the modern movement has been an open rejection of “respectability politics”—the notion that black Americans must prove themselves “respectable” to gain equal rights. Iconic images from the 1960s show young people dressed in their finest while police dogs bite them or fire hoses knock them flat. The day before our protest in Raleigh, the reverend reminded us of this tradition and encouraged us to

in cities such as Atlanta, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. At the same time, the War on Drugs, the 1994 crime law, and mass incarceration disproportionately harmed poor blacks.

An early objection to the Black Lives Matter movement was that, unlike the traditional civil-rights organizations, it was “leaderless.” This view reflects a certain sexism, overlooking the many black women who have spearheaded the movement since its inception. But yes, the movement’s leaders have made a deliberate effort to decentralize power. This is in no small part a response to the stark reality that past black leaders—King, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton—were targeted and killed, leaving their movements in turmoil. A report last summer from the FBI’s counterterrorism division alleged the rise of “black identity extremists,” a category previously unheard of. The report was



Wasn't Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated while wearing a suit?

reminiscent of the agency's COINTELPRO program that undermined black activists, including King, in the 1960s.

Political movements, by their nature, are messy and nuanced. King, who was in his 30s when he led the civil-rights movement, often found himself pulled between its younger and older factions. Institutions such as the NAACP generally consider the courtroom and the halls of government the most important battlegrounds in the fight for equality, while student movements seek to empower communities with nonviolent direct action. More recently, these grassroots activists have organized fast-food workers to "Fight for \$15" as a minimum hourly wage and fostered protests on college campuses to raise adjunct professors' pay.

Then, as now, getting arrested or jailed or associated with criminality in any fashion, whether in a hoodie or a suit

and tie, was bound to upset the political establishment. When Black Lives Matter activists blocked traffic and engaged in other acts of mass civil disobedience, many white liberals and older black activists charged that King wouldn't have approved of the type of disruption these protests caused. While the likes of King and Rosa Parks are now celebrated for their acts of defiance, their protests were no less controversial at the time, even within the civil-rights movement.

Taking the long view is important. The generations need to converse. The elders who once battled to integrate schools must listen to the young people who are now battling forces that funnel them from classrooms into prisons. The younger generation needs to understand how the modern movement is built upon every black-freedom effort that preceded it. The night my friends and I headed

to Florida, we were at an impasse with the reverend, but two years later, when I climbed a 30-foot flagpole on the South Carolina statehouse grounds and removed the Confederate flag, he issued a public statement of support.

In my current work as a community organizer in North Carolina, the other activists and I operate by a principle we refer to as "seven generations." The concept, which we adapted from the Iroquois Confederacy, means we understand that the work we're doing has gone on for seven generations and will continue for seven more. The movement lives because of the many people, places, and generations that breathe life into it. [↗](#)

Bree Newsome is a filmmaker and human-rights activist.

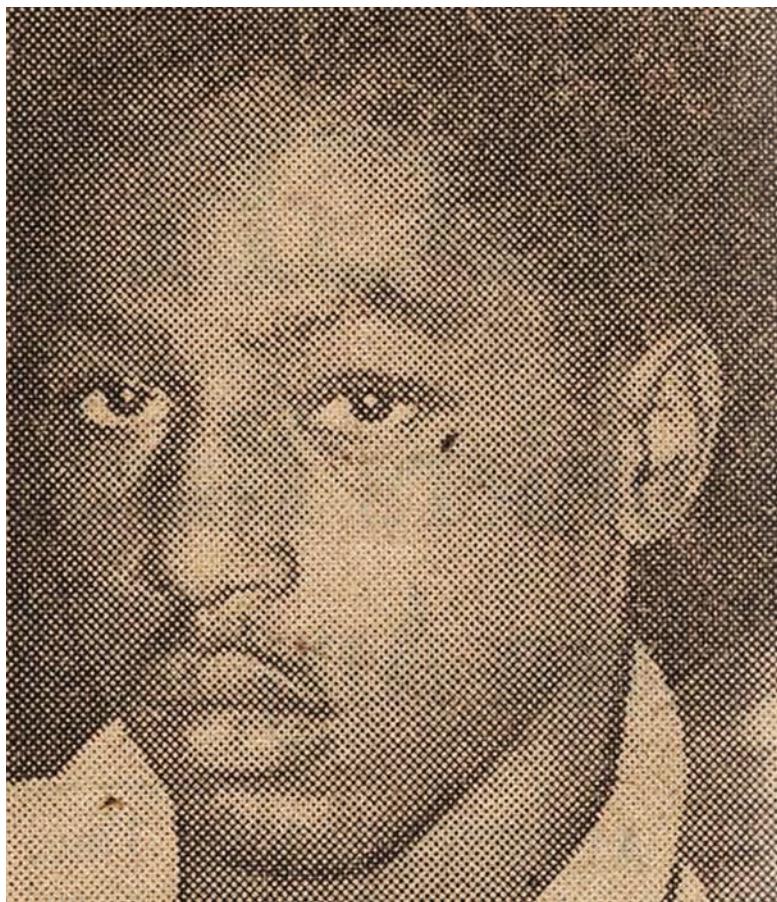
On March 28, 1958, a young black man, Jeremiah Reeves, was executed in Alabama for having allegedly raped a white woman when he was in his mid-teens. On April 6—Easter Sunday—King led a group of ministers in a “prayer pilgrimage” in Montgomery and denounced in religious terms the “severity and inequality” of Reeves’s death sentence.

(Originally titled: “Statement Delivered at the Prayer Pilgrimage Protesting the Electrocution of Jeremiah Reeves”)

A Question of the Dignity of Man

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1958



We assemble here this afternoon on the steps of this beautiful capitol building in an act of public repentance for our community for committing a tragic and unsavory injustice. A young man, Jeremiah Reeves, who was little more than a child when he was first arrested, died in the electric chair for the charge of rape. Whether or not he was guilty of this crime is a question that none of us can answer. But the issue before us now is not the innocence or guilt of Jeremiah Reeves. Even if he were guilty, it is the severity and inequality of the penalty that constitutes the injustice. Full grown white men committing comparable crimes against Negro girls are rare ever punished, and are never given the death penalty or even a life sentence. It was the severity of Jeremiah Reeves’s penalty that aroused the Negro community, not the question of his guilt or innocence.

But not only are we here to repent for the sin committed against Jeremiah Reeves, but we are also here to repent for the constant miscarriage of justice that we confront every day in our courts. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is only the precipitating factor for our protest, not the causal factor. The causal factor lies deep down in the dark and dreary past of our oppression. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is but one incident, yes a tragic incident, in the long and desolate night of our court injustice.

It is regrettable but true that in almost any session of our city, county and state courts one can see all of the injustices which the prophet Amos so bitterly decried and which he predicted would mean the ruin of [the Israelites’] once glorious civilization. Here Negroes are robbed openly with little hope of redress. We are fined and jailed often in defiance of law. Right or wrong, a Negro’s word has little weight against a white opponent’s. And if the Negro insists on the right of his cause, as opposed to a white man’s, he is often violently treated.

There is another injustice in the courts which is equally as bad. Cases in which only Negroes are involved are handled frivolously, without regard to justice or proper correction. We deplore this type of injustice as much as we do the injustice which the Negro confronts in his court relations with whites.

We appeal this afternoon to our white brothers, whether they are private citizens or public officials, to courageously meet this problem. This is not a political issue: it is ultimately a moral issue. It is a question of the dignity of man.

We assemble here because we still have faith in Alabama and its vast possibilities in the area of Christian brotherhood. We do not believe that the vast majority of white Southerners condone the type of injustice that we are faced with. The persons who perpetuate such injustices do not, we are thoroughly confident, speak for the South. They speak only for a willful but vocal minority. There are thousands of white southerners of goodwill whose voices are yet unheard, whose course is yet unclear and whose courageous acts are yet unseen.

In the name of God, in the interest of human dignity and for the interest of human dignity and for the cause of democracy, we appeal to these thousands to gird their courage, to speak out and act on their basic convictions.

As we stand in this historic spot let us as Negroes be challenged to accept our responsibilities by continually improving our personal standards. Let us work at every hour for cleanliness, good manners, chastity, home improvement and neighborhood improvement. If we have shortcomings, let us face up to them honestly.

We would not close without asking God's forgiveness for those who unjustly treat us. We are still inflicted with economic injustice—Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches—but Father forgive them. There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence who will stop us out on some wayside road and

“We still have faith in Alabama.”

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Jeremiah Reeves,
in the *Birmingham World* in 1953, the
year after he was
charged with rape

beat us, leaving us half dead—but Father forgive them. Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters—but Father forgive them. Our children, merely desiring equal education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder—but Father forgive them. Let us go away devoid of bitterness, and with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. In hope that in recognizing the necessity for struggle and suffering, we will make of it a virtue. If only to save ourselves from bitterness, we need vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure ourselves and American society. If some of us must go to jail for the cause of freedom, let us enter it as Gandhi urged his countrymen, “As the bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber,” that is with some trepidation but with great expectation.

It is significant that we assemble here on Easter Day. Easter reminds us of two things. On the one hand, it reminds us that there is something wrong with human nature and human history. It reminds us that man is separated from God and separated from his brother, which leads to the tragedy of Good Friday. On the other hand it reminds us that God is in Christ seeking to reconcile the world unto himself. It reminds us that God ultimately rules history. So Easter is a day of hope. It is a day that says to us that the forces of evil and injustice cannot survive. Truth may be crucified and justice buried, but one day they will rise again. We must live and face death if necessary with that hope. **A**

THE ATLANTIC ARCHIVES

MAYBE GOD WILL COME AND CLEAN UP THIS MESS

Robert Coles, M.D.

October 1967

Robert Coles was a research psychiatrist at Harvard with a poetic sensibility. He ventured into black ghettos to understand urban riots from the rioters’ point of view. His first book, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*, had just been published, the first in a series that won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1973.

By and large, racial riots have occurred somewhere between June and September, and it is not very hard for anyone familiar with ghetto tenements to explain why. In Harlem or Chicago’s South Side men have no boats to haul

by car to a beach. They don’t own summer homes or air conditioners, and their children have no nearby lakes or oceans to visit, or cars to take them to distant resorts. In July and August the sun beats down without letup on those flat-roofed buildings, and after a while they become unbearable. Rodents and bugs leave their hiding places; flies and mosquitoes are everywhere, and screens are rusty or simply absent. There is no wind, and there are no open spaces to give one respite, a sense of air and freedom. Rain brings not relief, but leaks, floods, more bugs.

It is terribly unsettling, even to a visitor who knows he can leave whenever he wishes ...

To a panicky, fearful white nation (more guilty than it knows, and therefore more willing to strike back at the people whose actions summon that guilt) the lesson should be clearer than I think it is: the rioters are not nearly as wanton and “irrational,” as thoughtless and heedless,

as we would like to believe. They know they are in a distinct minority. They talk about “black power,” but in their bones they recognize and pay their respects to white power ...

Start with centuries of slavery and its persisting consequences, and add widespread Southern poverty with the resulting shift of millions of bewildered, hungry people from a rural to an urban situation. Add television, with its ability to bring news immediately and vividly to an incredibly wide audience, to “illiterate” people who nevertheless can see and “get the picture,” so to speak. Throw in hot weather and a confusing war that has stalemated much of the progress that was being made or could be made.

And finally, don’t forget the densely packed people, so chronically fearful, so naturally vulnerable to all the rumors and crosscurrents of any crowd that forms. They all accumulate ... Then, suddenly, the explosion comes.

RECASTING RACISM'S BITTER LEGACY

*Kara Walker
turns the brutality
of history
inside out.*

By Adrienne Green

Adrienne Green
is the managing
editor of *The
Atlantic* magazine.



» Last year, a white-supremacist rally in defense of a Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, sparked a national conversation about Confederate monuments and, more broadly, about the ways in which the ugliest moments in American history are memorialized. Years before these shrines to the Confederacy began to topple, the artist Kara Walker was already capturing the traumas that extend from the era of slavery to the present day.

Walker attracted the art world's attention at age 24, after her 1994 installation, "Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart," was featured in the Drawing Center, in SoHo. Three years later, she became one of the youngest MacArthur Fellows. Walker is best known for her interrogations of race, gender, and sexuality. In the years since her debut, she has employed stereotype and caricature to emphasize the brutal ideological traditions of Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Using drawing, painting, cut-paper silhouettes, and large-scale installations, she challenges a flawed and distorted understanding of this country's violent racial history.

Her 2015 exhibit, "Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First," which was shown in the Victoria Miro gallery, in London, encapsulated this biting commentary. "I just find it really fascinating when people gouge a narrow channel in their thinking and then just keep [going], as if by gouging further into it, it makes the lie a fact as opposed to a bigger wound," she said in a conversation included in the artist's book that accompanied the show. Among the 39 provocative pencil-and-watercolor drawings exhibited: a fantasized "American Hero" monument to Dylann Roof, who murdered nine people at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina; Confederate notables depicted on Georgia's Stone Mountain alongside smiling Ku Klux Klansmen and a black man burning at the stake; and Martin Luther King Jr.'s burial ground in a pool of blackened water.

By focusing on the myths that undergird these historical narratives, she suggests that the legacies of these troubled eras are much more fraught than they might appear, whether carved into mountainsides or inscribed in textbooks. The civil-rights movement and King (whose tomb is also featured in one of Walker's drawings) often take center stage in discussions about America's moral trajectory on race relations. Fifty years after King's assassination, Walker's art underlines the wounds that remain—and how people today are complicit in perpetuating them.

Martin Luther King Jr. is buried in Atlanta. Walker's collection features a watercolor-and-graphite drawing of his tomb.

« DR KING (2015)

The Ku Klux Klan cites Georgia's Stone Mountain as its birthplace, in 1915. The site later became a Confederate monument and depicts three Civil War figures: Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson. Walker lived near the monument as a teenager and references it in a number of drawings.

» STONE MOUNTAIN MASCOT HUNT (2015)



« DYLAN ROOF MONUMENT (2015)

» BURNING CROSSES DON'T MEAN ANYTHING UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY A BURNING NIGGER (2015)

» MLK MONUMENT REVISED (2015)

Artwork selected from Walker's fall 2015 exhibit, "Go to Hell or Atlanta, Which-ever Comes First," which originally ran at the Victoria Miro gallery, in London





✓ King speaking in Washington, D.C., in February 1968

» King, third from the right, listens to United Nations Undersecretary Ralph Bunche, in 1967, as anti-war leaders deliver a letter accusing the U.S. of violating the UN charter. Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician turned activist, sits third from the left.

King's opposition to the Vietnam War gained national attention on February 25, 1967, when he appeared alongside four anti-war U.S. senators at a daylong symposium in Beverly Hills, California. In a powerful address, King described how the casualties of the increasingly unpopular war had spread beyond its physical horrors to wreck the Great Society and threaten American principles and values. His outspokenness about an issue not ordinarily seen as a question of civil rights brought a storm of criticism.

THE CASUALTIES OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

By Martin Luther King Jr.

1967

I need not pause to say how happy I am to have the privilege of being a participant in this significant symposium. In these days of emotional tension when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, there is no greater need than for sober-thinking, healthy debate, creative dissent and enlightened discussion. This is why this symposium is so important.

I would like to speak to you candidly and forthrightly this afternoon about our present involvement in Viet Nam. I have chosen as a subject, "The Casualties of the War in Viet Nam." We are all aware of the nightmarish physical casualties. We see them in our living rooms in all of their tragic dimensions on television screens, and we read about them on our subway and bus rides in daily newspaper accounts. We see the rice fields of a small Asian country being trampled at will and burned at whim: we see grief-stricken mothers with crying babies clutched in their arms as they watch their little huts burst forth into flames; we see the fields and valleys of battle being painted with humankind's blood; we see the broken bodies left prostrate in countless fields; we see young men being sent home half-men—physically handicapped and mentally deranged. Most tragic of all is the casualty list among children. Some one million Vietnamese children have been casualties of this brutal war. A war in which children are incinerated by napalm, in which American soldiers die in mounting numbers while other American soldiers, according to press accounts, in unrestrained hatred shoot the wounded enemy as they lie on the ground, is a war that mutilates the conscience. These casualties are enough to cause all men to rise up with righteous indignation and oppose the very nature of this war.

But the physical casualties of the war in Viet Nam are not alone the catastrophes. The casualties of principles and values are equally disastrous and injurious. Indeed, they are ultimately more harmful because they are self-perpetuating. If the casualties of principle are not healed, the physical casualties will continue to mount.

One of the first casualties of the war in Viet Nam was the charter of the United Nations ...

Our government blatantly violated its obligation under the charter of the



United Nations to submit to the Security Council its charge of aggression against North Viet Nam. Instead we unilaterally launched an all-out war on Asian soil. In the process we have undermined the purpose of the United Nations and caused its effectiveness to atrophy. We have also placed our nation in the position of being morally and politically isolated. Even the long standing allies of our nation have adamantly refused to join our government in this ugly war. As Americans and lovers of Democracy we should carefully ponder the consequences of our nation's declining moral status in the world.

The second casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the principle of self-determination. By entering a war that is little more than a domestic civil war, America has ended up supporting a new form of colonialism covered up by certain niceties of complexity. Whether we realize it or not our participation in the war in Viet Nam is an ominous expression of our lack of sympathy for the oppressed, our paranoid anti-Communism, our failure to feel the ache and anguish of the have nots. It reveals our willingness to continue participating in neo-colonialist adventures ...

Today we are fighting an all-out war—undeclared by Congress. We have well over 300,000 American servicemen fighting in that benighted and unhappy country. American planes are bombing the territory of another country, and we are committing atrocities equal to any perpetrated by the Vietcong. This is the third largest war in American history.

All of this reveals that we are in an untenable position morally and politically. We are left standing before the world glutted by our barbarity. We are engaged in a war that seeks to turn the clock of history back and perpetuate white colonialism. The greatest irony and tragedy of all is that our nation, which initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world, is now cast in the mold of being an arch anti-revolutionary.

A third casualty of the war in Vietnam is the Great Society. This confused war has played havoc with our domestic destinies.

Despite feeble protestations to the contrary, the promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Viet Nam. The pursuit of this widened war has narrowed domestic

welfare programs, making the poor, white and Negro, bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home.

While the anti-poverty program is cautiously initiated, zealously supervised and evaluated for immediate results, billions are liberally expended for this ill-considered war. The recently revealed mis-estimate of the war budget amounts to ten billions of dollars for a single year. This error alone is more than five times the amount committed to anti-poverty programs. The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Viet Nam explode at home: they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.

If we reversed investments and gave the armed forces the anti-poverty budget, the generals could be forgiven if they walked off the battlefield in disgust.

Poverty, urban problems and social progress generally are ignored when the guns of war become a national obsession. When it is not our security that is at stake, but questionable and vague commitments to reactionary regimes,

values disintegrate into foolish and adolescent slogans.

It is estimated that we spend \$322,000 for each enemy we kill, while we spend in the so-called war on poverty in America only about \$53.00 for each person classified as "poor." And much of that 53 dollars goes for salaries of people who are not poor. We have escalated the war in Viet Nam and de-escalated the skirmish against poverty. It challenges the imagination to contemplate what lives we could transform if we were to cease killing.

At this moment in history it is irrefutable that our world prestige is pathetically frail. Our war policy excites pronounced contempt and aversion virtually everywhere. Even when some national governments, for reasons of economic and diplomatic interest, do not condemn us, their people in surprising measure have made clear they do not share the official policy.

We are isolated in our false values in a world demanding social and economic justice. We must undergo a vigorous re-ordering of our national priorities.

A fourth casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the humility of our nation. Through rugged determination, scientific and technological progress and dazzling achievements, America has become the richest and most powerful nation in the world. We have built machines that think and instruments that peer into the unfathomable range of interstellar space. We have built gargantuan bridges to span the seas and gigantic buildings to kiss the skies. Through our airplanes and spaceships we have dwarfed distance and placed time in chains, and through our submarines we have penetrated oceanic depths. This year our national gross product will reach the astounding figure of 780 billion dollars. All of this is a staggering picture of our great power.

But honesty impels me to admit that our power has often made us arrogant. We feel that our money can do anything. We arrogantly feel that we have everything to teach other nations and nothing to learn from them. We often arrogantly feel that we have some divine, messianic mission to police the whole world. We are arrogant in not allowing young nations to go through the same growing pains, turbulence and revolution that characterized our history. We are arrogant in our contention that we

“The greatest irony and tragedy of all is that our nation, which initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world, is now cast in the mold of being an arch anti-revolutionary.”



have some sacred mission to protect people from totalitarian rule, while we make little use of our power to end the evils of South Africa and Rhodesia, and while we are in fact supporting dictatorships with guns and money under the guise of fighting Communism. We are arrogant in professing to be concerned about the freedom of foreign nations while not setting our own house in order. Many of our Senators and Congressmen vote joyously to appropriate billions of dollars for war in Viet Nam, and these same Senators and Congressmen vote loudly against a Fair Housing Bill to make it possible for a Negro veteran of Viet Nam to purchase a decent home. We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields, but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own south ...

All of this reveals that our nation has not yet used its vast resources of power to end the long night of poverty, racism and man's inhumanity to man. Enlarged power means enlarged peril if there is not concomitant growth of the soul. Genuine power is the right use of strength. If our nation's strength is not used responsibly and with restraint, it will be, following

Acton's dictum, power that tends to corrupt and absolute power that corrupts absolutely. Our arrogance can be our doom. It can bring the curtains down on our national drama. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. We are challenged in these turbulent days to use our power to speed up the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

A fifth casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the principle of dissent. An ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace-seekers depicts ... persons who call for a cessation of bombings in the north as quasi-traitors, fools or venal enemies of our soldiers and institutions. Free speech and the privilege of dissent and discussion are rights being shot down by bombers in Viet Nam. When those who stand for peace are so vilified it is time to consider where we are going and whether free speech has not become one of the major casualties of the war ...

Nothing can be more destructive of our fundamental democratic traditions than the vicious effort to silence dissenters.

American soldiers in Long Binh, Vietnam, observe King's birthday on January 15, 1971, 15 years before it was first observed as a federal holiday.

A sixth casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the prospects of mankind's survival. This war has created the climate for greater armament and further expansion of destructive nuclear power.

One of the most persistent ambiguities that we face is that everybody talks about peace as a goal. However, it does not take sharpest-eyed sophistication to discern that while everybody talks about peace, peace has become practically nobody's business among the power-wielders. Many men cry peace! peace! but they refuse to do the things that make for peace.

The large power blocs of the world talk passionately of pursuing peace while burgeoning defense budgets that already

bulge, enlarging already awesome armies, and devising even more devastating weapons ...

The stages of history are replete with the chants and choruses of the conquerors of old who came killing in pursuit of peace. Alexander, Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon were akin in their seeking a peaceful world order, a world fashioned after their selfish conceptions of an ideal existence. Each sought a world at peace which would personify their egotistic dreams. Even within the life-span of most of us, another megalomaniac strode across the world stage. He sent his blitzkrieg-bent legions blazing across Europe, bringing havoc and Holocaust in his wake. There is grave irony in the fact that Hitler could come forth, following the nakedly aggressive expansionist theories he revealed in *Mein Kampf*, and do it all in the name of peace.

So when I see in this day the leaders of nations similarly talking peace while preparing for war, I take frightful pause. When I see our country today intervening in what is basically a civil war, destroying hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese children with napalm, leaving broken bodies in countless fields ... when I see the recalcitrant unwillingness of our government to create the atmosphere for a negotiated settlement of this awful conflict by halting bombings in the north and agreeing to talk with the Vietcong—and all this in the name of pursuing the goal of peace—I tremble for our world. I do so not only from dire recall of the nightmares wreaked in the wars of yesterday, but also from dreadful realization of today's possible nuclear destructiveness, and tomorrow's even more damnable prospects.

In light of all this, I say that we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. We are called upon to look up from the quagmire of military programs and defense commitments and read history's signposts and today's trends.

The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that

“We cannot remain silent as our nation engages in one of history’s most cruel and senseless wars.”

goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars? Why can't we at long last grow up, and take off our blindfolds, chart new courses, put our hands to the rudder and set sail for the distant destination, the port city of peace?

President John F. Kennedy said on one occasion, “Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.” Wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminates even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of

human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war—God forbid!—will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to ultimate death. So if modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war, he will transform his earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine.

I do not wish to minimize the complexity of the problems that need to be faced in achieving disarmament and peace. But I think it is a fact that we shall not have the will, the courage and the insight to deal with such matters unless in this field we are prepared to undergo a mental and spiritual re-evaluation ...

Let me say finally that I oppose the war in Viet Nam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as a moral example of the world. I speak out against this war because I am disappointed with America. There can be no great disappointment where there is no great love ...

We cannot remain silent as our nation engages in one of history's most cruel and senseless wars. America must continue to have, during these days of human travail, a company of creative dissenters. We need them because the thunder of their fearless voices will be the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and the clamor of war hysteria.

Those of us who love peace must organize as effectively as the war hawks. As they spread the propaganda of war we must spread the propaganda of peace. We must combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement. We must demonstrate, teach and preach, until the very foundations of our nation are shaken. We must work unceasingly to lift this nation we love to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humane-ness ...

All the world knows that America is a great military power. We need not be diligent in seeking to prove it. We must now show the world our moral power.

There is an element of urgency in our re-directing American power. We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of *now*. [\[1\]](#)

Martin Luther King Jr. Mourns Trayvon Martin

By **Lauren K. Alleyne**

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For you, son,
I dreamed a childhood
unburdened by hate;
a boyhood of adventure-
skinned knees and hoops,
first loves and small rebellions;
I dreamed you whole
and growing into your own
manhood, writing its definitions
with your daily being.
I dreamed you alive, living.

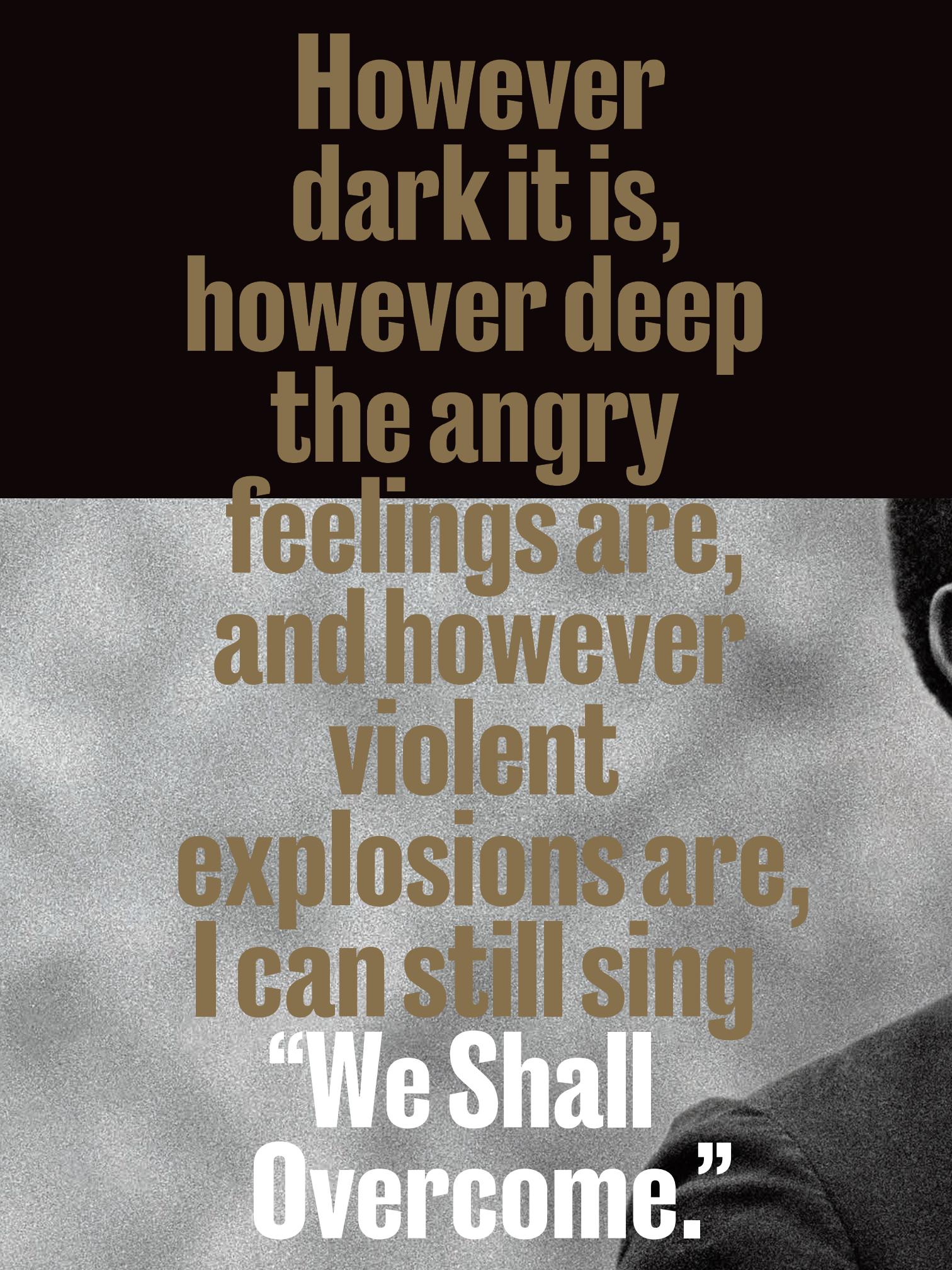
For you, America's African heir,
I dreamed a future
of open doors, of opportunity
without oppression,
of affirmation and action,
I dreamed Oprah and Obama
I dreamed Colin and Condoleezza
I dreamed doctors and dancers,
lawyers and linebackers, models,
musicians, mechanics, preachers
and professors and police, authors,
activists, astronauts, even,
all black as Jesus is.

I dreamed you dapper-
the black skin of you
polished to glow; your curls,
your kinks, your locs,
your bald, your wild,
your freshly barbered-
all beautiful.

I dreamed you wearing whatever the hell you want
and not dying for it.

For you, brother,
I dreamed a world softened
by love, free from the fear
that makes too-early ancestors of our men;
turns our boys into targets,
headlines, and ghosts.

I had a dream
*that my children will one day live
in a nation where they will not be judged
by the color of their skin
but by the content of their character.*
Sweet song of my sorrow.
Sweet dream, deferred.
For you, gone one, I dreamed
justice-her scales tipped
away from your extinction,
her eyes and arms unbound
and open to you
at last.



**However
dark it is,
however deep
the angry
feelings are,
and however
violent
explosions are,
I can still sing
“We Shall
Overcome.”**