

So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Second Coming of America

Vincent Harding

Cataapulted into national prominence by the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56, Martin Luther King, Jr., became the foremost symbol and spokesman for the direct action phase of the civil rights struggle that produced the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voter Registration Act of 1965. With extraordinary eloquence and charisma, King communicated the essence of the black demand for freedom to white America, even as he inspired and mobilized African-Americans to join that struggle. King's articulation of nonviolence as a philosophical principle, and his reliance on the Christian doctrine of unconditional love as the starting point for his leadership, helped to make acceptable to millions of white Americans a program of change that, by previous standards of action, seemed revolutionary. At the same time, King was always in danger of not proceeding far enough or fast enough to satisfy his African-American supporters.

In this article, Vincent Harding offers a personal, as well as historical, assessment of King's journey as he sought both to respond to those who prodded him to take a more radical path, and to address the realities of white political power. With sensitivity and passion, Harding helps us to gain an inner sense of King's own struggle, and a greater awareness of what King's life meant to the values and direction of American society.

From Vincent Harding, "So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Second Coming of America," in Michael V. Namorato, ed. *Have We Overcome? Race Relations Since Brown* (Jackson, 1979). Copyright © 1979 by the University Press of Mississippi. Reprinted by permission of Vincent Harding and the University Press of Mississippi.

I met Martin King in 1958, twenty years ago this month, and for the ten years of his life that we knew each other he was for me, to me, a brother, comrade, neighbor, and friend. From 1961 to the time of his death he regularly encouraged me to carry out the role I had chosen for myself as one who was both an engaged participant in the movement, and at the same time a committed historian and critical analyst of its development, as one who worked at the vortex of the struggle and yet remained outside of the official structures of the main civil rights organizations. . . . I come then as Martin's friend, his brother, as one who is crazy enough still to find myself talking to him on occasion, sometimes shouting his name—along with Malcolm's, along with Fannie Lou's, along with Clarence Jordan's and Tom Meerton's and Ruby Doris Smith's. (Many of these names you don't know, and if you are to get an education at this university—or any other—you must demand to know them.)

The second thing I need to indicate is probably already implicit in my first comment. In 1961, three years after first having met King, I came south from Chicago with Rosemarie Harding, my wife and comrade, to work full-time in the freedom struggle. I do not hesitate to proclaim that I am biased towards that struggle and its participants. Indeed, at the same time I seek to understand and record its past, I am totally committed to work actively towards the creation of its next, still unclear stages of development. And I expect always to maintain that partisan bias in favor of a new, more humane American society, in favor of freedom for all the men, women, and children who seek new beginnings, new opportunities to break the shackles of the many external and internal oppressive realities that still bind so many of us down to lives that are less than our best, most human selves. . . . Within that context, it is clear that we shall understand the role Martin King played in the movement only as we understand that he was at once created by the movement and a creator of some of its major thrusts. He made much history, but in doing so he was aided, limited, and defined by the struggle that was mounting all around him, making him.

This dialectic, the dynamic, often agonized interplay between Martin and the movement may be illustrated in many ways, at many points, but we shall choose five developments to illustrate briefly the relationship between the man and the movement and to comment on its nature and its strengths and weaknesses. Those reference points are Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955-1956; Albany, Georgia,

in 1961-1962; Birmingham, Alabama, and Washington, D.C., in 1963; Mississippi and Chicago in 1966, and the fateful, desperate road from Riverside Church, New York, on April 4, 1967, to Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

Let us begin at Montgomery, where black folks took the U.S. Supreme Court more seriously than the court took itself, firmly grasped the *Brown* decision, intuitively recognized its many broader implications, and began immediately to press it far beyond the limited arena of the segregated school systems. Even before he arrived in Montgomery as the new pastor of the prestigious, black middle-class dominated Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin King had entered the dialectic. He was a child of one of those comfortable Atlanta black bourgeois, church-dominating families; but nothing could insulate him against the reality of his people's existence in the South, in America. Nothing could blind him to the fact that ever since World War II a new phase of our freedom struggle had been mounted against rugged, often savage opposition, and he knew that what we were doing, largely through the courts at first, and through early, dangerous attempts at voter registration, was somehow tied to the anti-colonial struggles being waged across the world.

Then, just a bit more than a year after he had been in Montgomery, not long after he had completed his doctoral dissertation for Boston University, while thoughts of a relatively easy life as pastor and part-academic danced in his head, a strong, gentle woman named Rosa Parks refused to do the usual, agonized black dance on a segregated Montgomery bus. As a result, she was arrested, and a new time was opened in the struggle . . . the new time was building on the efforts and the people of the time before, and King was initially pressed into the role by a small group of genuine local leaders who had proven themselves in the past, and in a real sense he was later anointed by the larger masses of the Montgomery black people to be the public representative of their struggle. Even then no one fully realized that the new time had really begun to come, that it was possible now to make more history than they had ever made before in Montgomery, Alabama.

Before examining that particular [moment], it will probably be helpful to remind ourselves that at the outset of the Montgomery struggle the black folk of the city established their boycott of the segregated buses for very simple goals. They did not initially demand an end to bus segregation. Indeed, as late as April 1956, four months

after the beginning of the boycott, King was articulating three objectives which assured continued segregation. The three goals were:

1. More courteous treatment of black passengers.
2. Seating on a first-come, first-served basis, but with blacks continuing the current practice of filling up from the rear of the bus forward, while whites filled in from the front towards the back.
3. Hiring of black bus drivers on predominantly black lines.

That was all. That was all they asked at first, and they did not march, sit-in, or fill up the jails—they just refused to ride the buses. That was all. It seems so simple now, but it was a great step then, and it was the local context in which King began.

In the weekly mass meetings that developed as a series of increasingly politicized, religious revival sessions, King set out to put forward his evolving philosophy of Christian nonviolence. At first, it was defined primarily as a refusal to react violently to the violence of whites, as a willingness to return love for hatred, and a conviction that their action was not only constitutional but within the will of God—therefore also within the onward, righteous flow of history. So, at the first mass meeting on December 5, 1955, in his exhortation to the fearful, courageous, wondering, determined people, King said, "We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a Utopian dreamer who never came down to earth." Then he closed with one of his typically rousing and inspiring perorations: "When the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'There lived a race of people, a black people, fleecy locks and black complexion, but a people who had the marvelous courage to stand up for their rights and thereby they injected a new meaning into the being of history and of civilization.' And we are going to do that."

From that auspicious beginning, one of King's major roles was interpreter, inspirer, the prophet who saw the significance, the larger meaning of what was happening in the immediate movement. He learned that role, grew into it, made important errors in it, but it was his. . . .

So the young pastor, moving into his twenty-seventh year, had

found a black community ready to take certain initial risks on behalf of a limited vision of its rights and a new determination to establish its dignity. Beginning where they were, he took the people's courage and lifted it to the highest possible level, called upon them to see themselves as far more than black men and women of Montgomery Alabama, striving for decent treatment on a bus. Instead he pressed them forward, urging them to claim their roles as actors in a great cosmic drama, one in which they were at once in unity with the best teachings of American democracy, with the winds of universal social change, and at the same time walking faithfully within the unchanging will of . . . So, by the time the boycott had successfully ended in December 1956, by the time blacks were free to sit wherever they chose on the city buses, the possibility of an entire community of black men and women in the South taking large risks on the basis of conscience, justice, and a belief in the will of God had begun to be established. Those men and women and children of Montgomery, with their leaders-spokesman, had made it possible for others to go beyond them and make even more history, create an even greater future.

Yet, once the Montgomery bus boycott had ended, King was without the base of direct mass action that he needed for the fullest, continuing development of his own role. . . . On the last day of November 1959, Martin King announced his decision to move to Atlanta by February 1, 1960. Then he said, "The time has come for a bold, broad advance of the Southern campaign for equality . . . a full scale assault will be made upon discrimination and segregation in all forms. We must train our youth and adult leaders in the techniques of social change through nonviolent resistance. We must employ new methods of struggle involving the masses of the people."

Clearly, King was speaking to himself, to the moving black community, and to the white and nonwhite world all around. Then, only two months after the announcement, on the very day of the planned move, almost as if by orchestrated agreement, an explosive response to King's vision came from the very "youth" he had hoped to train. They were not waiting for that training, and when the student sit-in movement erupted, beginning in February 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, it drove immediately towards the center of King's life, transforming it in ways that he had likely not quite anticipated. That was, of course, appropriate. For these neatly dressed, amazingly disciplined black young men and women, who with a few white allies

began the new phase of the movement, were not only the products of the on-going school desegregation struggles of the South, they were really the children of Martin Luther King. In spite of many mixed feelings about him, they saw him as hero and model. But as is so often the case in such situations, they also went beyond him, creating what he could not create on his own, establishing the basis for the South-wide movement of massive, direct nonviolent confrontation with the segregated public facilities of the section which King had just announced. . . . They truly believed that through the power of their organized, disciplined, confrontative, nonviolent struggle, they were to be the builders of "the beloved community" in America, the harbingers of the new society Martin King had so continually evoked. Black and white together, they believed and they struggled, taking into their own flesh and spirit many of the hardest blows of white hatred and fear. . . .

But because we often create more history than we realize, because we often give birth to children that we do not understand and cannot control, it was not until the development of the Albany movement that Martin King was really able to catch up with the newest, rapid, explosive expansion of his people's struggle. What happened in this southwestern Georgia community from the fall of 1961 through the summer of 1962 was critical to the development of his role in the movement. Having moved from Montgomery to Atlanta in 1959, having developed no similar nonviolent mass action base in Atlanta, but sensing the new moment of history and its needs, King now became a kind of roving leader, responding to calls from the local movements that were springing up in hundreds of communities all over the South. . . . When in December 1961, the Albany movement invited King to come and help them, new patterns in his role began to be clear.

One of his major functions was admittedly to help inspire the local populace to greater efforts, for by now King had begun to be idolized by large sections of the black community, a development fraught with great pitfalls, of course, both for the idol and his idolizers. Nevertheless, King was their national leader, the acknowledged symbol of their struggle. And he was a great exhorter in every sense of the word. In addition, his presence was now considered a guarantee of national and even international media attention. Moreover, because Martin had begun since Montgomery to establish certain ambivalent contacts and significant influence with "liberal" white forces, especially

in the religious, educational, and labor union communities, he began to be seen as the one person who could mobilize the "people of good will" (as he called them) from across the nation to come help in the struggle of local southern communities. Even more important in the minds of some persons was the fact that King seemed to have access to the Kennedy White House and its great potential power. Of course, it also came to be understood that Martin would lead marches and go to jail, and that his own organization, SCLC, with its rapidly growing staff, would provide experienced aid to those who might be new in the ways of nonviolent struggle. Albany actually was the first real testing ground for this developing role of King, the visiting leader/symbol, and SCLC, the black church-based organization, in the new phase of the southern movement.

In many ways, as one might have expected, the first experiment was an ambivalent one. In Albany, King was able with the local movement leaders to test what was essentially a new strategy, one forced upon them by the powerful thrust of the freedom movement. Rather than focusing on a single issue, such as bus desegregation, they decided to make multiple demands for changes toward racial and economic justice in their city. The internal force of the people's rush towards justice, their sense that the new time was indeed upon them, their growing understanding of the wider significance of their movement and the stubborn recalcitrance and evasiveness of the white leadership—all these pushed the black freedom fighters out of the churches, out of the train and bus stations, out of the dime stores, out into the streets.

In this motion, King was a crucial element, constantly in dynamic interaction with the force of its thrust. Through his words, his actions, and the very fact of his presence, Martin served as a great inspiration to the movement of the local black community, especially in the early weeks of their activity. Hundreds of persons for the first time in southern freedom movement history volunteered for acts of direct action civil disobedience right out on the streets—which meant certain jailing in some of the most notorious and dangerous jails of Georgia. Out from the church mass meetings they marched, singing "We Shall Overcome," "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," and "This Little Light of Mine." They went to jail, singing, "I'm gonna let it shine." They sang and prayed in jail, "Paul and Silas locked in jail had nobody to go their bail, keep your eye on the prize, hold on." In the dirty jails where the memories of blood from older times were

still present, they were threatened for singing and praying, and they kept on singing and praying. . . . "Over my head I see freedom in the air. There must be a God somewhere." Indeed out of the Albany jails came one of the most dynamic cultural forces of the southern movement, the SNCC freedom singers, carrying the songs of the movement across the nation and over the world, songs which were bought at a great price "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Freedom." . . .

But there were major problems as well. The Albany movement had not really jelled as an organization before they called on King. Thus, there were both understandable confusions in its goals and in its role. On the one hand, their sense of the need for nonviolent struggle was constantly being strained by the rush of their own motion and the violence they were meeting. On the other hand there was a temptation to see King, to encourage him to see himself as a savior—too often a peripatetic savior, one who had to leave town at various points to keep speaking and fund-raising engagements elsewhere. This created real difficulties, especially for a leader who was not essentially a day-to-day strategist in the first place. In addition, there were understandable hard feelings among the SNCC forces—who were often brilliant, brave, and sometimes foolhardy strategists. These young people were often resentful when, after their initial, lonely, and often dangerous weeks of local organizing, Martin King would arrive on the scene, trailing a coterie of supporters and a crowd of media persons behind him, and the hard, dangerous spade-work of these young freedom soldiers would tend largely to be forgotten in the aura of *Martin Luther King*. Moreover, King's leadership style, which was also SCLC's style, derived largely from the semiautocratic world of the black Baptist church, and it simply grated against the spirits of the young people from SNCC. For they were working out their own forms of sometimes anarchistic-appearing participatory democracy. . . .

Nevertheless, two final words must be spoken about Albany. First it is to King's credit that he recognized many of the problems that were built into his own new role and tried to deal with some of them, but the role of a roving leader in the midst of a mass movement spread over such a massive area, often under the glare of television cameras, was fraught with deep and intrinsic difficulties. These were especially dangerous when added to the tendency to sycophancy and adulation that was building in some of the people around him, and the ten-

gency to psychic murder that was built into the media of mass television. Second, in spite of the mistakes of King, SCLC, SNCC, the NAACP CORE, and the Albany movement itself, Albany and its black and white people were changed and have been changed in profound, significant ways. There is no way that the black community will ever be pushed back to 1961; there is no way that white Albany will ever be the same again. But the question blacks now ask, as we must all ask, as Martin asked, is, where do we go from here?

In 1963, for King and SCLC, the geographic answer to that question was Birmingham, Alabama. But as we all knew, Birmingham, like Mississippi, was much more than a physical place. It had a bloody reputation, it was a frightening name. It was pronounced by some as "Bombingham" because of the violence whites had consistently brought against any black movements towards justice and equal rights there. And every black person in this country likely knew someone who had been run out of, beaten or killed in Birmingham, Alabama. But the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth had not been run out, though he had been beaten more than once and almost killed, at one point with national television cameras running. It was largely at Shuttlesworth's insistence that King and SCLC came to Birmingham in the spring of 1963. . . .

By the time that King himself began to lead demonstrations—a week after they began—he was faced with the reality that a very volatile situation was at hand, the most difficult he had ever faced. Birmingham was "bigger and badder" than either Albany or Montgomery, and whites were not the only bad dudes in that town. So certain powerful contradictions began to surface. On the one hand, the "Commandments" handed out to demonstrators began, "Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus," and included such additional admonitions as "walk and talk in the manner of love for God is love. . . . Refrain from violence of fist, tongue or heart." But at the same time, Jim Bevel and other staff members were confiscating a good number of knives and other weapons from some of the brothers who had come prepared for other ways of walking and talking. Obviously, then, the tensions were there, felt more sharply, drawn more clearly than ever before. . . .

These young people of Birmingham and others like them had a powerful effect on Martin King, on the shaping of his role, on the history he was making. He saw the great forces of energy and power,

still present, they were threatened for singing and praying, and they kept on singing and praying. . . . "Over my head I see freedom in the air. There must be a God somewhere." Indeed out of the Albany jails came one of the most dynamic cultural forces of the southern movement, the SNCC freedom singers, carrying the songs of the movement across the nation and over the world, songs which were bought at a great price "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Freedom." . . .

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black power, stored up within them, and he knew where it could lead. He realized that now they were at least potentially the children of Malcolm X as well, and he was not unmoved by that recognition. He saw them take on the dogs and the firehoses with courageous anger, and he knew that anger was not easily controlled.

So his rationale for nonviolence began to expand to account for such young men and women in Birmingham and everywhere, began to account for Malcolm and the Nation of Islam and other, even more radical and revolutionary voices abroad in the land. Now it was not simply a weapon of love. As he explained it to an increasingly perplexed white world, nonviolence was also a defense against black retaliatory violence. More explicitly than ever before, King was forced to face the stormy potential of the black young people around him, and what they meant for his own sense of the future. When forcibly given a time to rest and think in the Birmingham jail, these children, spawned out of his own body, were clearly on his mind as he wrote his famous letter. Speaking of the American blacks he said,

Consciously and unconsciously, [the Negro] has been swept in by what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march some times; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history.

From that point onward, King increasingly found himself caught between the rising rage, nationalistic fervor, and questioning of nonviolence in the black community, and the fear of the white community that would seek to hold down all those black energies, to break them up, at worst to destroy them. So while Birmingham represented the largest number of blacks ever engaged in massive direct civil disobedient action up to then, and while the agreement worked out with the city was considered a victory of sorts, King's role was clearly undergoing transition again. Forces were now at work that had long been kept in check; . . .

In a sense, Montgomery was a long, long time ago. Seen from the late spring of 1963, the bus boycott was now a time of quiet, gentle protest compared with the massive action sweeping across the South, challenging the old regime, eliciting some of its most brutal responses. This new massive direction-action pressed King more fully into another role—that of chief movement emissary to the White House. John Kennedy, who had said in January 1963, that civil rights action was not among his highest priorities, was forced to change his priorities by the whirlwind of the black movement. So White House conferences with King and others, by phone and in person, became almost *de rigueur*. But some persons soon learned—King later than some, earlier than others—that conferences with presidents may do more to divert the force of a movement than to fuel and inspire it, especially if that is one of the intentions of the president. . . . As a result, King became, partly unwarily, a tool for defusing a powerful current in a critical struggle for the future of the movement.

This is what I mean: for more than two years before Birmingham, Martin and others had talked about the development of a trained, disciplined nonviolent army that would become the spearhead for a national movement of powerful, disruptive nonviolent civil disobedience, from coast to coast. . . .

During the Birmingham demonstrations the group pressing for the development of such a nonviolent army proposed that its first action be aimed at Washington, D.C., to shut down the activities of the city until adequate civil rights legislation of many kinds was passed. Without going into the details of the transformation, it is enough to say that King allowed himself to be convinced by other more moderate black and white leaders of the civil rights coalition that such a move would be exceedingly unwise. They were convinced and were probably right that it would lose friends and anger many "neutrals" in the white community. It would certainly lose the president's support for civil rights legislation specifically and racial justice generally. So, instead of a disciplined, nonviolent force—largely from the southern testing grounds—descending on Washington for an extended campaign of disruptive civil disobedience, the summer of 1963 produced the one-day, unthreatening March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. As a result, King passed up an opportunity possibly to transform his role in the struggle, to transform the struggle itself, losing perhaps more than we can ever know. And it was not until the fiery, bloody summers of 1964–1967 had passed that he was even-

tually forced by the movement of his people and the larger forces of history back to the idea of an organized, national nonviolent revolutionary force. By then it would be too late—at least for that time. . . .

The issues which had been simmering, rolling the waters of the movement for a long time—sometimes pressed audaciously to the surface in the recent speeches of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the issues of power, the issues of racial pride, solidarity, and nationalism that had poured out anew in the North after the assassination of Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik El Shabazz; the issue of black control over the organizations of our struggle; the issue of the role of whites in the struggle; the issue of the need for black “liberation” as opposed to “integration,” raised to a new level by the introduction of Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* into the reading experience of many of the SNCC members; the concomitant rising discussion of black “revolution” as opposed to finding a place in the American status quo; the issue of the relationship between the black middle class and the masses of poor blacks, South and North; the issue of the need for the development of black leadership; the issue of sexual relations between white women and black men—all these exciting, frightening, dangerously explosive matters and many more leaped out in a compressed code from the lips of Willie Ricks of SNCC and they found their national identity in Stokely Carmichael, twenty-four-year-old veteran of the freedom rides, of the Black Panther party in Lowndes County. Alabama, of Greenwood, Mississippi. (Always remember that Stokely at his best was no dilettante. But, like the rest of us, he was not always at his best.) *Black Power! Black Power!* Black Power had officially begun its time: June 1966, on the road from Memphis to Jackson, cities of our music and our martyrs. . . .

At many points in the fall and winter of 1966–1967, after another summer of urban rebellions, as the fierce debate over Black Power raged, as he recognized the essential failure of his heroic/quixotic foray into Chicago, as the war in Vietnam continued to expand, as white anger mounted and black criticism of his positions grew more strident, King seemed at times like a great, courageous, but deeply perplexed captain, trying desperately to control a ship that was being rocked by mutinies from within and raging storms from without.

Yet, the truth of that perilous time was even more difficult. For by then there was no longer any one entity—even symbolically speaking—which could be called the Black Freedom movement and

which Martin could really lead. Indeed, the very internal power of the movement that he had done so much to create and focus, that had shaped and molded him, had now broken out in many new directions, reviving, inspiring a plethora of older black—and white—traditions. . . .

It was impossible for King—or any other single individual—to understand, much less command all the tendencies now set loose in the black communities of the land. (Of course, he knew that he was being falsely identified as an “Uncle Tom” by many northern black rhetoricians of revolution who had never once risked their lives as King had done so many times in the cause of his people’s freedom.) At the same time, Martin was trying to understand where the real, critical centers of power lay in American society, trying to understand how he could tackle the powerful forces that supported war, racism, poverty, and the internal subversion of the freedom movement’s many parts.

No easy task. Still King seemed convinced that he would be unfaithful to the history he had already made with others, untrue to his forebears and his children in the struggle for justice, unless he followed what appeared to be the logic of the movement. For him, that logic, that history, that sense of integrity pressed him toward a more radical challenge than he had ever mounted before, one that would leave him more naked to his enemies than ever before. . . .

First, King decided to try to respond fully to the unspeakable agony, the terrible crime of Vietnam, defying all his critics and many of his friends, from the White House to members of his own organization and his own family. On April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, the struggling leader-searcher addressed a major meeting sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. Near the beginning of his vibrant presentation, King admitted that he had not spoken clearly and early enough, but vowed that he would never make that mistake again. Justifying the connection he saw among the struggles for equal rights and economic justice in America and the demand for an end to American military involvement in Vietnam, King placed them all within the context of his commission as a minister of Jesus Christ and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Unflinchingly, he identified America as the essential aggressor in the war and called his nation “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” . . .

Soon he turned from Riverside Church to forge the second prong of his militant challenge to white American power. In the summer of 1967, after two of the decade's most deadly urban uprisings—in Newark and Detroit—had stunned the nation, after a national Black Power convention had done much to stamp that variously defined slogan in the minds of black folk everywhere, King announced his plans for a major attack on America's internal structures of inequality and injustice. . . .

It was a version of the nonviolent army again, now surfacing at a far more volatile, confused, and dangerous moment in the nation's history and in King's own career. . . . By the end of 1967, King and his staff had again decided to focus this potentially revolutionary challenge in Washington, D.C., fully aware of the ugly, angry, and unreluctant mood at work in the White House and elsewhere.

At his radical best, King was determined to press the logic of his position, the movement of his people's history. Having attacked the nation's antiliberationist overseas actions, he now intended to move on the heart of the government, demanding a response to the suffering of its own semicolonized peoples. (Nor was King paving a way of welcome for his move by saying late in 1967: "I am not sad that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable. Without this magnificent ferment among Negroes, the old evasions and procrastinations would have continued indefinitely." He was not paving a way, but he was indicating his own way, his own movement in the vortex of "this magnificent ferment.")

Martin was trying to be on time, trying to be faithful, trying to go forward, to create whatever openings toward the future that he could. Jamming his life against the advice of many of his black and white movement supporters, defying the angry warnings of Lyndon Johnson, King searched for his new role, for the new role of his people. In an America that seemed at times on the edge of armed racial warfare, an America increasingly torn over the Vietnam war, an America unresponsive to the deepest needs of its own people, especially its poor—in the midst of this history King was desperately searching for the connections with his past, for the openings to his and our future.

By December 1967, Martin had at least temporarily taken his new powerful and dangerous position. In a series of broadcasts for Canadian public radio, he said, "Negroes . . . must not only formulate a program; they must fashion new tactics which do not count on gov-

ernment goodwill." Instead he said the new tactics must be those which are forceful enough "*to compel unwilling authorities to yield to the mandates of justice.*" But here at the end, at the beginning of the end, in his last major published document, King was not talking about blacks alone. The movement had grown; there was no way to "overcome" without taking on much more than we have ever taken on before. Thus he said,

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. *They must organize a revolution against that injustice*, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty.

Martin King was talking about a nonviolent revolution in America, to transform the entire society on behalf of its poorest people, for the sake of us all. Martin King was moving towards an experiment with truth and power, and he was calling for three thousand persons to join him for three months of intensive training to begin that revolution at the seat of America's political power, Washington, D.C. Martin King was shaping a new role for himself, leader of a nonviolent revolutionary army/movement, one which he also saw connecting with the oppressed peoples of other nations. . . .

Perhaps Martin King had seen and felt more than he was able to accomplish. Perhaps he could not ever be ready for this new role. Perhaps in the violent climate of America, it was impossible to be ready for such a campaign of revolutionary, nonviolent civil disobedience without an organization that was fully prepared for all the dangers, all the opportunities, and all the long, hard, preparatory work. SCLC was not that organization. Nevertheless, ready or not, King appeared to be trying to get ready—facing toward Washington, D.C.

But first there were garbage collectors to help in Memphis, and there were powerful forces at every level of American society who were determined that Martin Luther King would never be ready for the kind of revolution he had now announced. As a result, Martin never made it to Washington, never found out if he was ready or not. . . .

This man who grew from a spokesperson for his people's search for simple dignity in a medium-sized southern city to become a giant

symbol of the search for justice across the globe—this man, with all his weaknesses, all his flaws,” all his blindspots and all of his creative, courageous greatness, made all the history he could make. Perhaps of even more importance to us here and now, we are able to see that he helped force open the way to the possibility of a new vision, a second coming of America, an America in which justice, compassion, and humanity prevail. . . .

King helped create the possibility that all of us might break beyond our own individual and group interests and catch a vision of a new America, create a vision of a new common good in a new future which will serve us all. He saw that our needs were economic and spiritual, political and moral, social and personal, and as the end, the beginning approached, he was groping his way towards a new integration—one that had very little to do with the legalities of *Brown v. The Board of Education*.

But in the midst of this struggle, this groping, this searching, King learned some things, and the message he left was the message he had learned, the message he had been given by the earlier generations of our freedom-striving people: Freedom is a constant struggle. The message he left was that a new America cannot be created without an even more difficult, radical, and dangerous struggle than we have known up to now. The message he left is that black people can no longer make any separate peace with America, that our needs are the needs of other millions of Americans, that the entire society must be challenged with the force of revolutionary change in all its political, economic, social, and psychic structures.

Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the spring of 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr., joined Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's Birmingham movement to demand the desegregation of what was known as the most racist and segregated city in America. The opposition was strident and brutal, with Bull Connor's police using fire hoses and billy clubs to repel the African-American demonstrators. Even when SCLC mobilized the young people of Birmingham to lead the marches downtown, police terrorized the children, siccing police dogs on them. The pictures from those demonstrations helped galvanize Americans everywhere in support of civil rights legislation and eventually forced the Kennedy administration to take a more activist stance in support of civil rights.

In the midst of these demonstrations, King was arrested. While in jail, he responded in this letter to a statement of "moderate" white ministers in Birmingham who had asked that the demonstrations be curtailed, and who seemed to blame the victims of violence as much if not more than the perpetrators. Here, King eloquently preaches his own sermon to those ministers, calling into question a position that would use "moderation" as a means of reinforcing oppression. King's sermon is similar to an Old Testament "jeremiad" where the prophets of Israel insisted on declaring the truth about their people.

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.

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... 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 am here because I have organizational ties here. . . . But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . .

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 the process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on non-violence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliation?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" . . .

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. Non-violent 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 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 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 jet-like 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 stam-

mering 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 Flintown 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 "noodiness"—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. . . .

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 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 anti-religious 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 Citizen's Council 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? . . .

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. . . . Actually, time itself is neutral: it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that 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 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, 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 "rabblers" 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 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 spitefully 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." . . .

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? . . . 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, Ann 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 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. 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, non-violent 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 ob-

serve 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. . . . 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 feet 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 Judeo-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? . . .

Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood,

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Message to the Grass Roots

Malcolm X

After becoming a convert to the Nation of Islam while in prison and a disciple of its African-American leader Elijah Muhammad, former pimp and street hustler Malcolm Little took the name Malcolm X (the X signifying that under slavery Africans had lost their true family identity). A dynamic orator, he became the leading voice of, and major recruiter for, the Nation of Islam, preaching the complete evilness of the white race and the white man's responsibility for the plight of African-Americans. Espousing black nationalism and racial separatism, Malcolm X argued for black control of black communities and urged African-Americans to fight white racism "by any means necessary." After his break with Muhammad in early 1964, Malcolm X modified some of his views yet still rejected nonviolence, maintained the necessity for African-American domestic economic and political independence, and continued to identify the struggle of African-Americans with Third World anticolonial movements. Assassinated in February 1965, the Malcolm X who symbolized militant defiance and racial pride then became the most significant inspiration for and influence on the proponents of Black Power.

Compare the central arguments of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and compare both with Bayard Rustin in the next selection. How do you explain the differences in their viewpoints? Consider why different segments of the black population believed such divergent African-American leaders so compelling. How do you account for the shift from integrationist to separatist sentiments in the African-American community after 1965? What is Malcolm X's legacy today?

We want to have just an off-the-cuff chat between you and me, us. We want to talk right down to earth in a language that everybody here

Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," in *Malcolm X Speaks*. Copyright © 1965, 1989 by Betty Shabazz and Pathfinder Press. Reprinted by permission.