

THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

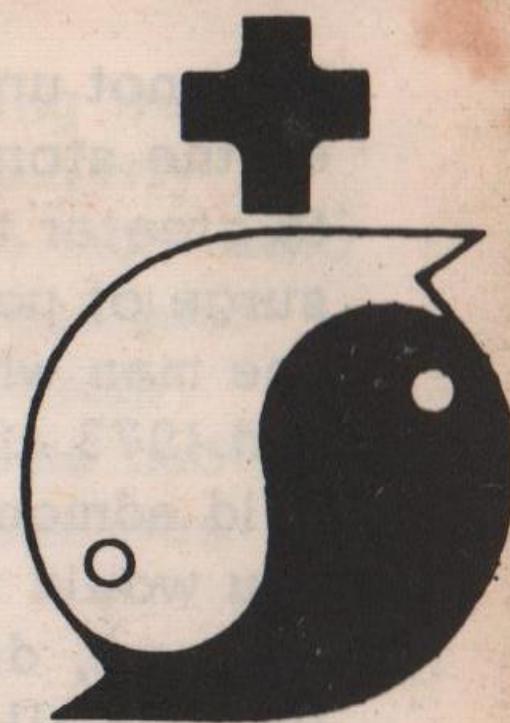
is an organisation whose broad aims are:-

1. To make representations to government and other official bodies on issues of racial justice.
2. To help the Catholic community become more aware of the views and aspirations of black people, of the extent of discrimination, and of the urgent need to promote racial justice.
 - a. by forming or encouraging groups of clergy, sisters and lay people in each diocese to do this in their own areas, through existing structures, and,
 - b. by working through Catechetical Institutes, Colleges of Education and Seminaries to change racial attitudes in education.
3. To seek to raise funds from within the Catholic community to support projects in multi-racial areas, on the lines of the Community and Race Relations Unit project-work, funded by Christian Aid.

C.C.R.J.,

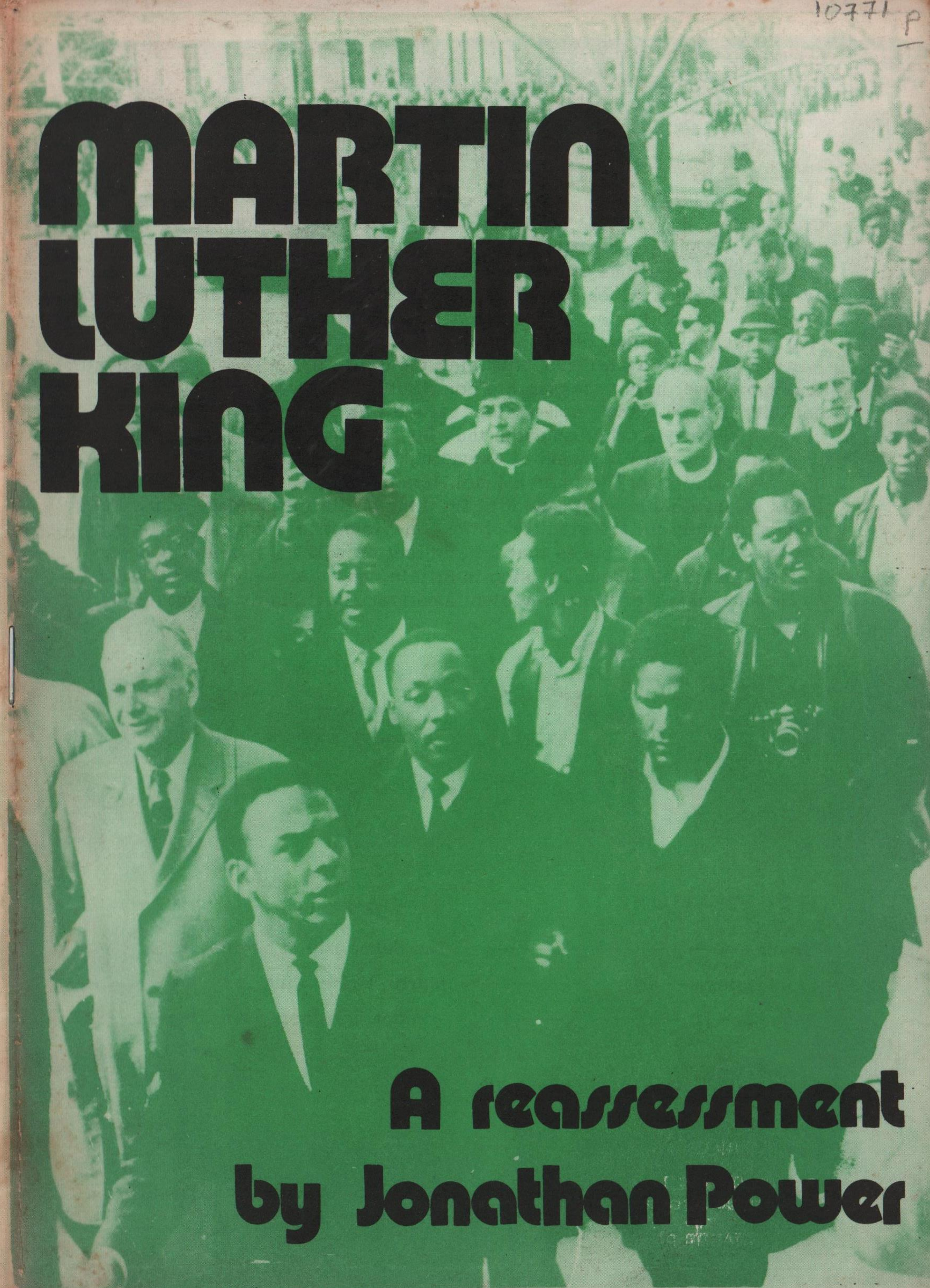
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MARTIN LUTHER KING

A reassessment
by Jonathan Power



Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, one of the greatest figures in the American Civil Rights struggle in this century was assassinated eight years ago, April 4th. 1968, after thirteen years of courageous non-violent campaigning. He died at a time when his tactics were being increasingly questioned by more 'militant' blacks, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, and when his opposition to the Vietnam war was criticised by some as a dilution of the main thrust of the Movement, and when the campaign in the Northern States was far from promising the dramatic successes of the South. Jonathan Power here assesses his contribution and argues convincingly, not only that Dr. King's non-violent stance was the sole viable tactic capable of carrying the campaign thus far, but had he lived, it would have been the most fruitful means of extending the Civil Rights struggle. He is now a columnist for the International Herald Tribune. This pamphlet provides an invaluable assessment of Dr. King's role in the Movement, and argues strongly for the validity of the non-violent techniques promoted by Dr. King. The CCRJ hopes that its publication will fill a gap in popular material available about Dr. King in Britain, and that many will be inspired by the successes of the non-violent American Civil Rights movement.

Barbara Kentish.
Spring 1976

ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover -----	The Selma march begins, 1965
Frontispiece -----	Martin Luther King
Pages 9 - 10 -----	Freedom marchers, Washington, 1963



Biographical Notes

- 1929 Martin Luther King Junior born. His father a preacher at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, and his mother a teacher.
- 1947 At the age of 18 King ordained a Baptist minister.
- 1951 Studied for PhD at Boston University, where he met, and two years later married, Coretta Scott.
- 1954 September, invited to become pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama.
- 1955 December - Beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, King elected Chairman of organising committee.
- 1956 November. Segregation of buses declared unconstitutional. First employment of non-violent approach.
- 1957 Other movements started. Founding of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), to coordinate them, with King as President. Visit to Ghana at invitation of Nkrumah for Ghanaian Independence. Close link seen between struggle against colonialism and against segregation.
May: Prayer Pilgrimage of Freedom : the launching of campaign for voting rights.
- 1958 Stabbed and nearly killed by woman in New York.
- 1959 Visit to India - more convinced than ever of power of Gandhian idea of non-violent resistance. Left Montgomery for Atlanta, to become co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church, in order to devote more time to the Civil Rights campaign.
December: announced a 'broad bold advance of the Southern campaign for equality', with plans for training leaders in non-violent techniques.
- 1960 Widespread student action to desegregate luncheon counters, and restaurants. Formation of the Students' Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) under guidance of SCLC. King arrested in Atlanta demonstration: imprisoned, and again in Albany 1961. Released through intervention of Senator John Kennedy then running for President. This may have won for John Kennedy a crucial number of black votes.
- 1961 Beginning of the Freedom Rides: blacks and whites rode together in interstate buses in the South, arousing much opposition and violence, but successfully desegregating buses.
- 1963 Civil Rights Bill put before Congress and passed the next year. March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Assassination of President Kennedy.
- 1964 King awarded Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1965 Selma voting campaign. King imprisoned (altogether was in jail over 20 times) Malcolm X assassinated. Voting Rights Bill announced by President Johnson. Campaign in the North began in Chicago.

- 1966 June 10th. Freedom Sunday March. Meeting with Mayor Daley. Demands refused. Chicago riots. August 26th: Demands for open housing granted.
- 1967 April: Dr. King announced his opposition to the Vietnam war. The Poor People's Campaign launched - widening of the Civil Rights Movement to include poor groups of all ethnic origins.
- 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers Union on strike, peaceful demonstration broken up with police violence. They were joined by other unions and Dr. King spoke at a number of meetings.
April 4th: Dr. King assassinated in a Memphis hotel.

Further Reading

1. Stride Towards Freedom by Dr. Martin L. King Jr. - describes Montgomery Bus Boycott and beginning of Civil Rights Movement.
2. Why We Can't Wait by Dr. Martin L. King Jr. - the impatience of blacks for freedom now. Further chronicle of the movement.
3. Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos Or Community by Dr. Martin L. King Jr. - a look at the way ahead.
4. Strength to Love by Dr. Martin L. King Jr. - Sermons on non-violence.
5. My Life with Martin Luther King by Coretta Scott King.

Martin Luther King—A Reassessment Jonathan Power

It's now eight years since Martin Luther King died. And it's taken all of that time for us to understand the measure of his achievement. At the time of death it looked as though he had been overtaken by events - and his own death symbolised the gathering turmoil of America. But now it is possible to believe that his eclipse need only have been temporary and that after three years of a kind of 'scorched earth' policy America, both black and white, would have responded to his leadership. Only now is it possible to weigh the fullness of his contribution - to weigh the fat years of say 1955 to 1966 (the years of King's great success) against the lean years of 1966 to 1972. And the best way to begin with this is to return to 1955, the year when it all really began, for it is only by accounting the vicissitudes of his campaign that we see the real heart of the man.

The Beginning: Montgomery Alabama

On the morning of December 5th, 1955 there was no overwhelming reason to think that the birth of the civil rights movement was only hours away. Certainly, no-one in Montgomery, Alabama, considered that they would be the fountainhead of a movement that would sweep America, standing a multitude of traditional beliefs and practices on their head; that would make possible great legislative triumphs no-one with any political realism considered possible; that would trigger off an unprecedented revolt by the young - black and white - against established mores and politics; that would stir and influence protest and revolutionary movements all over the world. But that was to be the outcome of one defiant gesture by a black seamstress, Mrs. Rosa Parks. On the morning of December 5th., she broke with all precedent and refused to give up her seat on the bus to the white man who demanded it. She was arrested and carted off to jail. But it broke the camel's back. The black population of Montgomery had reached the end of its tether. With an amazing and hitherto unobtainable show of unity it united behind a decision of a group of clergymen to boycott the city's buses. For 385 days the buses travelled with only white people. Black people either walked or, if they were too old or weak, used the highly efficient clergy-operated car and taxi pool. The man who was catapulted into the leadership of the boycott was a young Baptist preacher of 26, Martin Luther King. He had been living in Montgomery less than a year. Indeed he had chosen more for its quietness than anything else - he was intent on finishing off his doctoral thesis. And it was King's lack of self-assertion and the fact he had not had time to make any local enemies that persuaded the other local leaders that he would be their best choice. Besides, they knew he could preach a good sermon - and that was a high asset in the church-dominated black community.

So began the most powerful and successful movement for social change that had occurred in the West since the birth of the trade union movement in the nineteenth century.

Local Campaigns

During the years 1955 - 1962 the bastions of racialism were slowly eroded under the attrition of a multitude of local campaigns. Buses were desegregated. So were lunch counters, toilets, water fountains and cinemas. Even the universities. Progress was also made in getting those blacks who could register to vote registered. From 1947 to 1964 the numbers of Negroes registered to vote increased from 6,080 to 111,000. In 1957 and 1959 two minor but nevertheless important civil rights acts were passed - the first federal legislation improving Negro rights since Reconstruction.

John Kennedy, elected in 1960, had managed to swing a large majority of the black votes behind him. He had placed a well-timed phone call to Mrs. King while her husband was in prison and he promised during his election campaign to do away with discrimination in federally financed housing programmes "with the stroke of a pen". He even brandished a pen as he spoke. But on winning office he began to backtrack. No executive order on housing was signed. Plans to introduce anti-discriminatory legislation were quickly shelved. Sorensen, Kennedy's closest confidant besides his brother, recalls in his biography of Kennedy the thinking of the Kennedy administration.

"But for two years no other civil rights measures were sought or enacted. Bills originating in the Congress were endorsed by administration witnesses, thus technically fulfilling the pledges of the 1960 platform, but none of these was adopted or pressed by the President as his own. The reason was arithmetic. The August 1960 defeat of civil rights measures in the more liberal Eighty-sixth Congress - as well as the voting patterns in January of 1961 in the Rules Committee fight in the House and the closure rule fight in the Senate - all made it obvious that no amount of Presidential pressure could put through the Eighty-seventh Congress a meaningful legislative package on civil rights."

Federal Campaign: Birmingham Alabama

By now King and the civil rights movement were convinced that the only way to get real progress was to have extensive and comprehensive federal legislation that would both safeguard the successes they had chalked up and would extend those achievements so they were universally applicable, not merely limited to the one city or state where the Movement had stirred things up.

King decided the way to do this was to take a major southern city and carry on a campaign there that would not stop merely when the local conservative interests capitulated but only when the Federal government gave a promise to introduce a major civil rights bill.

Birmingham, a major industrial city, was chosen as the testing ground. By all accounts it was one of the most segregated and conservative of American cities.

Within three months the situation had completely changed. Life in Birmingham had been brought to a virtual standstill. The white diehards who were all well represented in the local police had sickened and revolted even white southerners with their open brutality and disregard for human suffering. The black demonstrators with their astonishing self-discipline in the face of mortal danger had awoken sympathy that none suspected existed - not least the Administration.

Where violence would have confirmed the prejudiced and alienated the liberals, non-violence minimised the resentment of the prejudiced and inspired the liberals. In such a political climate the power of the Negro to push for change had dramatically shifted. Arthur Schlesinger summed up the new American mood:

"The events in Birmingham abruptly transformed the mood of the nation. Churchmen, whose piety had studiously overlooked what John Quincy Adams called the foul stain on the American conscience, idealistic students, recently preoccupied with disarming the United States and leaving the Soviet Union the great nuclear power in the world, ordinary citizens complacent in their assumptions of virtue, were for a season jerked into guilt and responsibility. Bull Connor's police dogs accused the conscience of white America in terms which could no longer be ignored. But the awakening was so belated that it could hardly claim moral credit. Adam Clayton Powell, the urbane and cynical Negro congressman from Harlem, stated it with precision from Paris in May: all of a sudden in Birmingham the white man had come face to face with the fact that his numerical superiority and naked power could no longer contain the black mass. "He has seen little children stand up against dogs, pistol packing policemen and pressure hose, and they kept on coming, wave after wave. So the white man is afraid, he is afraid of his own conscience... Now is the time to keep him on the run."

Birmingham's city leadership was forced to sue for peace and President Kennedy found himself able to bring forth strong and extensive legislative proposals convinced that there was an excellent chance of their passage through Congress. In no western democracy in modern times has an entrenched position of a majority been upset so rapidly.

Despite the real achievement of forcing the Administration to introduce legislation, it took the Great March on Washington - where over 100,000 people participated - and some argue even President Kennedy's death, before Congress actually allowed the bill through.

Voting Rights: Selma Alabama

King's next major campaign was in Selma, a small market town in Alabama. It was an attempt, first to get the 3,700,000 blacks in the south eligible to vote registered, and second to raise the issue of the illegality of numerous barriers to registration that confronted the vast majority of southern negroes. These ranged from phoney literacy tests to impossible hours of opening at registration centres. They also included a fair amount of simple crude physical intimidation.

The campaign was a political success. It mobilised tens of thousands of black southerners. The restrictive registration procedures were made a mockery of by the unending queues of Negroes who patiently waited to register. Even when knocked to the ground by high powered hoses or tortured by electric cattle prods they maintained their determination to queue and wait.

The outcome was swift and definite. The Johnson administration moved at a cracking pace to introduce far reaching voting rights legislation. From now on the black vote was going to be of increasing importance.

SNCC - Focus of Discontent

But while King was enjoying enormous success on the legislative front and his popularity was increasing by leaps and bounds, there were certain currents of black opinion moving against him. A year later they would erupt into the call for "Black Power". At the moment they merely called for a more aggressive stance towards the white man, in particular toward the federal government.

The focus for discontent within the civil rights movement was in SNCC (The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee). Here the younger student activists both black and white felt the successes notwithstanding, the pace was not being pushed hard enough, that King worried too much about alienating the government and that at crucial moments he would draw back from pressing his advantage in order to make some deal or compromise with the political establishment.

Many observers found it difficult to appreciate why there should be so much discontent within SNCC given the phenomenal rate of advance of the civil rights movement. It was a question of raised expectations. When a cause

is riding high, inevitably the younger members feel that it is a question only of how much "shove" is needed before the whole edifice of the opposition crumbles and topples.

Their impatience, one might fairly describe it as impetuosity, was strengthened by the increasing unrest in the northern big city ghettos; an unrest that was born partly out of frustrated rising expectations, but maybe in their case less out of response to the gathering momentum of the civil rights movement than as a reaction to the unfilled rhetoric of the Johnson administration. Where was the so-called Great Society?

The Watts Riot: Los Angeles

The Watts riot only two weeks after the passage of the Voting Rights Act erupted into the euphoria surrounding Dr. King. In two days of rioting 34 people were killed. It was the first real big city riot since the Detroit riot of 1943. The violence was untrammelled and undisciplined. And elements within SNCC, so deep was their frustration after the Selma debacle, were ready to respond to this new mood and give it leadership. They were extraordinarily well positioned to lead a hard-hitting campaign of black militancy. More so probably than Malcolm X would have been, had he still been alive. In fact from the vantage point of the rioters Malcolm X had appeared in the last year of his life to be moving away from them. Besides he had renounced his political base - the Black Muslims - and he had not given the time to build another. But SNCC had a base - a firm constituency within an important segment of the civil rights movement. It contained the younger activists together with significant elements of the southern rural population in the areas SNCC had been organising - Lowndes County Alabama and Greenwood Mississippi in particular. The danger for Dr. King was that SNCC would leave his civil rights coalition in an attempt to give leadership to the frustrated elements that had produced Watts. But tragically he did not see the danger - at least in time. In Selma he might have been able to take preventive action. After Watts it was just too late. Surprisingly, King's writings give us no indication that this was the dilemma that confronted him. Perhaps he naively believed that his own personal good relations with the SNCC leaders would overcome any ideological difference they might have. But it was an enormous oversight.

The signal of change to come was Stokely Carmichael's election as chairman of SNCC in May 1966. He replaced the quieter and gentler John Lewis, who although critical of SCLC on many counts did not want to see a fundamental break in the movement or in the philosophy that guided it. Carmichael in contrast represented a fast growing new school of thought; that blacks should only use non-violence as a tactic for certain clearly defined political purposes; that in ordinary situations when attacked or threatened, defensive violence was justified and that the angry mood of the northerners should not be denounced but rather channelled into concrete political activities.

Internal Dissension: Chicago

While SNCC was preparing to shed its non-violent coat King had moved his battle weary staff north to Chicago. King's response to Watts had been to admit failure. In the Saturday Review he wrote an article suggesting that it had been a miscalculation to have concentrated so exclusively on southern problems.

Sadly, King's journey north seemed doomed from the start. His staff were emotionally drained after almost ten years of non-stop gruelling activities. Constantly on the front line, constantly facing unarmed the possibility of death rarely at home with their families and now facing the awesome task of translating the tactics of the predominantly rural south to the predominantly urban north the pressures were just too much. The leadership could not really cope with what looked like being the hardest and roughest campaign so far. Staff discipline began to weaken. The younger fieldworkers on the SCLC staff began to fight among themselves. Infected by the polarisation in the outside world, the white and black junior staff were caught up in intense racial conflict, much of it with highly charged sexual overtones. Andrew Young, SCLC's executive vice president and the man closest to King, argued later that whatever the pressures were to move north, the leadership and the staff should have taken six months holiday after Selma. But they did not and the ensuing faltering campaign was the outcome.

And so for the first six months the campaign dragged itself along. A few big landlords were exposed and forced to defend themselves publicly in front of mass meetings of tenants. Some landlords sold out or even abandoned their properties. Mayor Daley instituted a rat control campaign. But by the standards King was expected to live up to these were small achievements.

The Emergence of Black Power

Then out of the blue James Meredith was gunned down on a road in Mississippi and the whole Chicago campaign temporarily came to a halt. Meredith had been the first black student to enrol at the University of Alabama, now he had been trying to show that it was possible to march across the south with no more protection than a bible in his hand. Inevitably, his attempted murder made his march a cause celebre. All the civil rights leaders pledged to continue his march from where he had fallen. This was the moment SNCC had been waiting for. How could the blacks go on being non-violent and concerned with integration if this was to be the result? The shooting of a defenceless Meredith coming soon after the Watts riot and the build up of the war in Vietnam heightened the frustration with King's methods and the seemingly slow pace of the civil rights struggle. The young could not wait: a new direction was called for. It was to be



who needed who. It did not seem to concern the White House that it might be to their advantage to help King in order to limit the growing influence of the Black Power militants. Perhaps Illinois was just too important. In the end the tussle between the two boiled down in King's mind to just how many people he could be sure of counting on to march with him. If they were all arrested on the first march would others take their place? King was just not sure enough of his support. The previous marches although well supported did not compare with his southern ones. King agreed to negotiate. Daley was uneasy enough about being unseated to give something away. King was aware enough of his own weaknesses to take less than he had come to Chicago for. The ensuing agreement reflected the balance of forces - enough promises to make it look as if King had achieved a lot together with enough legal loop-holes for Daley to wriggle out through at a later date; certainly in time for the next mayoral election.

King left Chicago in the Autumn - not long after the agreement was signed. He justified his departure on the grounds that this was the way SCLC always worked: it moved into a community, helped raise the issues and then left the implementation of the follow-through to the local civil rights leadership.

But unlike Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma, King left with a sense of defeat. He had played his cards and had not too much to show for it. Certainly the black militants dismissed his Daley accord from the beginning. And the critical aim of the campaign to build a viable ghetto-wide tenants organisation had floundered.

Still it was not an unmitigated failure. Indeed for anyone else it would have been a triumph.

Chicago: The Results

From now on Daley found it increasingly difficult to get the black vote. Before he had always taken it for granted - his super-efficient machine saw to that. But now an increasing number of blacks began to buck the machine, even if it did mean that their jobs were threatened and the precinct captain did not help them out when they were in trouble with the law. Black candidates running as independents began to get elected. Blacks began to split their ticket.

It was also easier, after King's campaign, for blacks to get a mortgage and move into the suburbs, even though this only benefited a few. The Churches began a massive follow-up campaign. Catholic priests were ordered by Cardinal Cody to preach anti-racist sermons. Many parishioners walked on these sermons. Most probably ignored them. But others

were forced to start thinking about old attitudes and habits. The Churches, Protestant and Catholic, acting in unison, also opened employment agencies and started to build low-income housing. In relation to the problem these were only drops in the ocean, but compared to what had gone before it was a measurable start.

Most important of all, King left behind one of his young lieutenants, Rev. Jessie Jackson, a man of 26, a charismatic personality like King himself and, unlike King, a good 'on the ground' organiser. King put him in charge of a relatively new SCLC division - 'Operation Breadbasket'. Its purpose was mainly economic - to increase the quality of black job opportunities.

The idea was to organise local ministers to lead their parishioners in boycotts of firms that discriminated in their employment practices. By the time King left Chicago in the autumn of 1966 it was just getting off the ground. Already two large grocery chains - Hi-Low and National Tea - had capitulated after lengthy boycotts, and had agreed to carry the products of black corporations and to deposit in black banks the income from their stocks in the black ghettos. Compared with what Jackson was later to achieve these were very small victories.

The Media - A Change of Attitude

Whatever success King had in stirring up the forces of change in Chicago was set up against the sense of failure generated by the lapsed expectations of what he had publicly set out to do - the overthrow of white supremacy in Chicago. Compared with previous campaigns when the enemy was toppled like a pack of cards - or so it seemed in retrospect - the impression left behind in Chicago was that in Mayor Daley, King had more than met his match. Beside a dulled King, the Black Power leaders - Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown and Floyd McKissick - seemed much more colourful. Certainly they were better press copy, and King found it increasingly difficult to get the press coverage he needed. King's charisma depended on communicating visual excitement. And having once had so much press coverage any falling off was bound to weaken the public image of the exciting, active, moving, charismatic man. It did not matter if the publicity was bad or twisted - the people believed in him enough to sort out the truth. But he needed to hit the headlines, if only to show he was relevant and important. But when news editors decided that there was something more visual, exciting, and 'newsworthy', and that King no longer seemed novel, fresh, and unusual, he was quietly dropped from his former prominence. It did not matter that opinion polls in the black community still showed him as the most popular leader by far, he just wasn't 'news'.

Vietnam

The only activity of King's that was now to get any attention at all from the media was his outspoken criticism of the war in Vietnam, though of course, most of the publicity was highly critical. King had spoken out against the war as early as 1965. Long before Fulbright, McCarthy, McGovern or Kennedy were questioning it. King had made no bones about his attitude. It was not easy for King however. He was a public figure of significance. He needed to minimize personal opposition and antagonism in order to be as effective as possible in pushing his civil rights demands. Opposition to Vietnam was bound to raise the hackles of many of his civil rights supporters in the Congress and the White House. All the other civil rights leaders, apart from SNCC felt he was being counter productive and was weakening the cause of black advancement. They bitterly opposed his Vietnam stand. So did, for a time, the board of SCLC including his own father, who till this point had been a pillar of support.

Press opinion was sharply critical. While King was in Chicago the New York Times editorialised 'Civil Rights and Peace don't mix'. Life magazine was even sharper. It argued that King 'goes beyond his personal right to dissent when he connects progress and civil rights here with a proposal that amounts to abject surrender in Vietnam, and suggests that youths become conscientious objectors rather than serve.'

Notwithstanding the criticism and despite his defeat in Chicago, King in 1967 decided to bring his opposition to the war to the forefront of his concern. If there was an element of calculation in this, it was that he knew it would endear him to the militants and would push him into the public eye again. But it was a tremendous risk nonetheless. The black population had shown itself a strong supporter of the Vietnam cause; it provided opportunities for unemployed men. And black Americans had always felt that one way to prove themselves loyal Americans was to defend America's wildest foreign adventures. He was putting his prestige in the black community on the line. It says much for the man's real hold on his people that black opinion moved against the war so quickly from 1967 on.

The Riverside Address: New York

And so on April 4th 1967, Martin Luther King made his famous Riverside Address at New York's prestigious Riverside Church;

"The bombs in Vietnam explode at home - they destroy the dream and the possibility for a decent America", King preached that evening. And he went on to elaborate the historical background to America's involvement in Vietnam, and to argue that if one looked at the question honestly the Vietcong had more right on their side than the Americans. King was mov-

ing out on the most dangerous of all limbs - overt support for the American enemy.

"The second casualty of the war in Vietnam 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 realise it or not our participation in the war in Vietnam 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."

Carl Stokes: Cleveland Ohio

Nothing highlighted King's alienation from the press more than the work he did for Carl Stokes in Cleveland in the summer and autumn of 1967. Stokes was running for mayor in one of the most important cities, the sixth largest in America. If elected he would be the first black to hold such an important and influential office. Stokes was a black politician of the new school. Beholden to no machine; running as an Independent Democrat in the teeth of opposition from the regular machine, he was a post-Voting-Rights-Act black man's candidate. King threw his tremendous prestige into a drive to get the black vote registered in Cleveland, and making sure it came out and voted. He made sure that insecurity did not triumph, the hapless minority attitude prevail and the machine be supported again. Stokes won, and a new chapter in black political activity was opened.

King's role in the election however, received hardly any mention outside of Cleveland. The press were too preoccupied with the aftermath of the summer's big riots. Rap Brown's "Violence is as American as apple pie" was more newsworthy at this time. "And anyway who is this King guy? He's had his day, he's finished. That's stale, man" was the average news editor's view.

Poor People's Campaign

King knew his prestige was ebbing and his political muscle rapidly weakening. He had somehow to recapture the high ground. First he had to bring the militants back into the united front approach that had so successfully steamrollered into American racism for ten years. Second he had to reach out to white opinion, to allay the fears that Black Power and the riots had so provoked. He had to persuade them to respond, not react. Above all, he had to be newsworthy. A lesser man would have assumed such a task was impossible given what had gone before. But King persisted. It was in this mood that he conceived the Poor People's Campaign.

There were two highly imaginative elements in King's new plans. First he was going to attempt to broaden his platform. No longer would he try and

enjoin only the black underdogs to support his cause; he was going to actively organise other oppressed groups - Puerto Ricans, Indians, Mexican Americans, and most important, poor Whites. Second, he was going to step up the tempo of his non-violence in a way he never had before. He was prepared, if necessary to bring the life of Washington to a halt. (It was highly ironic that three years later in the Spring of 1971, the highly militant S.D.S. leader Renie Davies tried to do the same with a Vietnam protest. Noam Chomsky wrote a long article in the New York Review of Books heralding the 'new civil disobedience' tactics as a great imaginative breakthrough, yet in 1968 both considered King passe.)

The Memphis Strike

At that point a completely unexpected development took place, it was going to have dramatic and unforeseen consequences. The garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee went on strike. It was March 1968. As Memphis was to be one of the key centres in recruiting poor people for their trek to Washington, and as one of his inner circle - James Lawson - had his church there, it was almost inevitable that King would be brought in to give the strike support. King began to organise marches. But the young black power militants were not impressed, and reduced the first march to a stone-throwing, window breaking spree. There were only a few of them, and they did not have much support in the Memphis black community. But given the climate in America, they put King on the defensive. It looked as if he was out of his depth; that he was no match for Black Power. At least, that is how the press played it.

A lesser man might well have written Memphis off. After all Memphis was only a small piece of his total Poor People's Campaign strategy. And in other places, he could even get the militants on his side. King however, was not the kind of man to run out on a problem. He had faced dissident groups of black youths like these before, long before, who had tried to smash things up - in Birmingham, in Albany, and in Chicago. In the end he had been able - by sheer force of personality and will-power - to get on top of them and win them back to his point of view. The difference now was that the media would not give him a chance.. Neither would the White House. President Johnson appeared on television to condemn the 'mindless violence'. Yet only a few windows had been broken, and the President had never undermined King like this before, even when more serious things had gone wrong. Johnson was still counting on another term in the White House, and he apparently needed white votes more than he needed King.

King persisted. He locked himself in his hotel room with the leaders of the Invaders - Memphis' militant Black Power sect. At the end of a long session - like on so many occasions before - his honesty and vigour of

argument triumphed, and the Invaders pledged their cooperation with the next march. It looked as if it would be all right. They would win in Memphis, and this would give the Poor People's Campaign the boost it needed.

Death in Defeat

It was not to be. At 6.08 pm on Thursday April 4th, Martin Luther King was dead. Killed by an assassin's bullet.

King had died in defeat. Defeated by the media on which his gifts so heavily depended. They no longer judged his cause worthy of coverage. Defeated by the White House, who sought to undermine rather than support him. L.B.J.'s involvement in Vietnam blinded him to other political sensibilities, particularly as the time came up for re-election. His blind rage at King's persistent denunciation of the Vietnam policies, his feeling that King was not repaying his debts - and Johnson was a great caller-in of debts - prohibited him from seeing how, by stonewalling King's demands, he was helping the Black Power cause. And how racial polarisation would make profound political change even more difficult to achieve. Finally, King was defeated by the black militant leaders who, however strong their personal affection for King - Stokely Carmichael walked down the aisle and embraced Mrs. King at the funeral - could not see that their shouts of blood and thunder were leading them up a political cul-de-sac. A cul-de-sac that could only end in disillusionment and failure, increased fragmentation and a weakening of the whole black thrust. But young men do not think far ahead. They need to give tangible witness to their emotional fervour. They do not look much further than that.

The Results of Non-violence

There was much glib talk after Dr. King's death about how non-violence was dead too. Certainly as the riots fanned out across America, when the news of King's death broke, it looked like that. But in fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. Within two years American radicals would feel so saturated with violence that they would begin to open their minds to new political initiatives. There would be a sickening awareness that bomb talk and bomb activity got them nowhere. One by one the great leaders of the left would publicly question their own former tactics. Bernadine Dolan of the Weathermen, in January 1971; then Huey Newton of the Panthers, in June 1971; and finally Jerry Rubin of the Yippies in October 1971.

They were still a long way from returning to non-violence, though Huey Newton did drop some hints that that was what he was thinking. But they were doubting their previous bombing/sabotage/confrontation type of politics.

Certainly by the end of 1971, it was possible to think that if King were alive the time could not be more opportune for the start of a popularly supported non-violent campaign. Time was the best antidote to those who argued that King had been a failure. In retrospect, it was obvious just how successful his methods had been compared with his competitors. Also it was becoming clearer just what an incredible revolution he had wrought and what deep foundations he had laid. In particular one was beginning to see the result of his Voting Rights Campaign.

Five years ago fewer than 480 blacks held public office; now 2,264 do, and 86 blacks are mayors of cities. In 1970 563 blacks held public office in the old confederacy: in 1972 it was over 1,000. In South Carolina the number rose from 38 to 61 - three of them were the first black members of the legislature. In Alabama, the heart of the confederacy and Wallace's own stomping ground, more blacks hold public office today than in any but two other states - New York and Michigan. In southern rural areas locally elected officials such as sheriffs and judges have, to an Englishman's way of thinking, a remarkable amount of responsibility and power. Now that an increasing number are black they are exerting a profound impact on their white constituents. It challenges southern white racism at the gut level by showing them that blacks can exert authority over whites. In the north three of America's most important cities - Gary (Indiana), Cleveland and Newark - have had black mayors. In 1970 Los Angeles missed electing one by a narrow margin. By 1985 the blacks will most probably control sixteen of America's major cities. Although it is true that whites are fleeing to the suburbs, they cannot, given the size and complexity of modern city life, remove its basic ingredients - industry and commerce. This, together with the likelihood that there will be some kind of revenue-sharing procedure (whereby a portion of Federal revenue will go straight back in block grants to city and State administrations) on the Federal statute book in the next two or three years, means that black city administrations are going to become an important political force. Sixteen black-controlled cities could wield a tremendous amount of leverage at some future Democratic National Convention. Moreover, the whites that the blacks are replacing in office are often conservative Democratic machine politicians. And the whites who are left behind in the Democratic party are of a more liberal hue.

On the economic front progress is at last being noticed. In 1960 blacks accounted for only 4.5 per cent of those employed in the top categories of the occupational structure. A decade later it was 6.5 per cent. Blacks were also moving fast in acquiring educational skills. Blacks in higher education increased by 91% to 522,000 between 1967 and 1971. Black faces are almost an everyday affair as far as television is concerned. Even a Republican administration feels it must employ blacks in senior positions.

It is not unrealistic, then, to argue that if King had lived and had weathered the storm of the last two or three years, he would have pushed through to greater things, that his incredible stamina would have produced a new surge of political strength. It may be that he would have emerged as the one man who could have appealed to the disillusioned blacks of 1971, 1972 and 1973 and said to them, without rancour or bitterness but with only a mild admonishment 'I told you but you would not listen. I showed you but you would not look'. And maybe, because they knew that King for all his failings, did not let up, did push through, did get things done, did believe in them all, they would have followed him again.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND..

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