

The black King's murder

Fear and loathing in 1955



Demonstrators in Atlanta

Montgomery was a bad place for blacks in 1955. As Americans commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the year of his death, they may have found their memories drifting back to 1955, and the town of Montgomery.

As in the rest of the rural South, Montgomery blacks were forced to use separate and substandard public facilities such as washrooms, bus and train stations, restaurants, schools, and playgrounds. Remote constitutional amendments offered only words to southern blacks, who felt Washington, D.C. to be far away as Mars, and not nearly as close to the skin as the "Jim Crow" laws of segregation and hatred that governed the South.

Though white hatred of blacks extended far beyond separate facilities, perhaps nowhere did the segregation laws affect Montgomery blacks more than on the public bus system. Because few blacks owned cars, most depended on public transit to get them to and from work. Bus seating was segregated, and blacks had to sit at the back. When their seats were full, blacks, including the elderly and the infirm, had to stand while white seats remained empty. Blacks had to enter at the front, pay the driver, exit, and then re-enter through the back door to take their proper seats. The process was humiliating, scarring, and indicative of the shocking treatment accorded to black citizens in the Old Confederacy, which maintained its pathetic veneer of gentility spread thin over a century of bigotry toward a race barely free from the shackles of slavery.

But in December 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white, and she was charged for this crime by Montgomery police. In her defense, black churches in Montgomery organized a bus boycott, and chose as their boycott leader a young preacher, recently arrived in Montgomery from Atlanta, named Martin Luther King.

King was unlike any leader Southern blacks had seen; he spoke with the fire and passion of the Baptist pulpit, but he spoke not of heaven and hell, but of temporal salvation, the sin of bigotry, and the dignity of each individual regardless of race. He also spoke the language of Gandhian nonviolence and

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civil disobedience, and using these tactics, King led the blacks in completely shutting down the Montgomery transit system.

King also awoke the criminally sedate Eisenhower administration, and after 382 boycott days and the aid of federal intervention, blacks were able to claim total victory as the bus system was desegregated. Two days after the boycott ended, bullets were fired through King's house and shotgun blasts ripped through two buses loaded with blacks. The Montgomery bus boycott defined the paradox of King's meteoric 12 years as a symbol of black unity: it signalled the success that could be achieved through peaceful civil disobedience, and it brought out the full fury of white ignorance and hatred.

King and his coalition of black groups, called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, won more victories by organizing nonviolent protest movements across the South. Through Jackson, Albany, and Birmingham, King's magnificent oratory and valiant leadership inspired blacks and enraged white bigots. The homes of black leaders were burned, busloads of black Freedom Riders were beaten by mobs, and, in Birmingham, police dogs were unleashed and water hoses turned on against black children staging a peaceful sit-in.

Nonetheless, across the South blacks took King's cue and stood up against a century of *de facto* apartheid, forcing a new president, John Kennedy, and his diligent, passionate Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, to commit themselves to meaningful enforcement and expansion of federal legislation to assist blacks. At each stage, the powerful, haunting image of King and his untiring footsoldiers gave strength to blacks everywhere.

The extent of white intransigence and hatred toward blacks during this period is startling to Canadians, especially younger ones who cannot recall vivid TV images of white police brutalizing blacks. Even allegedly educated whites showed an appalling ignorance; newspaper editor James Kilpatrick appeared on an NBC news program in 1963 and stated that "King wanted to stamp out segregation everywhere" (as if this were a bad thing) and eventually create a "coffee-color compromise, a society in which every distinction of race has been blotted out." Such irrationality, so similar to the pre-Civil War alarm that shrilly warned white gentlemen to lock up their daughters when a black was around, was commonplace in the South, even 100 years after the Civil War.

King and the SCLC ran into difficulty when their campaign moved north following the famous March on Washington in August, 1963, when from the foot of the Lincoln Memorial King delivered his stirring "I Have Had a Dream" speech to 500,000 people. But the problems faced by blacks in the northern urban ghettos were different from the rural South, and the communitarian link of the Church had been supplanted by the isolation of the ghetto tenement and the fury of the street gang in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York, and even in Upper South cities like Baltimore. Though King gained thousands of adherents in the North, and did more than any man since Lincoln to make black rights a political issue in Northern capitals and in Washington, the nonviolence of King's philosophy was challenged and found wanting by advocates of revolution and black nationalism. King himself was, by the time of his death in April 1968, plagued by doubts about the efficacy of civil disobedience; his earlier successes by this method had brought out deep racial hatred that taunted black unity and tore at black spirit.

In the years since King's death, the problems faced by black Americans have not disappeared, though national resolve to solve them certainly has. The Black movement has reached its nadir with the 7-year-old Reagan administration, which has been led by a president almost totally unaware of and unmoved by the staggering economic and social conditions endured by most blacks. Recent government statistics reveal that 31 per cent of American blacks live in poverty, and racial clashes from Howard Beach, New York to Griffin County, Georgia indicate that white intolerance towards blacks is still a major problem.

On January 15, Americans might also have recalled the racial violence and black rage that erupted in the late 1960's especially after King's death and they might have appreciated a bit more the tremendous contribution King made to black rights and racial harmony. Constantly in danger of assassination and relentlessly pursued by an obsessed FBI, King nonetheless lent his uncommon wisdom and passion to the noblest of causes, and tempered his emotion with rationality and a ceaseless striving for racial brotherhood. Such a message, so eloquently delivered, is King's brilliant legacy.

by Gordon Turtle



Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral march