

# The Warfare Comes Home

The recent killings in Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas recall the racial violence of the 1960s which also occurred against a backdrop of U.S. warfare, a parallel that ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern notes.

By Ray McGovern

In 1967, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. faced a painful dilemma. How could he tell oppressed young blacks and police to shun violence on the streets of our country, but rather to behave nonviolently, when the entire country watched state-sanctioned violence in Vietnam on evening TV?

What Dr. King [chose to do then](#) needs to happen again – NOW. Against the “practical” advice of virtually all his Realpolitik associates, King asked one of his closest advisers, Vincent Harding, to draft a speech, *Beyond Vietnam*, in the dangerous prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power. (Thirty-five years later, I studied under the late Dr. Harding at [Word and World](#), a timely workshop in Greensboro, North Carolina, aimed at making faith *relevant* by closing the gaping gaps between Seminary, Sanctuary, and Street.)

In that momentous Vietnam speech before 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York, Dr. King broke multiple taboos by making unmistakably clear and explicit the organic connection between violence at home and abroad. The date of the speech was April 4, 1967; King was murdered exactly a year later.

But who will be today’s Dr. King? Who will have the courage of Harding and King to tell it like it is – to draw the connections between 15 years of state-sanctioned violence abroad and what is happening in our streets at home? Are there no prophets left?

I edged toward this key issue in [an article](#) that I wrote last year, which Consortiumnews.com dusted off from the archives and posted again in the wake of the despicable, but – I would suggest – largely explainable violence in Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas.

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## Ghosts of '68 in Election 2016

Longtime observers of American politics have noted striking parallels between the unpredictable wartime election of 1968 and the bizarre presidential contest of 2016, another time of war and distress, as Michael Winship recalls.

By Michael Winship

Watching the mad, mad, mad, mad world that is the 2016 presidential campaign, I was trying to remember a presidential campaign that was as jaw-dropping, at least in my lifetime, and easily settled on 1968.

For those too young to remember, imagine: As fighting in Vietnam rages on and the Tet Offensive makes us all too aware of the futility of our Southeast Asian military fiasco, Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy decides to run as an antiwar candidate against incumbent President Lyndon Johnson.

Supported by an army of "Clean for Gene" college students knocking on doors and making phone calls, McCarthy does surprisingly well, and then New York Sen. Robert Kennedy gets into the race, too. Johnson makes a surprise announcement that he will not seek a second term in the White House and McCarthy and Kennedy duke it out in the primaries.

In the midst of all this, civil rights giant Martin Luther King Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, and riots erupt across the cities of the United States. Two months later, Kennedy is murdered in the kitchen of a Los Angeles hotel just minutes after winning the California primary.

In August, eight years after his defeat by John F. Kennedy, the Republicans bring back Richard Nixon as their presidential candidate and the Democrats select Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who has not run in a single primary, as their party's standard bearer.

Simultaneously, a police riot against protesters outside the Democratic convention in Chicago leaves an indelible image of chaos, tear gas and blood. Nixon wins the election with a well-executed campaign set to the accompaniment of dog whistle signals against minorities and left-wing dissenters.

Oh, and one other thing – Alabama Gov. George Wallace, arch segregationist and race baiter, runs as the third-party candidate of the American Independent Party, campaigning as a rebel populist seeking the votes of the angry, white working class. He wins almost 10 million votes and carries five states in the South.

All of which brings me to one of the curiosities of that manic '68 campaign season, a slim volume written by Russell Baker, former *New York Times* columnist and veteran White House and congressional reporter. First serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, it was published as a book under the title *Our Next President: The Incredible Story of What Happened in the 1968 Elections*.

But here's the thing: Baker's book was written *before* all the events I just

described. It was imaginary, a work of speculative fiction that soon found the real thing giving it a run for its money. And yet, much of what Baker dreamed up presaged what really happened and is eerily reminiscent of what's going on in 2016 America.

In the book, President Johnson is indeed as besieged as the actual LBJ – “being ground in a politics of frustration more bitter than any could remember since the Depression election of 1932,” Baker writes. “A seemingly endless war, record food prices, rising taxes, intractable poverty, a surly unmanageable Congress and now an incipient revolution of race – and Johnson bore the burden of public blame for all.” It's all too similar to the climate today.

But in Baker's version of history, Johnson uses his legendary political wiles to create a scenario that he believes will lead to his reelection – Hubert Humphrey is made to step down as vice president, becoming secretary of state, and Kennedy is named as the next vice president, creating a Johnson-Kennedy ticket. Pandemonium ensues.

### **Art Anticipating Life**

As in the actual summer of 1968, there are race riots that impact the campaign and as is the case in 2016, the Republican Party is in complete disarray, riven by a plethora of potential candidates, many of whose names may now seem unfamiliar but all of whom were genuine presidential possibilities – Mitt Romney's father, George, the governor of Michigan; Ohio Gov. James Rhodes; former Pennsylvania Gov. William Scranton and Illinois Sen. Charles Percy, among others. There's Nixon, of course, New York's Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and, oh yes, California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

After much shouting and disruption, eventually they choose as their slate New York City Mayor John Lindsay and running mate John Tower, conservative U.S. senator from Texas.

George Wallace is prominent in Baker's story, too, running just as he really did in 1968... and in 1972 (when he was shot and forever after wheelchair-bound)... and in 1976. Here's Baker's description of the Southern populist's campaign:

“Wallace's crude animal reaction to the complexities of American society found a sympathetic hearing that summer among millions baffled by the speed at which the future was hurtling upon them and frustrated by their individual impotence against the tyranny of vast computerized organizations spreading through American life. With his snake-oil miracle cures, Wallace satisfied a deep public yearning to be deluded with promises of easy solutions.”

And here's Baker's version of Wallace inveighing against protesters: “If I ever

get to be president and any of these demonstrators lay down in front of my car, it'll be the last car they ever lay down in front of.”

If, as Mark Twain supposedly said, history does not repeat itself but certainly does rhyme, Russell Baker’s description of the state of the union nearly 50 years ago and a Wallace candidacy that’s so very much like Donald Trump’s is as blank verse from the past, reflecting a national mood that today is perhaps even more confused and enraged.

I’m far from the first to draw the parallel. George Wallace’s own daughter, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, recently told National Public Radio that both men have played to our basest instincts. “Trump and my father say out loud what people are thinking but don’t have the courage to say,” she said. “They both were able to adopt the notion that fear and hate are the two greatest motivators of voters that feel alienated from government.”

And back in January, Dan T. Carter wrote in *The New York Times*, “Both George Wallace and Donald Trump are part of a long national history of scapegoating minorities: from the Irish, Catholics, Asians, Eastern European immigrants and Jews to Muslims and Latino immigrants. During times of insecurity, a sizable minority of Americans has been drawn to forceful figures who confidently promise the destruction of all enemies, real and imagined, allowing Americans to return to a past that never existed.”

An aversion to spoilers tempts me to not tell you how Baker’s story ends but you may have trouble tracking down a copy of this long out-of-print little book, so here it is: the three-way election – Johnson vs. Lindsay vs. Wallace – is deadlocked in the Electoral College. As per the Constitution, the choice of president is turned over to the House of Representatives, and the Senate chooses the vice president. A series of maneuvers, miscalculations and skullduggery ultimately results in a second President Kennedy.

We should be so lucky.

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## Who Would Dr. King Endorse?

Hillary Clinton won endorsements from Congressional Black Caucus members while

civil rights legend Harry Belafonte came out for Bernie Sanders. But another question is who would Martin Luther King Jr. have supported since he like Sanders advocated for “democratic socialism,” as Jeff Cohen recalls.

By Jeff Cohen

Corporate mainstream media have sanitized and distorted the life and teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., putting him in the category of a “civil rights leader” who focused narrowly on racial discrimination; end of story. Missing from the story is that Dr. King was also a tough-minded critic of our capitalist economic structure, much like Bernie Sanders is today.

The reality is that King himself supported democratic socialism and that civil rights activists and socialists have walked arm-in-arm for more than a century.

The same news outlets that omit such facts keep telling us that the mass of African-American voters in South Carolina and elsewhere are diehard devotees of Hillary (and Bill) Clinton implying that blacks are somehow wary of Bernie Sanders and his “democratic socialism.”

Here are some key historical facts and quotes that get almost no attention in mainstream media:

1909: Many socialists both blacks and whites were involved in forming the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), our country’s oldest civil rights group. Among them was renowned black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois.

1925: Prominent African-American socialist A. Philip Randolph became the first president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union that played a major role in activism for civil *and* economic rights (including the 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom”).

1952: In a fascinating letter to Coretta Scott, the woman he would marry a year later, Martin King wrote: “I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic. . . . Today capitalism has out-lived its usefulness.”

1965: King wrote an essay in *Pageant* magazine, “The Bravest Man I Ever Knew,” extolling Norman Thomas as “America’s foremost socialist” and favorably quoting a black activist who said of Thomas: “He was for us before any other white folks were.”

1965: After passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, King became even more vocal about economic rights: “What

good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"

1965-66: King supported President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" but urged more calling for a "gigantic Marshall Plan" for our nation's poor of all races.

1966: In remarks to staffers at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), King said: "You can't talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can't talk about ending the slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums. You're really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you are messing with folk then. You are messing with captains of industry. . . . It really means that we are saying something is wrong with capitalism. There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

March 1967: King commented to SCLC's board that "the evils of capitalism are as real as the evils of militarism and evils of racism."

April 1967: In his speech denouncing the U.S. war in Vietnam at New York's Riverside Church, King extended his economic critique abroad, complaining about "capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries."

May 1967: In a report to SCLC's staff, King said: "We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power . . . this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together . . . you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others . . . the whole structure of American life must be changed."

August 1967: In his final speech to an SCLC convention, King declared: "One day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society.

"We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the iron ore?' You begin to ask the

question, 'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?'"

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated as he and SCLC were mobilizing a multiracial army of the poor to descend nonviolently on Washington D.C. demanding a "Poor Peoples Bill of Rights." He told a New York Times reporter that "you could say we're involved in the class struggle."

A year before he was murdered, King said the following to journalist David Halberstam: "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the South, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values."

Unlike what Hillary Clinton professes today, Dr. King came to reject the idea of slow, incremental change. He thought big. He proposed solutions that could really solve social problems.

Unlike corporate-dominated U.S. media, King was not at all afraid of democratic socialism. Other eminent African American leaders have been unafraid. Perhaps it's historically fitting that former NAACP president Ben Jealous has recently campaigned for Bernie Sanders in South Carolina.

If mainstream journalists did more reporting on the candidates' actual records, instead of crystal-ball gazing about the alleged hold that the Clintons have over African American voters, news consumers would know about the deplorable record of racially-biased incarceration and economic hardship brought on by Clinton administration policies. (See Michelle Alexander's "Why Hillary Clinton Doesn't Deserve the Black Vote.")

With income inequality even greater now than during Martin Luther King's final years, is there much doubt that King would be supporting the progressive domestic agenda of Bernie Sanders? Before Bernie was making these kinds of big economic reform proposals, King was making them but mainstream media didn't want to hear them at the time . . . or now.

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# MLK's Warning of America's Spiritual Death

**From the Archive:** A year before his death, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. broke with many political allies by warning that the Vietnam War was inflicting a "spiritual death" on America, casting King outside mainstream opinion circles which called his advice naive and irresponsible, as Gary G. Kohls recalled in 2014.

By Gary G. Kohls (Originally published on Jan. 19, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Riverside Church speech was titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." It was delivered exactly one year before his April, 4, 1968 assassination in Memphis. In the speech, King declared, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

The people who heard that speech recognized it as one of the most powerful speeches ever given articulating the immorality of the Vietnam War and its destructive impact on social progress in the United States. In explaining his decision to follow his conscience and speak out against U.S. militarism, King said:

"I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."

But King went farther, diagnosing the broader disease of militarism and violence that was endangering the soul of the United States. King said, "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government."

## **Poisoning America's Soul**

King knew very well that the disease of violence was killing off more than social progress in America. Violence was sickening the nation's soul as well. He added "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam'." King urged his fellow citizens to take up the causes of the world's oppressed, rather than taking the side of the oppressors. He said:



"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

"We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors.

"If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight."

King pointed to an alternate path into the future: "Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?"

### **Signing His Own Death Warrant**

By denouncing so forcefully the war crimes that the U.S. military was committing daily in the killing fields of Vietnam, some of King's followers understood that he had just signed his own death warrant. But King, being a person of conscience, was compelled to express his deep sense of moral outrage over the horrific maiming, suffering and dying of millions of innocent Vietnamese civilians in that unjust war that afflicted mostly unarmed women and children and that was going to leave behind lethal poisons in the soil, water and unborn babies that would last for generations.

He knew that non-combatants are always the major victims of modern warfare, especially wars that indiscriminately used highly lethal weapons that rained down from the air, especially the U.S. Air Force's favorite weapon, napalm, the flaming, jellied gasoline that burned the flesh off of whatever part of the burning adult or child it splashed onto.

King also connected the racist acts (of American soldiers joyfully killing dispensable non-white "gooks" and "slants", often shooting at "anything that

moves”) on the battlefields of Southeast Asia to the oppression, impoverishment, imprisoning and lynching of dispensable, deprived non-white “niggers” in America.

King saw the connections between the violence of racism and the violence of poverty. He saw that the withholding of economic and educational opportunities came from the fear of “the other” and the perceived need to protect the white culture’s wealth and privilege with violence if necessary.

King knew, too, that fortunes are made in every war, and the war in Vietnam was no exception. In his speeches, he talked about that unwelcome reality that the ruling class preferred not be discussed. That meant his well-attended Riverside Church speech threatened not only the powerful interests already arrayed against his civil rights struggle but also the interests of the war profiteers and the national security establishment.

### **War is Good Business**

The longer the Vietnam War lasted, the more the weapons manufacturers thrived. With their huge profits, there was a strong incentive for these financial elites to continue the carnage. And therefore the Wall Street war profiteers financed, out of their ill-gotten gains, battalions of industry lobbyists and pro-military propagandists who descended upon Washington, DC, and the Pentagon to claim even more tax dollars for weapons research, development and manufacture.

With that funding secured, armies of desperate jobs-seekers were hired to work in thousands of weapons factories that were strategically placed in congressional districts almost everywhere, with weapons research grants likewise being awarded to virtually every university in the nation. Thus, weapons-manufacturing and R&D soon became vitally important for almost every legislator’s home district economy as well as for the household budgets of millions of American voters who indirectly benefitted from the U.S. military’s killing, maiming, displacement, starvation and suffering of non-white people in war zones.

King’s anti-war stance was based on his Christianity and on the ethics and life of Jesus, but it was also based on his standing as a revered international peace and justice icon. Those factors made him a dangerous threat to the military/industrial/congressional/security complex.

The powerful forces that were working hard to discredit King had already infiltrated the civil rights movement. Their efforts, cunningly led by the proto-fascist and racist J. Edgar Hoover and his obedient FBI, accelerated after the Riverside speech. The FBI ramped up the smear campaigns against King.

Eventually he was “neutralized” with a bullet to the head. [The case for believing that King’s murder was not simply the act of lone gunman James Earl Ray is laid out in many studies, including attorney William F. Pepper’s *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King.*]

### **King’s Prophetic Vision**

Now, almost five decades after his anti-war speech (which was widely kept from the public), it is clear how prophetic King’s observations were. America is indeed losing its soul. Violence, racism, militarism and economic oppression are still American epidemics.

Both upper- and middle-class investors of get-rich-quick schemes in America have succumbed to predatory lenders, cannibalistic corporate mergers and acquisitions, psychopathic multinational corporate schemers, corrupt crony capitalists, and the rapist/exploiters of the land and water by extractive industries all schemes that will eventually burst as part of predictable economic bubbles.

Those busted bubbles regularly wipe out investors (except for the large, deep-pocketed “insiders” who, usually being forewarned, will have sold their holdings just in time, before the publicly revealed “bust”), leaving the taxpayers to bail out the financial messes that were created by the so-called “invisible hand of the market” but are really caused by the cunning work of corporate gamblers.

King was trying to warn us not just about the oncoming epidemic of violence toward victims at home but also about the tens of millions of people around the world who were and are still being victimized by U.S. military misadventures. King was also warning us about the multinational corporate war profiteers whose interests are facilitated and protected by the U.S. military whether they are operating in Asia, Latin America, Africa or the Middle East.

The Pentagon budget averages well over \$700 billion per year, including wars that are often illegal and unconstitutional. That amounts to \$2 billion per day with no visible return on investment, except for the military contractors, the oil industries and Wall Street financiers.

Vast sums also are needed to address the physical and mental health costs needed for the palliative care for the permanently maimed and psychologically-traumatized veterans. Hundreds of millions of dollars more are spent paying down the interest payments on past military debts.

All those potentially bankrupting costs represent money that will never be available for programs of social uplift like combatting racism, poverty and hunger, or paying for affordable housing/healthcare, universal education or

meaningful job creation. Can anyone else hear a demonic laugh reverberating down Wall Street?

King was warning America about its oncoming spiritual death if it didn't convert itself away from military violence. But most observers of the U.S. see America still worshipping at the altars of the Gods of War and Greed. Our children may be doomed.

The vast majority of American Christian churches (whether fundamentalist, conservative, moderate or liberal, with very few exceptions) have failed King's vision, despite the lip service they sometimes give to King on MLK Day. Churches whose members were brought up on the Myth of American Exceptionalism (and the myth of being "God's chosen people") consistently refuse to take a stand against the satanic nature of war.

### **Past the Point of No Return?**

If America is to avert future financial and military catastrophes, King's central warnings about the "triple evils" of militarism, racism and economic oppression must be heeded. That means a retreat from worldwide network of budget-busting military bases. And, if America wants to shed the justified label of "Rogue Nation," the covert killing operations of its secret black ops mercenary military units all around the world must be stopped, as should the infamous extrajudicial assassinations by America's unmanned drones.

If King's 47-year-old warning continues to be ignored, America's future is bleak. The future holds the dark seeds of economic chaos, hyperinflation, unendurable poverty, increasing racial/minority hostility, worsening malnutrition, armed rebellion, street fighting, and perhaps, ultimately, institution of a reactionary totalitarian/surveillance police state in order to control citizen protests and quell rebellions.

In 1967, many Americans considered King hopeful vision for a better future as irrational idealism. He was told that the task was too great, the obstacles were too imposing, and there was no will for even the churches to reverse their age-old, conservative pseudo-patriotism and society's institutional racism. I suspect that many of the churches that called King a communist and therefore ignored him back then wish that they could turn back the clock and give King's (and Jesus's) path a try.

King finished his speech with these challenges: "War is not the answer. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors. If we

do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight.”

And he had these sobering words for the churches that are immersed in a polytheistic culture (the worship of multiple gods, including the gods of war and mammon) and thus are tempted to quietly ally themselves with those gods rather than the God of Love that King was devoted to:

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’”

Today, the task is even tougher, the obstacles much more imposing, but the path that King outlined remains. MLK Day should be a good time to start seriously reconsidering King’s radical message.

**Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired physician who writes about peace, justice, militarism, mental health and religious issues.**

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## The Battle over Dr. King’s Message

**From the Archive:** Martin Luther King Day is a rare moment in American life when people reflect on the ideals that guided Dr. King’s life and led to his death. Thus, the struggle over his message is intense, pitting a bland conventional view against a radical call for profound change, said Brian J. Trautman in 2014.

By Brian J. Trautman (Originally published on Jan. 20, 2014)

Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the Twentieth Century’s most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous “*I Have A Dream*” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge, by and large, derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King’s radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vicious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "*The Octopus of Poverty*," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967, King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to educate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change. The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In "*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*" published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be

reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.” He cautioned that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

King’s most pointed speech against militarism was “*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*,” delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated. While King’s popularity among political allies and his inner circle was already beginning to wane because of his increasing public criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the growing war in Vietnam, the *Beyond Vietnam* speech was to become his most public dissent of the war to date, a war still largely unopposed by the majority.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, “because my conscience leaves me no other choice.” With such a call to conscience, “a time comes when silence is betrayal.” And in the present day, argued King, “that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.”

In the speech King calls the United States “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King’s efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King’s dream of the Beloved Community.

A small but important step toward this goal is to volunteer, as my family and I do, with a charitable and progressive cause on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, a national day of service.

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## MLK and the Curse of ‘Moderation’

**From the Archive:** When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism

from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged “moderation,” prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalled in 2014.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published on Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King’s statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King’s birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his “I Have a Dream” speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King’s maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an “outsider” had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’” Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that “moderation” was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”



In the letter, King called not for moderation or patience but for non-violent and peaceful extremism, arguing that clergymen, the very people who should be at the forefront calling for justice in the name of Jesus, were betraying the Christian gospel by calling for moderation and gradualism. King wrote:

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.”

### **Disappointing Churches**

King’s letter moves on to express his “disappointment with the churches.” King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

“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 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 traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.

“Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’

“Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

### **Pinnacle of a Message**

Most reviewers of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. see his “I Have a Dream” speech as the high point of his career. I beg to differ. Birmingham and the letter may have been the pinnacle of his career as he confronted not simply society but Christian churches and their clergy.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was published in leading Christian publications and in the nation’s most read newspapers. His confrontation with moderation was blunt yet gracious. Segregation and injustice were not his primary targets, rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King's rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, "moderates" will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

**The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in Palmer, Alaska. His email address is [hdbss@mtaonline.net](mailto:hdbss@mtaonline.net).**

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## Reasons for Despair and Hope

This year, Holy Week marking the crucifixion of Jesus coincides with the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder on April 4, 1968, with some Christians seeing many reasons to despair and a few reasons to hope, as Kathy Kelly explains from her cell in a Kentucky federal prison serving a sentence for anti-war activism.

By Kathy Kelly

Here in Lexington federal prison's Atwood Hall, squinting through the front doorway, I spotted a rust-red horse swiftly cantering across a nearby field. The setting sun cast a glow across the grasses and trees as the horse sped past.

"Reminds me of the Pope," I murmured to no one in particular. "What's that?" Tiza asked. I tried to explain that once, when I asked a close friend his opinion of the Pope, shortly after Catholic bishops had elected Pope Francis, my friend had said, "The horse is out of the stable! And galloping."

I love the image. Here is a Pope who, upon learning that a chaplain in a Chinese prison couldn't afford to buy the traditional "moon pies" for every prisoner to celebrate the harvest moon, cut a check to cover the remaining cost. This Pope loves the tango dance. On his birthday, tango dancers filled St. Peter's Square

at the time when ringing bells call on believers to kneel and recite the Angelus.

In September 2015, Pope Francis will visit New York City, Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. Tiza and I wondered if he would visit a prison.

"If he does, he should come here," Tiza insisted, "and not go to some showcase place!"

I don't think he'll be able to put Kentucky on his agenda, but it's not outlandish to imagine the Pope visiting a U.S. prison. He consistently emphasizes our chance to choose the works of mercy rather than the works of war: to visit those who are sick, those who are in prison; to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bury the dead. Never to turn our heads, say "it was their own damn fault"; never to choose wars and weapons, the burning of fields, destruction of homes, slaughter of the living.

Women here pray for the Pope every week, their prayers guided by a Jesuit priest, a tall, balding man with a long, white beard and a kindly manner. "He's the one who looks like a mountain man," Tiza once told me.

At the beginning of a 40-day season of atonement called Lent, the priest's message was stark and simple: "Our world is very sick." He asked the women before him to recall how each might feel, as a mother, if her child is sick. "Nothing else matters," said the priest. "You're focused on your child."

He urged us to focus on healing an ailing world with just as much fervor. Following his words, we joined in prayer for the Pope, a symbol of unity, collecting our desires for a world at peace, where people's basic needs are met and all children can thrive.

A few evenings later, while walking up the stairs toward my third-floor room, I heard a woman wailing. "Not my baby!" she cried, in pure anguish. "Not my baby!" She had collapsed to the floor in the middle of a phone call telling her that her four-year-old child had been rushed to the hospital, unconscious. Her closest friends were soon at her side, holding her, soothing her.

Word spread through the prison. After the 9:00 PM "count," women did what they could. Dozens of women filled the first-floor chapel, praying for hours for the prisoner, for her child, for the child's caregivers, for the hospital personnel. Word arrived, the next day, that the child had regained consciousness.

The good priest had chosen a metaphor that women here could readily understand. Gypsi, one of my roommates, saves her funds for phone calls, twice a week, with

her small daughters, age 3 and 5. Prisoners can make 15-minute calls, at 21 cents per minute.

One night, Gypsi came back from her call, red-eyed but smiling. Meekah, her younger daughter, can trade song verses with Gypsi. "Momma, let's sing one more!" Meekah had cried. "Please sing another song!" But, instead, a loud beep signaled that the call was over.

I just finished reading an exquisite book, Yashar Kemal's *Memed My Hawk* (2005, NYRB Classics 50th Anniversary Edition), with a subplot about two women wrongfully imprisoned. Iraz thinks longingly of her son Riza, while Hathe remembers Memed, the young love of her life.

"As the days passed, Iraz and Hathe shared everything, including their troubles. Hathe knew Riza's height, his black eyes, his slim fingers, his dancing, his childhood, what he had done as a child, with what trouble Iraz had brought him up, the whole story... down to the last detail, as if she had lived through and seen it all herself. It was the same with Iraz. She too knew everything about Memed, from the day he and Hathe had first played together as children."

Yes, it's like that among women in prison. Tremendous focus. And yet, as Kemal adds, "Anyone going to prison for the first time is confused on entering so different a world. One feels lost in an endless forest, far away, as if all ties with the earth, with home and family, friends and loved ones, with everything, have been broken. It is also like sinking into a deep and desolate emptiness."

Broken. On empty.

Worldwide, impoverishment shackles women to unspeakably harsh conditions and makes them vulnerable to predators. Lacking protection, they are sold into human trafficking rings, subjected to forced labor, forced prostitution and forced removal.

Widows and orphans find themselves penniless and defenseless. More than 115 million widows live in extreme poverty around the world, with a half billion children dependent on their care and support: Gary Haugen, in *The Locust Effect* (2014, Oxford University Press), presents in careful and disheartening detail a discussion of the sea change needed to uphold the rights of impoverished women and children. Sadly, in many places, traditions and customs regard women as being less valuable, subordinating them and treating them as property.

Sometimes, we have to interrupt ourselves in our relative comfort and estimate how we can bring to bear our best resources in the name of changing criminal,

wrongful patterns.

Pope Francis faces an extraordinary possibility. He could rely on Catholic teaching which proclaims that humans are all part of “one bread, one body,” emphasizing that women and men are equal to each other; and he could promote an exemplary practical consequence of this teaching by embracing “the priesthood of all believers,” welcoming women as well as men to follow a vocation into ordained ministry.

It would be a dramatic change, an arrow pointing toward new expectations and possibilities regarding the status of women.

Coretta Scott King said that in the moments after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, turned to her and said, “This is what is going to happen to me also. I keep telling you, this is a sick society.”

She could only agree that he was right; and he was. Yet his service to equality and his fierce courage to reject violence couldn't be killed. He took us with him to that mountaintop, entrusting to us a new vision and a way forward.

Pope Francis must indeed feel the challenge of the past century's social justice visionaries, many of them cruelly vilified and rejected – many sent by violence from the world. Assassination is on the rise: the “kill list” is now an openly acknowledged part of U.S. policy. I know that women here will continue to pray for a sick society, and for the Pope, long after I leave.

I will continue to feel deeply moved by our “mountain man's humble, direct plea, asking us to focus for 40 days on our very sick world. Lent ended on Thursday. Then came “Good Friday” and Saturday is the anniversary of our loss of Dr. King.

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his death, Dr. King told us that “we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.”

In just a few more weeks, I'll be moving on from here. The other members of our congregation will remain, and, along with so many of the world's most expendable people, will remain nearly invisible to corporate forces driving humanity to nightmarish war, horrifying inequalities in wealth and education, and the irreversible destruction of natural resources nearly as precious as the squandered hopes of these women.

Where you stand determines what you see. Transformation of the Jericho Road must

begin with actually stopping there. In Atwood Hall, our “mountain man” earnestly spoke to us as the people with whom the transformation starts, as people both vital and central to the healing he yearns for. If it comes, it will have started in a million places like this one.

Recognizing our need to support one another, to overcome the scourges of our time, to pick up a pace commensurate to the needs of those surrounding us, focused on our sick society with the same determination to heal that we would bring to a very sick child, we all have the task of going beyond our places of comfort, of escaping the stable and trotting if we can’t manage to gallop, of building new affinities in which to imagine and then co-create a better world.

I hope the Pope will pick up the scent of spring renewal, maybe even imagine a Kentucky Derby, as he prepares to speak a clarion and expansive wake-up call, calling us to sing another song, a new song: just as we’ve called to him.

**Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence ([www.vcnv.org](http://www.vcnv.org)) is in federal prison for participation in an anti-drone protest. She can receive mail at: KATHY KELLY 04971-045; FMC LEXINGTON; FEDERAL MEDICAL CENTER; SATELLITE CAMP; P.O. BOX 14525; LEXINGTON, KY 40512.**

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## The Battle over Dr. King’s Message

**From the Archive:** Martin Luther King Day is a rare moment in American life when people reflect even if only briefly on the ideals that guided Dr. King’s life and led to his death. Thus, the struggle over his message is intense, pitting a bland conventional view against a radical call for profound change, says Brian J. Trautman.

By Brian J. Trautman (Originally published on Jan. 20, 2014)

Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the Twentieth Century’s most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous “*I Have A Dream*” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge, by and large, derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King’s radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vicious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "*The Octopus of Poverty*," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967, King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to educate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change. The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In "*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*" published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be



reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.” He cautioned that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

King’s most pointed speech against militarism was “*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*,” delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated. While King’s popularity among political allies and his inner circle was already beginning to wane because of his increasing public criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the growing war in Vietnam, the *Beyond Vietnam* speech was to become his most public dissent of the war to date, a war still largely unopposed by the majority.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, “because my conscience leaves me no other choice.” With such a call to conscience, “a time comes when silence is betrayal.” And in the present day, argued King, “that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.”

In the speech King calls the United States “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King’s efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King’s dream of the Beloved Community.

A small but important step toward this goal is to volunteer, as my family and I do, with a charitable and progressive cause on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, a national day of service.

**Brian J. Trautman writes for [PeaceVoice](#), is a military veteran, an instructor of peace studies at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and a peace activist. On Twitter @TrautBri.**

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## MLK and the Curse of ‘Moderation’

**From the Archive:** When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism

from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged “moderation,” prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalls.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King’s statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King’s birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his “I Have a Dream” speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King’s maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an “outsider” had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’” Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that “moderation” was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian

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“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.”

### **Disappointing Churches**

King’s letter moves on to express his “disappointment with the churches.” King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

“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.’

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### **Pinnacle of a Message**

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rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King's rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

On a related front, I have been involved in the struggle for full acceptance of people who are gay for over 40 years. I have taken my lumps because of my outspoken insistence that gay people be fully accepted in the life of our churches and in American society.

I have been shunned, had employment disrupted and was dis-fellowshipped, not because I am gay but for speaking out about injustice toward gays. In recent years, however, full acceptance of gay people in America has made great progress, though we still have a long way to go.

Kind, loving, peaceful extremists for justice are in short supply in our nation and especially in our Christian churches.

In the Jan. 13, 2014 edition of Sports Illustrated, columnist Phil Taylor took on the National Football League for its tolerance of homophobia in the league. He cited the case of punter Chris Kluwe, formerly of the Minnesota Vikings. No one was suggesting that Kluwe is gay. He is, however, a vocal advocate of gay marriage and full rights for LGBT persons. His coach counseled him toward moderation. Even though he was identified as one of the league's best punters, Kluwe is now unemployed, a free agent.

Taylor's column makes the case that the National Football League is homophobic from headquarters to owners, to coaches, to the locker room. Gay players (there are believed to be many) in the NFL will remain tightly closeted.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, "moderates" will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

**The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in**

Palmer, Alaska. His email address is [hdbss@mtaonline.net](mailto:hdbss@mtaonline.net).

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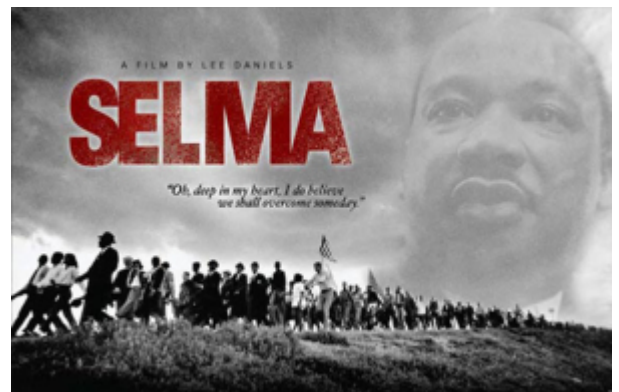
## A Disappointing 'Selma' Film

**Exclusive:** At a moment when voting and other civil rights are under attack in America, a new movie "Selma" recounts the struggle, led by Martin Luther King Jr., to secure the African-American right to vote. But the film falls short in both telling key facts and conveying the drama, says James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

In post-World War II American history, with the exception of John F. Kennedy, perhaps no other figure grips the public imagination like Martin Luther King Jr. does. And as with Kennedy, questions about the original verdict in his assassination help fuel the interest in his life.

But unlike President Kennedy, King was never a politician. He was a Baptist minister by training and vocation. But once he did such a fine job organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, he launched himself into the political arena by becoming the de facto leader of the American civil rights movement.



In other words, a man who had been trained as a religious pastor dedicated himself to breaking down the centuries old walls of segregation and discrimination in the South. And towards the end of his life, King had broadened his scope further. He spoke out in opposition to the Vietnam War and on the question of the distribution of wealth in America. A man trained in religion aimed his sights at political, social and economic goals.

Further, he refused to take any monetary gain for his efforts, even though his notoriety managed to bring millions of dollars to his cause. Because of all this, King has attained a status something like a secular saint in American culture, explaining why some of the books about him have religiously referenced

titles e.g. David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross*, and Taylor Branch's trilogy: *Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan's Edge*.

This aspect of King's career a kind of precursor to liberation theology is particularly accentuated because, unlike Malcolm X, King did not advocate or threaten violence in his protest campaigns. In fact, under the influence of Bayard Rustin, King had studied the effectiveness of the non-violent crusades of Gandhi against the British Raj in India. And in 1959, he actually visited India to study how Gandhi had done his work. (*Martin Luther King Jr.: The FBI File*, by Michael Friedly ad David Gallen, p. 20)

### **King's Origins**

King was born into a middle-class family in Atlanta in 1929, coming from a line of local Baptist preachers. King's father practiced at the famous Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, a church that had a strong influence on the local civil rights movement. (James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, pgs. 20-22)

King's father was proud to be a member of the black middle-class. He liked to say that his children never lived in a rented house, and he never owned a car for very long with payments due. But at the age of six, little Martin was stunned when a white school friend of his told him he could not associate with him anymore since he was "a colored boy." (ibid, p. 23)

King went home and told his parents. They sat him down and explained the terrible and true facts about what whites had done to black Americans since slavery began. King recalled later that the question in his mind after this was, "How can I love a race of people who hate me?"

His parents said that whatever he felt about it was irrelevant. He could not hate the white race for the simple reason that he was a Christian. But his father also demonstrated to him that he did not have to take personal insults by turning the other cheek. King Sr. said, "When I stand up, I want everyone to know that a *man* is standing there." (ibid)

For instance, once when his father was stopped by a policeman, the officer told him, "Boy, show me your license." To which King Sr., replied by pointing at young Martin and saying, "That's a boy there. I'm, a man, I'm Reverend King." (ibid, p. 24) He later told his son, "Nobody can make a slave out of you if you don't think live a slave."

At Booker T. Washington High School, King first became known for his remarkable speaking abilities. On a return trip one night from an oratorical contest, the bus driver demanded that King and his teacher give up their seats near the front of the bus to some newly boarding whites. King did not want to comply. The

driver then started cursing at them “and calling us black sons of bitches.”  
(ibid, p. 25)

King still would not move. But his teacher said they had to obey the law. The two stood in the aisle for 90 miles from Valdosta to Atlanta. King never forgot that humiliation. And he also added, “I don’t think I have ever been so deeply angry in my life.”

### **An Unlikely Course**

King was such an exceptional student that he skipped two grades of high school. When local Morehouse College announced it would accept any high school student who could pass their entrance exam, King took them up on their offer. He graduated from Morehouse at age 19 in 1948, and enrolled at Crozier Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania.

Moving north, King found out that racism in America was not confined to south of the Mason-Dixon line. At Crozier, King had a gun pulled on him by a white student from North Carolina who accused him of messing up his room. Another time, he and his friends were refused service at a restaurant in New Jersey. The owner then removed them from the establishment at gunpoint. When King tried to file charges, none of the white witnesses would agree to testify in court.  
(ibid, p. 28)

At Boston University, during his Ph. D. studies, King was exposed to Walter Rauschenbusch’s classic 1907 book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. This was a seminal work of the Social Gospel movement. (ibid, p. 29) One of its most famous dictums is, “Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master.” King now had the theological underpinnings to gird him for his career. This is why he always said he came to Gandhi through Jesus. (Garrow, p. 75)

King graduated from Boston University in 1955. He and his wife Coretta could have stayed in the Northeast. He was offered positions in New York and Massachusetts. (Cone, p. 32) Instead he chose the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, as his first posting. At first, King thought he would be a pastor for a few years and then step into the academic world and be a professor. (ibid, p. 33)

But in a colossal piece of serendipity, it was in that year and that place that both Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks were arrested for refusing to give up their bus seats to whites. The local civil rights leaders decided that the Parks



incident was an ideal vehicle with which to challenge both the law and the Montgomery bus company. (Garrow, p. 16)

### **A Reluctant Leader**

Contrary to popular belief, King did not step in and take over the Montgomery movement. At first, he did not even want to get involved. He told his fellow minister, Ralph Abernathy, he would think over attending a local pastors' meeting. (ibid, p. 17)

Abernathy convinced King not to just attend, but to hold the meeting at his own church. As everyone knows, the success of the Montgomery bus boycott essentially created the civil rights movement. It also launched King's national career, and started the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was the fundraising and decision-making arm of the King/Abernathy organization.

What should not be forgotten is that this was a perfect example of a man growing into a moment. For example, during that year-long boycott, King visited a friend of his from the Crozier seminary. The friend later said he could barely recognize King from his college days. He said he had aged 20 years in just five. But further, "He wanders around in a daze, asking himself: Why has God seen fit to catapult me into such a situation." (Garrow, p. 76)

If ever there was an example of a stumbling into his great place in life, it was King. But as most commentators would agree, after the Montgomery boycott, the SCLC did not really come close to repeating that kind of spectacular success until Kennedy's inauguration. This was because, even though the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board* court decision in 1954 on school integration had been handed down during Dwight Eisenhower's presidency (and two other civil rights landmarks the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 also occurred during the Eisenhower administration), Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon were not deeply interested in advocating for or advancing civil rights.

Laws also are only effective if they are enforced. And the enforcement of these new rules was, at best, tepid under the GOP administration despite the notable exception of Eisenhower's intervention in the desegregation of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. But the pace for change was about to accelerate.

### **A White House Ally**

In October 1960, Sen. John Kennedy, the Democratic presidential nominee, told his civil rights advisory board that he would use the two legislative acts to break the back of voting discrimination in the South. (Harry Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, p. 139)

This was a stark contrast to Eisenhower telling a reporter in 1956 that the Brown decision had set back progress in the South by at least 15 years. Or Nixon saying, "If the law goes further than public opinion can be brought along to support at a particular time, it may prove to do more harm than good." (ibid, p. 61)

Kennedy's promise of action, plus his intervention for King during the 1960 campaign while King was in jail, raised expectations once Kennedy was in office. By openly allying himself with King, Kennedy was giving the civil rights movement ballast and hope. So when Attorney General Robert Kennedy began to file segregation and voting rights cases under the dormant laws that Eisenhower and Nixon had neglected, something unforeseen happened: the civil rights movement began to broaden and act on its own on multiple fronts.

The movement finally had someone in the White House who had sympathy for them and with whom they had some influence. In his first memo to Kennedy on the subject, civil rights adviser Harris Wofford wrote that the problem with the civil rights cause was that there had been no real leadership in the Executive Branch or Congress to supplement the work of the courts.

So when President Kennedy began ordering integration and affirmative action in government positions and business contracts and altering the composition of the Civil Rights Commission and Robert Kennedy began hiring more civil rights lawyers and investigators and filing more and more state cases a synergy entered the calculus.

Soon, there was a powerful new momentum for racial justice. So much so that in June 1963, Kennedy made the clearest affirmation on the need for civil rights by a president in 100 years. He followed up by sending a new civil rights bill to Congress and then, in July, he made a surprise announcement at a press conference: He would back King's upcoming March on Washington in support of the bill. (Irving Bernstein, *Promises Kept*, p. 114)

### **Political Battles**

After Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, Congress passed and President Lyndon Johnson signed into law much of Kennedy's civil rights bill with an emphasis on equal access to public places. But Johnson had stripped the act of an important voting rights aspect, since he thought it would be filibustered otherwise.

So there still needed to be further legislation on voting rights, which whites in parts of the Deep South staunchly opposed. One of those places was Alabama under the rule of segregationist Gov. George Wallace.

The voting rights battle would put King and civil rights activists back in the streets. Overall, there were four spectacular demonstrations that King was involved in: the Montgomery bus boycott, his showdown with police chief Bull Connor in Birmingham, his March on Washington and his face-off with Wallace and Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark in Selma in 1965. The last is the subject of the new film *Selma* produced by Oprah Winfrey and Brad Pitt.

It's hard to believe considering the incredible historic drama around King's career that there have been few widely distributed movies either feature films or documentaries made about his life. In 1970, a cinema-verité-style documentary was produced for theaters by Ely Landau: *King: A Filmed Record from Montgomery to Memphis*. In 2004, PBS produced a more conventional documentary, *Citizen King*, which was a part of its *American Experience* series.

In 1978, writer-director Abby Mann made a three-night, 300-minute mini-series for NBC which starred Paul Winfield as King and Cicely Tyson as his wife. In 2001, HBO films produced a television movie called *Boycott* about the Montgomery movement, starring Jeffrey Wright as King and Terrence Howard as Abernathy. I have seen all of the above except the last (which, in fairness to it, is supposed to be the best.) To me, none of them really did justice to King, but the Mann mini-series was particularly poor.

Before addressing the current film, let us lay in the historical background about the Selma demonstrations. Alabama, because of George Wallace's high profile, had been a target of the civil rights movement for years. Young organizers like John Lewis and Jim Bevel had tried to organize voting rights drives there prior to 1965.

But the white power structure was not going to give black citizens the franchise, keeping blacks from the polls with devices such as the poll tax, the grandfather clause, and literacy tests. Showing how effective these tactics were, Alabama had an all-white state legislature. (Garrow, p. 371)

Further, though Selma was 57 percent black, only 130 African-Americans were registered to vote in 1964. In that year, Lewis had tried to register 50 blacks, but they were arrested. Afterwards, a state judge imposed an order saying any gathering of more than three people in public to discuss civil rights was against the law. This unconstitutional edict was clearly aimed at preventing civil rights activists from organizing mass demonstrations. (Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, p. 553)

### **Taking to the Streets**

Prior to Jim Bevel convincing King to take on the challenge, the two main voter

rights organizations in Selma, which was located in Dallas County, were the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Dianne Nash, a young volunteer, was a major force in SNCC. (Although she is portrayed in the film, her presence is minimal. And the husband/wife relationship between her and Bevel is not noted.)

As many historians have written, King was really the glue that kept the civil rights movement together for two reasons: first, his remarkable oratorical powers combined with his genial personality made him indispensable to the outreach of SCLC, and second, he did not present himself as a radical like Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael. He could work with the politicians inside the system.

King also was in the center of the movement, with the NAACP on his right and groups like SNCC on his left. So, as the film depicts, when King decided on the Selma drive, some of those representing other factions did not welcome his, or the SCLC's, presence.

King decided to take on Selma because he noted some factors in his favor. First, the newly elected mayor was a moderate. His police chief, Wilson Baker, was also a relatively reasonable man. But the sheriff, Jim Clark, was another Bull Connor: an inveterate, violent racist determined to stop King.

Baker was planning to employ the soft-line tactics used so adroitly against the SCLC by Laurie Pritchett in Albany, Georgia. But King understood that the courthouse in Selma was under Clark's jurisdiction. So this is where the SCLC planned its first marches. The idea was to make Clark into another Connor: a symbol of the ugly, near-psychotic racism of the Old South and to use that image in the media to shame the consciences of Northern liberals.

This approach had worked to give Kennedy the votes he needed to submit his Civil Rights Act. The SCLC was going to use Clark and Selma to give Johnson the boost he needed to pass a Voting Rights Act. The fact that Clark had both Klansmen and National States Rights Party members on his force made this tactic naturally enticing.

### **The Battle Begins**

Sheriff Clark controlled not just the courthouse square, but also the outlying areas. The SCLC understood the tactical importance of this division in duties as did police Chief Baker, who favored a less confrontational strategy. But Baker and the mayor could not overcome the stubbornness of the state police officers and Wallace, who had a lot invested in this conflict. In 1963, Wallace had been forcibly removed from the front gate of the University of Alabama when Kennedy

enforced a court order to integrate the college. The governor did not want to suffer another public reversal.

In January 1965, the SCLC began with marches on the courthouse in order to get their people registered. Accompanied by the likes of Nazi George Lincoln Rockwell and states rights fanatic J. B. Stoner, Sheriff Clark escorted the demonstrators to a nearby alley and said applicants would be registered one by one. (Garrow, pgs. 378-79) But that did not happen.

The next day, when the marchers arrived again, they refused to move to the alley as requested. When Clark forcibly removed them from the sidewalk, there was mild resistance. This quickly escalated into police brutality and mass arrests. The arrests were based on the previously mentioned ruling by the state judge. This repeated itself the next day. By that time, there were over 200 people in jail, including King. The SCLC paid for an ad in the *New York Times* saying that Clark had more people in the Selma jail than were registered to vote.

Since there were 60 newsmen on the scene, the media attention worked. President Johnson began to talk about both a voting rights bill and an amendment. Further, U.S. District Judge Daniel Thomas issued a restraining order barring Selma authorities from hindering applicants. But Clark would not let up. He arrested people with writs saying "charges to be named later". (Branch, p. 562)

When Annie Lee Cooper and others showed up the next day, Clark pushed some of the demonstrators. Cooper punched him. As the deputies threw her to the ground, she screamed up at Clark, "I wish you would hit me, you scum!" Clark did. And it made the front pages. (Garrow, p. 381. The film shows this incident, but strangely, her great line is not in the film.)

As more and more national attention focused on the confrontation, King began to direct the crusade from inside the jail. He asked for congressional visits, more of Johnson's intervention, and also for private citizens to join in from all areas of America.

Federal Judge Thomas issued another order, saying Selma must drop Alabama's difficult literacy test and at least 100 new applicants must be registered per day. Johnson made a public statement approving this new policy and endorsing the demonstrators' aims. (ibid, p. 385. LBJ's powerful statement is eliminated by the screenwriter, a revealing excision that I will return to later.)

The SCLC could have bailed King out of prison the first day. However, in order to heighten the tension, they didn't. When he did leave, he flew to Washington and met with Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Attorney General Nicolas Katzenbach and Johnson to discuss the specifics of a voting rights bill. (ibid, p. 387.)

Again, this is not in the film.)

### **An Expanding Confrontation**

The demonstrations spread outside of Selma, to places like Camden and Marion. At night, in Marion which was under Clark's control newsman Richard Valeriani had his skull fractured and demonstrator Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed. Wallace then banned all nighttime protests and labeled the SCLC as "professional agitators with pro-Communist affiliations." (ibid, p. 392)

In the wake of Jackson's death and Wallace's smear, the SCLC decided to cap the drive with a march to Montgomery from Selma, a distance of over 50 miles. King returned to Washington before the march and was told by Johnson that that he thought he could get the voting rights bill through. They also talked about protection for the march. (ibid, p. 395)

There ended up being three attempts at a march. King was absent from the first attempt which, as the film shows, was led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis. As the march crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it was stopped by a large detachment of state troopers. They ordered the marchers back. When the marchers hesitated, they were attacked by batons, tear gas and troopers on horseback. In the background, white Southerners cheered the violence. Over 70 people went to the hospital, including Lewis. Police Chief Baker finally arrived at the scene to berate Sheriff Clark.

King led the second march. This time, he stopped in front of the troopers. Wallace had ordered the troopers to open up an alley for the procession to pass. (ibid, p. 404) But King did not utilize it. He led a chorus of "We Shall Overcome" and turned around.

That evening a group of three visiting Massachusetts ministers were attacked by white thugs. One, the Reverend James J. Reeb of Boston suffered a blow to the skull from which he later died. Johnson issued a statement condemning the violence and said he was writing a bill on voting rights. He would address Congress himself on the issue. (ibid, p. 405) He did so, and most believe he gave the best speech of his life, echoing the words, "We shall overcome."

For the final march, Gov. Wallace said he could not guarantee the demonstrators' safety, so Johnson mobilized the National Guard under the direction of the Justice Department. The march proceeded successfully and King made a powerful speech in Montgomery, but not before there was one more death, Viola Liuzzo, a Northerner who came to Selma at King's urging. She was transporting some of the SCLC marchers back and forth during the procession and was killed by a Klan member.

## The Movie's Narrative

The movie *Selma* begins with King dressing to accept the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. We then cut to the bombing of four young black girls in Birmingham, murders that actually occurred the year before, after Kennedy's submission of his civil rights bill. To me, this was an acceptable use of dramatic license, since it showed that even though King was being honored abroad, there was still much violence awaiting the movement at home.

We then move to Selma where Annie Lee Cooper is being denied the right to vote by a registrar because she cannot name all 67 judges in Alabama. Next, the SCLC begins to move into Selma in preparation for the crusade. We watch as one of Nazi Rockwell's henchmen punches King in the lobby of a (now integrated) hotel.

Throughout the film, director Ava DuVernay posts facsimiles of FBI teletypes showing the surveillance that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was conducting on King. The FBI file on King went back as far as 1958 (Friedly and Gallen, p. 110), and it was greatly intensified in 1962 when King criticized Hoover about the lack of protection the FBI was giving civil rights workers.

The ultra-sensitive FBI Director promptly retaliated by calling a news conference and calling King the most notorious liar in America. (ibid, p. 43) Although there was an attempt at public reconciliation, it was only done for public appearances. Hoover's resentment toward King persisted until King's death and some would say beyond that.

Hoover's effort to destroy King culminated in the manufacture of a so-called "suicide package," a message telling King that he was a "complete fraud" and a "moral imbecile." After two paragraphs of insults and invective, the letter said King's end was approaching and "you are done," repeating that phrase three times.

The letter concluded with: "there is only one thing for you to do. You know what that is. . . . There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation." (Garrow, p. 373)

Enclosed with the letter was an audiotape of King telling some bawdy jokes and making some unkind comments about some friends and public figures. There were also the sounds purportedly of King engaging in sex with other women besides his wife. The film depicts Coretta King playing the tape for her husband but does not include the letter, whose absence is symptomatic of a serious failing of the film.

By not having the letter read verbatim, DuVernay passes up what surely would have been a dramatic highlight. But it also dilutes just how vicious the battle

was between Hoover, King and the civil rights movement. Further, Hoover is barely depicted in the film. When he is, he is played by Dylan Baker, who does not resemble him and is not made up to look like him.

### **Misunderstood Role**

And in Hoover's one scene, screenwriter Paul Webb portrays the FBI Director as some kind of efficient civil servant who reports to President Johnson on the surveillance and intelligence that he has on King. This is simply not accurate. In addition to the aforementioned "suicide package," during the time frame of the film, Hoover tried to get the business and political leaders of Atlanta not to follow through on a dinner to honor their most famous citizen.

Hoover also tried to prevent King from getting an audience at the Vatican. (Branch, pgs. 483, 569) By all accounts, these maneuvers had a serious deleterious psychological effect on King. He was deeply troubled that, one day, he would wake up and see these accusations splashed across the front page of a major newspaper, which is what Hoover tried to do on more than one occasion.

But, for some reason, screenwriter Webb and director DuVernay decided to leave almost all of this out. Instead, they do something just as inexplicable: They transfer the animus and obstructionism from Hoover to Johnson.

Johnson historian Mark Updegrave has complained about this inaccuracy. If anything he is too mild. For instance, the film clearly implies that the celebrated "suicide package" was sent to the SCLC Atlanta office because Hoover was abiding by Johnson's wishes. In other words, it was a joint venture to stop King's Selma drive.

In no account that I have read of this despicable act is there even the pretense for this being accurate, including the Church Committee Report where it first surfaced, down through the two leading biographies of King by Branch and Garrow, and even books which focus on this very subject, that is the campaign by Hoover against King.

At the time depicted in the film, Johnson was actually on friendly terms with King. On the eve of the Selma drive, he called King for some advice on presidential appointments. (Branch, p. 560) It's true that when King met with Johnson on his return from Oslo, Johnson told him that he did not think he had the votes to pass a Voting Rights Act.

As Andrew Young recalled, when King told him about this, Young asked what they should do in that case. King replied that they had to get the power for Johnson, which was one reason the Selma campaign began. (op. cit. Updegrave)



Further, unlike what the film depicts, Johnson did not need to call Hoover in to be briefed on what the FBI had on King because Hoover voluntarily would send Johnson reports on this activity. He did this for the same reason he sent the material to Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Hoover was trying to drive a wedge between these two national leaders and King. (Branch, p. 545)

The film also discounts the real reason that King passed up the chance to go through the opening left by Sheriff Clark on the second attempt to march to Montgomery. Johnson and his aides had been working with the federal judge to hold a hearing so that he could legally provide protection for the marchers.

King wanted to march before that hearing was held. So Johnson sent in a team of mediators, among them Kennedy's civil rights lawyer John Doar, to negotiate a truce so that no one would get hospitalized again. The film only shows this very briefly and it does not make clear Johnson's role in it.

To be sure, there was a falling-out between King and Johnson. But this occurred later after King began to rail against the administration for shortchanging the War on Poverty while spending billions of dollars on the Vietnam War. But that break occurred in 1967 when King made his blistering speech against the war in New York City.

No one has more disdain for President Johnson than I do for reversing so many of Kennedy's policies, but voting rights was not an example of this. And, therefore, this is not a legitimate use of dramatic license.

It is instructive to compare the depiction of Hoover in this film with his portrayal in Mario Van Peebles' 1995 *Panther*. That was an accurate and honest portrayal of what Hoover's FBI did through its COINTELPRO attacks to decimate the Black Panther movement. That much-ignored film much more honestly than *Selma* depicts Hoover's role against the civil rights movement.

### **Other Shortcomings**

Beyond that cheap shot against Johnson, *Selma* has other shortcomings. It contains most of the conflicts that occurred during the voting rights campaign and those moments presented remarkable opportunities in cinematic terms. I wish I could say DuVernay was up to them. But in my view, the direction, editing, and music scoring were all pretty much conventional and prosaic.

In fact, from what I have seen of HBO's *Boycott*, that television film holds its own technically and aesthetically with *Selma*. This film, with a more capable director, would have had much more brio and fire to it.

And this criticism extends to the acting. The best I can say about the major

performances is that they were adequate, including Tim Roth as Wallace, Tom Wilkinson as Johnson, Carmen Ejogo as Coretta and David Oyelowo as King. With these kinds of roles at hand and with so much archival material available the director should have pushed the performers into the very breath of their characters, such as has occurred in other historical movies, i.e., Daniel Day-Lewis as Lincoln and Jack Nicholson as Jimmy Hoffa.

To put it mildly, I never got that feeling watching the film. In fact, the best performance in the film is by Oprah Winfrey as Annie Lee Cooper. She really understood and planned her character, and then got to the outer reaches of sensitivity to empathize with her. For me the best scene in the film is the early one with Cooper being denied her voting rights and much of that quality is due to Winfrey's acting.

And finally, the film passed up a real opportunity to add some electricity to the film. During the crusade in Selma, Malcolm X had a speaking engagement in nearby Tuskegee and was invited by two SCLC workers to visit Selma. He appeared at a press conference, met with staff members, gave a speech, and talked to the wives of King and Abernathy. Pretty much all we see of this is the last.

In my opinion, this would have been a great opportunity to dramatize the splits in the civil rights movement, to contrast Malcolm with King, and to show how Malcolm was not changing his approach and he was beginning to play a "good cop/bad cop" routine with King. Meaning that, if you don't give this American Gandhi what he wants, you will have to deal with me.

The film ends with King giving his speech in Selma and captions denoting progress made that, for example, Andrew Young went on to be voted mayor of Atlanta twice and John Lewis a long-term congressman.

The film is supposed to be a commemoration of a long and brutal struggle, as well as a distillation of a great man. In this writer's opinion because of the script's biases and the director's lack of inspiration and imagination it does not do justice to its subject. We should have felt like we were being forced to the ground and pounded by Clark's baton. We should have been shaking with rage at Wallace's plotting in the state house. Most of all, we should have been outraged at Hoover's attempts to break King's spirit.

The film doesn't do these things. Therefore, I still await a picture that does justice to the great subject of Martin Luther King.

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