

Harvard Sitkoff, King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

Chapter 8

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way, because I heard a voice saying, "Do something for others."

Grief would shadow King's spirit in the last year and a half of his earthly journey. In the fall of 1966, Stokely Carmichael reaped headlines, and political havoc, by increasingly portraying Black Power as a bitter rejection of both white society and King's nonviolence, and by depicting the score of ghetto riots that summer as revolutionary violence to overthrow a reactionary society. Meanwhile, capitalizing on the backlash against racial violence and "crime in the streets," Republicans, many of them rightwing conservatives, replaced forty-seven Democratic incumbents in the House and three in the Senate. At the same time, King watched the war in Vietnam expand ominously, multiplying the numbers of Americans shipped home in body bags—16 percent of them blacks in 1966—and causing appropriations for the war on poverty to be slashed by a third.

King despaired a "white society more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity." As never before, Coretta thought him morose. He smoked constantly and overate heedlessly. His depression, she recalled, was "greater than I had ever seen before." Martin brooded that "people expect me to have answers and I don't have any answers." Worried that Black Power had made him irrelevant, he feared a looming race war.

Unlike most mainstream civil rights leaders, however, King would not jump on the anti-Black Power bandwagon. Instead, he decried the "white backlash" and insisted "America's greatest problem and contradiction is that it harbors 35 million poor at a time when its resources are so vast that the existence of poverty is an anachronism." As no other public figure, black or white, he decried the socioeconomic conditions that underlay the urban riots, insisting on a fundamental restructuring of the American system. He called for mass protests until the government provided a guaranteed annual income of \$4,000 to every American adult, and proposed that SCLC organize "the poor in a crusade to reform society in order to realize economic and social justice."

King mused to his aides that the only way to get the nation to address poverty might be to get large numbers of very poor people to march on Washington. "We ought to come in mule carts, in old trucks, any kind of transportation people can get their hands on. People ought to come to Washington, sit down if necessary in the middle of the street and

say ‘We are here; we are poor; we don’t have any money; you have made us this way; you keep us down this way; and we’ve come to stay until you do something about it.’”

“There are few things more thoroughly sinful than economic injustice,” King thundered to a church convention in Texas. Laying bare his troubled soul, he vouched that “Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.”

King knew he would suffer. No longer the darling of the liberal media, he knew what he must do. But, not knowing how to do it, King called for a staff retreat at the Penn Center in Frogmore, South Carolina, to mull SCLC’s future. Martin admitted his chagrin that the Movement’s “legislative and judicial victories did very little to improve the lot of millions of Negroes in the teeming ghettos of the North,” and his despair that “the roots of racism are very deep in America.” To his seventy-five staff members, Martin expressed his conviction that “something is wrong with the economic system of our nation.” He emphasized the need to pursue “substantive,” not “surface,” changes that would make “demands that will cost the nation something.”

Few of his aides and advisors saw it King’s way. Hosea Williams wanted SCLC to concentrate on voter registration in the South; Jesse Jackson thought it should devote its resources to an expanded Operation Breadbasket in northern cities. Stanley Levison warned that whites were not ready for “deep radical change,” and to maintain that black equality could be achieved only “with the revolutionary alteration of our society” was “poor tactics.” Others feared King’s increasing economic radicalism would frighten potential donors and foundations, and worsen the serious money problems SCLC already faced. The lack of support for a mass-action campaign focused on economic justice and the incessant clash of executive staff egos further depressed King. As did the constant fund-raising trips to keep the financially-sinking SCLC afloat. They left Martin little time for reflection, or for home and family. Despite his awareness of FBI surveillance, King’s need for respite, for solace, accentuated his quest for sexual liaisons, and his struggle to reconcile the public moralist and the private sinner intensified.

At the same time, events at home and abroad forced King to bear the cross. Unable to be the “guilty bystander,” King believed he needed to provide a nonviolent alternative to the urban riots and could not stay silent as the United States pursued an immoral, murderous conflict in Vietnam. Neither endeavor appeared promising. Both would surely be costly to King and to the Movement. But failure to act made one complicit in the perpetuation of gross evil. He had no alternative but to redeem the soul of America
 ___ Leaving for Jamaica in mid-January 1967, for a month of solitude to work on his next book, Where Do We Go From Here, King happened upon “The Children of Vietnam,” an illustrated article in the January Ramparts magazine. Suddenly Martin stopped, recalled his aide Bernard Lee:

He froze as he looked at the pictures from Vietnam. He saw a picture of a Vietnamese mother holding her dead baby, a baby killed by our military. Then Martin pushed the plate of food away from him. I looked up and said, “Doesn’t it taste any good?” and he answered, “Nothing will ever taste good for me until I do everything I can to end the war.”

Seeing the pictures of children maimed and murdered by the United States, Martin would “no longer remain silent about an issue that was destroying the soul of our nation.”

He knew this meant incurring the wrath of the President of the United States. He knew it deprived the civil rights movement of his precious time and energy. He knew it would cause a drop in contributions to the SCLC—already 40 percent lower than a year earlier. He knew it meant allying himself with radicals that most Americans despised, and that it destroyed whatever slim chances remained for the kind of massive federal expenditures required by the ghettos. But the practical and the sensible could no longer compete with his Christian conscience. King had crossed his moral Rubicon.

—King believed “the potential destructiveness of modern weapons of war totally rules out the possibility of war ever serving again as a negative good.” An alternative must be found. “The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence,” he wrote. “It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”

He had first spoken out against the Vietnam War at Howard University in March 1965, just as President Johnson began his escalation of the conflict. To audiences that year in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston and in Petersburg, Virginia, Martin declared that the war must be stopped and called for a negotiated settlement. When it was extremely unpopular to do so, he stated “We must even negotiate with the Vietcong.” He also proposed that Americans hold peace rallies, “just like we have freedom rallies.” Going further yet, he suggested that Americans go to Vietnam to rebuild some of the villages they had destroyed.

However, in August 1965, when King sought the backing of SCLC’s Board for his idea to send personal letters to all the leaders involved in the war, urging a speedy negotiated settlement, the Board demurred. It recognized King’s right to speak as an individual, but affirmed that SCLC existed for the purpose of securing the civil rights of Negroes. Unsettled by King’s venturing into the minefield of war and peace, the Board stated that SCLC’s “resources are not sufficient to assume the burdens of two major issues.” SCLC would not get involved in foreign affairs.

Despite the rebuke, King called on the President to “seriously consider halting the bombing” of North Vietnam and to state “unequivocally” his willingness to negotiate with the Vietcong. Taking his Nobel Peace Prize to heart, valuing the importance of his reputation as a proponent of nonviolence, resenting the patronizing attitude of the Administration that he was “out of his depth” on foreign policy, and foreseeing that the war abroad would be paid for by starving social programs at home, Martin pressed on with his intention to plead with the all the warring parties to settle their differences at the conference table. To those who wanted him to stick to racial matters he repeated, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and “justice is indivisible.” He could not be for democracy and humanitarianism and not be against colonialism and imperialism. “I will not stand by when I see an unjust war taking place and fail to take a stand against it.”

But Lyndon Johnson had had enough. He gave King the cold-shoulder at the Voting Rights Act signing ceremony in August. The following month, he directed U.N. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg to persuade King that the President sought a peaceful resolution of the conflict, that secret negotiations were underway and peace was quite near, and that any public criticism “would give aid and comfort to the enemy and stiffen” its diplomatic position. At the same time, Johnson had one of his senatorial cronies, Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, publicly blast King for having “absolutely no competence” to speak about foreign affairs and for unpatriotically aligning himself “with the forces of

appeasement.” The news media seemed to see it all through Johnson’s eyes. In an article entitled “Confusing the Cause,” Time declared that King should stop meddling where he did not belong. King, most columnists echoed one another, had no business speaking about foreign affairs. Public opinion polls indicated that most blacks and whites agreed.

Dismayed by the President’s offensive, and by the public disapproval of his antiwar activities, a frustrated King ~~decided to call it quits~~. He could not fight the war and the President while fighting for civil rights. “I’m already over-loaded and almost emotionally fatigued,” Martin confided to friends, and “can’t battle these forces who are out to defeat my influence... to cut me down.” He needed to “withdraw temporarily,” to “gracefully pull out so I can get on with the civil rights issue.” Most of the SCLC staff, following Andy Young in thinking antiwar activists “a bunch of crazies,” breathed a sigh of relief.

Yet King’s conscience churned away. Quietly, Martin turned to James Lawson, who journeyed to Vietnam in 1965 on a peace-seeking mission for King and then helped form the Southern Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and to James Bevel, who preached that the “Lord can’t hear our prayers here in America because of all the cries and moans of His children in the Mekong Delta.” Constantly urging Martin to take a more radical stand on Vietnam, Bevel claimed that the Lord had appeared to him sitting on the dryer in his Chicago laundry room, “saying my children are dying in Vietnam, my children are suffering. They are your brothers and sisters too. You must help them.” Mostly, Martin listened increasingly to his wife on Vietnam. A committed pacifist, Coretta Scott King had joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom as a student at Antioch, continued her peace activities later in the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and picketed the White House over Vietnam even before Martin first spoke against the war. Her views on the war in Vietnam, more than anyone else’s, nurtured King’s beliefs,

“I did not march, I did not demonstrate, I did not rally,” he later wrote about the remainder of 1965. “But as the hopeful days became disappointing months, I began the agonizing measurement of government promising words of peace against the baneful, escalating deeds of war. Doubts gnawed at my conscience.” Without a doubt, Martin told an aide, “the position of our government is wrong and it is getting wronger every day.”

Lashing out at the Administration’s efforts to muzzle critics of the war, to depict advocates of negotiation “as quasi-traitors, fools, or venal enemies of our soldiers and institutions,” King declared to a New York audience that he would not be silenced. He quoted Amos on justice, Isaiah on renouncing violence, and Micah on beating swords into plowshares. As a minister, “I am mandated by this calling above every other duty to seek peace among men and to do it even in the face of hysteria and scorn.”

As 1966 began, the Georgia state legislature barred SNCC’s Julian Bond from taking his elected seat because of SNCC’s call for young blacks to take up civil rights work rather than submit to the military draft. King publicly joined the campaign to get Bond seated. “We are in a dangerous period when we seek to silence dissent,” King told newsmen, adding that “in my current role as a pacifist I would be a conscientious objector.” In his Sunday sermon, King proclaimed “Our hands are dirty” in Vietnam, and depicted dissent and nonconformity as the essence of true Christianity.

Later in the spring, King won the approval of the SCLC Board for a resolution branding as “immoral” the U.S. support of South Vietnam’s military junta; calling on President Johnson to “seriously examine the wisdom of prompt withdrawal” from the war; and condemning the conflict “on the grounds that war is not the way to solve social problems” or ensure America’s interests. “The intense expectations and hopes of the

neglected poor in the United States must be regarded as a priority more urgent than pursuit of a conflict so rapidly degenerating into a sordid military adventure.” The following month, on CBS’s Face the Nation, King renewed his public demand for a halt to the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and his call for Johnson to agree to negotiate. Then, in August, another SCLC Board resolution denounced Johnson’s “relentless escalation” of the war and demanded he immediately and unilaterally de-escalate the conflict. Late in the year, King sadly told a Senate subcommittee: “The bombs in Vietnam explode at home; they destroy hopes and possibilities for a decent America.”

But tentative, circumspect opposition to the war did not suffice. King could no longer trod the tortuous middle path. Well aware that Johnson and the key Democrats in Congress no longer considered him a dependable ally, he felt freer than ever before to follow his conscience. Indicating the graphic illustrations of the horrors of war in Ramparts, Martin informed his aides that he would now take a more active role in opposing the war, no matter the cost.

Making his first public appearance in more than two months at an antiwar rally in Los Angeles in late February 1967, King lambasted Johnson’s Vietnam War policies for morally isolating the United States. “We are engaged in a war that seeks to turn the clock of history back and perpetuate white colonialism.” He decried the American military’s atrocities, “our paranoid anti-Communism,” and “deadly western arrogance.” Unable to bear “the betrayal of my own silences,” King thundered that it was time to halt the bombing, negotiate with the Vietcong, and “deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism and militarism.... We must demonstrate, teach, and preach,” King concluded, “until the very foundations of our nation are shaken.”

Several days later, at a meeting in New York, Whitney Young berated King. “The Negro is more concerned about the rat at night and the job in the morning than he is about the war in Vietnam,” the head of the Urban League declared. “If we are not with him [Johnson] on Vietnam, then he is not going to be with us on civil rights.” “Whitney, what you’re saying may get you a foundation grant,” Martin shot back, “but it won’t get you into the kingdom of truth.” Livid, Young pointed to King’s ample stomach, “You’re eating well.” The two former comrades in the Movement, now politically far apart, had to be physically separated to stop punches from being thrown. Martin telephoned Young hours later to apologize for the outburst. To no avail. They renewed the argument, neither man backing down or changing the other’s mind. Young then traveled to South Vietnam as part of the official American delegation sent to observe, and to praise, the elections being held there.*

*In October 1969, however, with a Republican who courted the white-backlash voters in the White House rather than the civil rights-minded LBJ, Young noted that Martin Luther King had been “more right” about the war than he and he issued a public statement supporting the Vietnam Moratorium Committee demonstrations against the war.

King had little more success with the SCLC Board or his closest advisors. He reminded the Board of “those little Vietnamese children who have been burned with napalm,” and that African Americans were paying the heaviest price for the war, both in battlefield casualties and in cutbacks in social welfare programs. But some preachers thought he was imposing his views on them like a bishop, and the Board refused to adopt King’s resolution committing the SCLC to active opposition to the war. Nor could he sway Levison, Rustin, and his closest aides to support his wish to take part in the upcoming April 15 protests against the war. Bevel, alone, advocated that King march. All the rest derided his joining a “squabbling, pacifist, socialist, hippie collection.” Warned by Levison that it would cause a severe drop in contributions, King replied “I don’t care if we don’t get five cents in the mail. I am going to keep preaching my message.”

“At times you do things to satisfy your conscience,” Martin patiently explained to Levison, “and they may be altogether unrealistic or wrong tactically.” But he saw no alternative. This war is so evil “I can no longer be cautious about this matter. I feel so deep in my heart that we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I’m willing to go that road.”

Martin would go, alone if need be. As King told a reporter for the New York Times, “we are merely marking time in the civil rights movement if we do not take a stand against the war.” America must realize that international violence is just as immoral as racial segregation. “It is out of this moral commitment to dignity and the worth of human personality that I feel it is necessary to stand up against the war in Vietnam.”

He did. In late March, King and Dr. Benjamin Spock led five thousand demonstrators in downtown Chicago, the first antiwar march of Martin’s career. There, he railed at the cruel irony of blacks and whites dying together “for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.”

A week later, King addressed some four thousand congregants in New York’s stately Riverside Church. “A time comes when silence is betrayal,” he began reading the remarks largely written by Professor Vincent Harding of Spelman College. King declared his opposition to his government a “vocation of agony.” — “My conscience leaves me no other choice.”

In measured rhetoric that would be reported around the world King enumerated the many reasons the war in Vietnam must be ended. First, our military intervention in Vietnam had “broken and eviscerated” the war on poverty “as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war.” Like “some demonic destructive suction tube” it robbed funds from domestic programs and sent poor black youth to fight and die out of all proportion to their numbers. The “flame throwers in Vietnam fan the flames in our cities.” In addition, “I knew that 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.” His Christian ministerial role and convictions required him to adopt a broad world perspective rather than a narrow American one. A moral obligation “to work harder than I had ever worked before” to end war, furthermore, had been “placed upon me in 1964” by the Nobel Peace Prize.

Harshly, King condemned America's puppet government in South Vietnam as a vicious dictatorship and questioned the very basis of U.S. foreign policy. Given America's neocolonialism, he thought Vietnam no aberration. He pictured America siding with "the wealthy and the secure while we create a hell for the poor" of Vietnam, and demanded, once again, that the United States end all its bombing and negotiate with the Vietcong. King also now insisted on a date by which all foreign troops would be out of Vietnam, and asked all young men to declare themselves conscientious objectors if drafted.

This business 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 and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.... Somehow this madness must cease.

"The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit," King concluded his critique of U.S. policy in Vietnam. It was time, he said, that America lead a world revolution against "poverty, racism, and militarism." 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." His voice resounding in the immense Gothic cathedral, the preacher declared, "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."

—Given that 73 percent of Americans in the spring of 1967 supported the war, and only 25 percent of African Americans opposed it, the speech ignited a firestorm of criticism. Virtually every American newspaper and magazine rebuked King. Typically, the Washington Post declared the speech "unsupported fantasy," adding that King had gravely injured the civil rights movement and himself. "Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country and to his people." Under the title, "Dr. King's Error," the New York Times belittled King's intelligence and claimed that he had done "a disservice" to both the civil rights and peace movements. Even Negro newspapers like the Pittsburgh Courier accused him of "tragically misleading" African Americans, and the NAACP adopted a resolution stating that the effort to join the civil rights and peace movements is "a serious tactical mistake" that serves neither cause.

Newsweek denounced his demagoguery; Time complained he had set back the cause of Negro advancement; U.S. News and World Report accused him of "lining up with Hanoi;" and Life magazine arraigned him for uttering "a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi." Baseball legend Jackie Robinson, Negro Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, and African American Ralph Bunche, the U.N. Undersecretary-General added their public criticism of the speech to the barrage of attacks on King.

"What is that goddamned nigger preacher doing to me?" Johnson raged. "We gave him the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we gave him the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we gave

him the War on Poverty. What more does he want?" The preacher would never again be invited to the White House. King's door to the Oval Office closed permanently. Martin would henceforth be on the outside, in a picket line, shouting peace chants through the wrought-iron gates.

"The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures," King had warned in April 1967, "we will lose in our decaying cities." Then, in July, the black ghettos exploded in the most intense and destructive wave of rioting the nation had ever experienced. Unprecedented numbers of blacks in some three-score cities, North and South, coast to coast, took to the streets, looting and burning, throwing Molotov cocktails, and firing upon police. To stop the rioting in Newark, New Jersey, the police and National Guard killed twenty-five blacks and wounded or arrested another thirteen hundred. In Detroit, where nearly four thousand fires destroyed thirteen hundred buildings, most of the forty-three deaths and many of the thousand wounded came at the hands of untrained and jittery National Guardsmen. All told, the long, hot summer of 1967 resulted in at least ninety deaths, more than four thousand wounded, and nearly seventeen thousand, mostly black, arrests. "There were dark days before, but this is the darkest," a dispirited King told Levison as he watched his "dream turn into a nightmare."

King placed the ultimate blame for the riots on white America. "The turmoil of the ghetto is the externalization of the Negro's inner torment and rage. It has turned outward the frustration that formerly was suppressed in agony." He pleaded for an immediate program to end unemployment, beseeching Washington for a New Deal effort to provide a job to everyone who needed work. Unless the government acts at once, he declared, "this tragic destruction of life and property" will spread. Neither Congress nor the President responded. King feared time was running out for America and all he believed in. He had to act.

His preoccupation with Vietnam now became a preoccupation with leading a massive crusade of urban civil disobedience. King sought to force the nation to attack the root causes of black nihilism. Despite racial matters having changed more in the previous decade than in any decade since the Civil War, King knew time was running short. As he had written just after the Watts riot in 1965, the "explosive Negro community in the North has a short fuse and a long train of abuses." He needed to "transmute the deep rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative force." He needed to salvage nonviolence as a strategy for change. King called for a "radical redistribution of power." On various occasions during the spring, he insisted that America's "moral sickness," its "repulsive moral disease," necessitated radical measures.

"I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx," King liked to say. "I got it from a man named Jesus." Publicly, Martin avoided using the word "socialism." He feared giving his enemies, whether in the White House, the FBI, or the economically conservative black church, cause to claim he was a Communist or a Marxist. But many of his speeches clearly expressed his preference for what Coretta said was Martin's long held democratic socialist beliefs. As a seminarian he frequently voiced deep skepticism about the capitalist system and elaborated on the need to redistribute wealth and income. In subsequent years, he would claim economic justice as critical to the Movement as individual freedom.

He called for a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" similar to the GI Bill of Rights. Justified by "the robberies inherent in the institution of slavery," it advocated preferential

employment practices and home and business loan subsidies for African Americans. Writing in Why We Can't Wait (1964), King insisted that the "relevant question" is how "can we make freedom real and substantial for our colored citizens? What just course will ensure the greatest speed and completeness? And how do we combat opposition and overcome obstacles arising from the defaults of the past?" Harkening back to what Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had told him about the preferential treatment given to untouchables in applying for jobs and education, his answer was "compensatory consideration for the handicaps he has inherited from the past," preferential treatment that would equip blacks to compete on a just and equal basis now. "Giving a man his due may often mean giving him special treatment."

In Where Do We Go From Here (1967) he pictured "the good and just society" as neither "capitalism nor communism, but "a socially conscious democracy" that would close the gulf "between superfluous wealth and abject poverty" and end "cut-throat competition and selfish ambition." It "is morally right," King declared in his final book, "to insist that every person have a decent house, an adequate education, and enough money to provide basic necessities for one's family."

The year before he had told the SCLC staff, "You can't talk about ending slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums." King cautioned that "this means we are treading in difficult waters, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with capitalism." He had no blueprint but was sure "God never intended for some of his children to live in inordinate superfluous wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty." Maybe, he concluded, "America must move toward a Democratic Socialism." He often used the example of Sweden as a model that the United States should follow.

—His sermons at black churches throughout the spring of 1967 dealt increasingly with poverty and class exploitation. Only by reallocating power, King preached, can we "wipe out the triple interlocking evils of racism, exploitation, and militarism." He called for a "human rights revolution" that placed economic justice at the center. He talked of moving from a reform movement into a "new era, which must be an era of revolution." The time had come to raise new questions, to change the rules. America must be born again. "The whole structure of American life must be changed."

"For years," Martin told journalist David Halberstam in April 1967, "I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, 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." By this he meant "the possible nationalization of certain industries, a guaranteed annual income, a vast review of foreign investments, an attempt to bring new life into the cities." Only these, just possibly, might stem the exhortations from those like H. Rap Brown, who had succeeded Stokely Carmichael as head of SNCC, for African Americans to "get your guns" and "kill the honkies."

On ABC's "Issues and Answers" that summer, King again called for a radical reconstruction of society. "Many of the allies who were with us during the first phase of the Movement," he warned, "will not be with us now because it does mean dispersing the ghetto; it does mean living next door to them; and it does mean the government pouring billions of dollars into programs to get rid of slums and poverty and deprivation." Giving no quarter to former allies who now thought him misguided, King emphasized that "this is why the civil rights movement has to restructure itself, in a sense to gear itself for an altogether new phase of struggle."

Speaking to the tenth anniversary convention of SCLC in Atlanta, in mid-August, King made no effort to sugar-coat his militancy. He began by quoting Victor Hugo's Les Miserables: "If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness." Whites, he exclaimed, caused the darkness. "They created discrimination. They created slums. They perpetuate unemployment, ignorance, and poverty." To combat those, he called for the creative extremism of civil disobedience. The time had come to disrupt business as usual in "earthquake proportions," so that "the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice."

King then asked, "Why are there 40 million poor people in America?"

When you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy.... But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.... 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?"

"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just," he quoted Jefferson, concluding that for America to be born again there must be Christian democratic socialism.

Interviewed by a reporter at the convention, King explained that his strategy for the ongoing crisis of the poor did not depend on the good will and political support of the federal government. In fact, its tactics would compel "unwilling authorities to yield to the mandates of justice."

Just then, James Lawson, now a minister of a church in Memphis, pleaded with a weary King to assist in a strike by the city's black sanitation workers over the mayor's refusal to recognize their union.

Once again his aides objected to King volunteering, as he had done in Albany in 1961, to come in at the last moment to a situation that others planned and controlled. "We felt like you couldn't take on everything, and if we went into Memphis, we'd get bogged down there and never get back to Washington," added Andy Young. "But Martin said he couldn't turn his back on those garbage workers." Picturing the mainly poor black displaced rural migrants "carrying the man's garbage," King claimed "it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income."

Late in January, when heavy rains made sewer work impossible in Memphis, twenty-one black workers had been sent home with only two hours of wages while their white co-workers remained "on the clock" and received a full day's pay. Moreover, two black workers had been crushed to death by their compactor because they were not allowed to sit out the rain in the cab like white workers. And to make matters worse, the dead men's status as unclassified workers meant that their families received no benefits. To protest the unjust treatment by the city, a "wildcat strike" by the mostly-black sanitation workers began on February 12. They did not ask for much: a small pay raise, improved safety standards, and recognition of their union, the American Federation of State, County and

Municipal Employees, But it represented a claim to long-denied dignity and justice, expressed starkly in King's personalist terms: "I Am A Man."-

Memphis' unbending segregationist mayor, Henry Loeb, refused to negotiate and resolved to break the strike. He issued an ultimatum: return to work or be fired. And the next day he began hiring non-union workers to replace the strikers. Loeb's blue-helmeted riot police then brutally maced and clubbed African Americans walking in a orderly protest march that had been organized by black ministers and union leaders. This galvanized the black community, stimulating almost daily marches and a boycott of the downtown stores. A local labor dispute had become a racial struggle with national implications.

Despite the objections of his aides, King responded positively to Lawson's call for help. The Memphis strike seemed a perfect way to dramatize race-based poverty and to highlight the interplay of class and racial oppression—the very reason for a Poor People's Campaign. He would speak in Memphis the next day, March 18. As Ralph Abernathy told Coretta: "We're going to Washington by way of Memphis."

Wednesday, April 3, King returned to Memphis, checking into the black-owned Lorraine Motel, where his room 306 faced a parking lot below and the back windows of a cheap, run-down rooming house across the street. He learned that afternoon that a U.S. district court judge in Memphis had issued a restraining order against the march. Although he had always avoided defying federal court orders, King said that this time he would march anyway. "We are not going to be stopped by Mace or injunctions," he informed reporters. "It is a matter of conscience. We have a moral right and responsibility to march."

A heavy rainstorm buffeted the city that night. Sensing that few people would venture out in the storm to hear him speak at Mason Temple, King sent Abernathy in his place. His phone soon rang. Martin, Abernathy pleaded, "they want to hear you, not me. This is your crowd." They've braved tornado warnings, he implored King, don't let them down. Warily, Martin gave in, despite his unceasing depression and exhaustion.

A haggard King mounted the podium to the accompaniment of blasts of thunder. He began in sorrow, his theme one of death. He spoke of his stabbing, of it now being a time of nonviolence or nonexistence. "But only when its dark enough can you see the stars." King saw God in the masses of people rising up, [Yessir! Yessir!] and whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, [Tell it, doctor] "the cry is always the same: 'We want to be free.'" [Oh yes!] The applause shook the stained-glass windows. The rain rattled windows. It hammered the roof, and King warned that "if something isn't done, and in a hurry, [Yes doctor] to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed."

For the final time, his words recalled Montgomery, exclaiming that the Movement's most important change was in the minds of those who boycotted. They were no longer "scratching where they didn't itch, and laughing when they were not tickled." The day of playing the white man's fool is over. "We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world." [Amen, brother.]

King spoke of the many threats on his life "from some of our sick white brothers.;" As on many previous occasions, King perceived his mission as divine and preordained,

and foresaw his own crucifixion. Suddenly the storm crested. “But it doesn’t matter with me now.” [Tell it.] He paused. “Because I’ve been to the mountaintop.” [Amen!]

The sounds of sobs alternated with thunder claps. What happens to me “doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. [Go ahead.] And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place.” The thousands seated before him hushed. His voice trembled. “But I’m not concerned about that now.” Martin had, from time to time, delivered this peroration of his bearing the cross, but never with such fervor. As lighting flashed, King exclaimed, “I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve s-e-e-e-e-n the promised land. [Yes, yes, yes] I may not get there with you. But I want you to know, tonight, [Oh yeah] that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. [Yes! Go ahead] And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...” He did not finish. As the audience cheered wildly, Martin collapsed into Abernathy’s arms.

The assembly’s enthusiastic reception of his speech elated King. He went off, happily, for a late dinner and the companionship of one of his special female friends. Hours later he returned to the Lorraine Motel, where he joked with his brother and then left with another longtime mistress to her room. Abernathy would not awaken him until noon.

Later that day Young returned from court with the news that the judge would allow a restricted march on the next Monday. Although King was set to march anyway, Young’s good news led to a pillow fight and much horseplay between Martin and his colleagues. He then got ready for dinner, relishing the prospect of his favorite soul food meal at a preacher-friend’s home.

Having a moment to spare he stepped out on his room’s balcony, looked down at the parking lot and joshed with his driver and jazz saxophonist Ben Branch. “Ben,” he smiled, “I want you to play ‘Precious Lord’ for me tonight like you never played it before.” Especially for me tonight, he added, “I want you to play it real pretty.”

An earsplitting noise pierced the air. Some thought it a car backfire or a firecracker. Others took cover near the rented limousine. The bullet shot out of a high-velocity rifle from the rooming house 70 yards from the motel smashed through King’s neck, exploded his right cheek and jaw, and severed his jugular vein and spinal cord.

King, just thirty-nine, flew backward. His body slammed up against the wall, then fell to the balcony floor. Abernathy rushed to his friend and leader. He took him in his arms. Blood gushed from the gaping wounds. “Martin, Martin, this is Ralph. Do you hear me? This is Ralph.” Silence. The bullet, fired by one man but aimed by many, stilled King’s voice forever--yet his words would never die.