

# Bravest and Best

**Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965**  
by Taylor Branch.  
Simon and Schuster, 746 pp., \$30.00

**The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign**  
by Gerald D. McKnight.  
Westview, 192 pp., \$25.00

**But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle**  
by Glenn T. Eskew.  
University of North Carolina Press, 434 pp., \$49.95; \$19.95 (paper)

Russell Baker

## 1.

When the Israelites fled Egypt, God parted the waters of the sea and went before them in the form of a cloud to show them the way and of a pillar of fire to light their path by night. So says Exodus. *Parting the Waters* was the title of Volume One of Taylor Branch's huge, sprawling history of the civil rights movement, published ten years ago. Now we have Volume Two, titled *Pillar of Fire*.

What Branch wants us to take from these biblical titles is fairly obvious, I think. Among black Christians the story of Israel's captivity in Egypt always spoke eloquently of their own situation in the United States. They had been brought in chains, sold as chattels, and condemned to generations of forced servitude. One of their songs familiar even to whites was a lament for a people "way down in Egypt's land, oppressed so hard they could not stand." Its refrain, "Let my people go," paraphrased God's instruction to Moses: "Tell Old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'"

Egypt's land when the civil rights movement began was the United States. A century after Lincoln, inhuman treatment was still the daily experience of black Americans. In this American Egypt, Old Pharaoh was no single human being, but an interlocked network of white authority figures. These ranged from the president and Congress of the United States to the FBI's national police apparatus down through local school boards and church officers all the way to backwater Dixie's white-sheet set and decadent courts routinely excusing white thugs for murder. The Ku Klux Klan flourished, and not only in the South. Branch describes a Klan cross-burning ceremonial in St. Augustine, Florida, where the crowd was addressed by "a traveling celebrity Klansman" from California, the Reverend Connie Lynch, founder of the National States Rights Party. Four black girls had just been killed by a Sunday church bomber in Birmingham.

Lynch dismissed squeamishness about the Birmingham church bombing, saying the four young girls had been "old enough to have venereal diseases" and were no more human or innocent than rattlesnakes. "So I kill 'em all," he shouted, "and if it's four less niggers tonight, then good for whoever planted the bomb. We're all better off."

*Parting the Waters* dealt with Martin Luther King and the civil rights move-

ment from 1954 to 1963, part of an era Branch calls "the King years." In *Pillar of Fire* the time frame is much shorter, extending only from January of 1963 to the later part of 1965. Short though the time span is, these were years packed with great events that were to change the course of history. Branch seems determined to reconstruct a day-by-day record of absolutely everything that took place. This makes for a very long book that is not always easy reading. Trying to include everything means including a good deal that is comparatively dull or trivial. Trying to give an utterly fair, deadpan account of events sometimes produces sentences so confusing that Branch's editor seems to have been yawning when they slipped by.

Its defects, however, cannot diminish the grandeur of this book. I think of H. L. Mencken's judgment on Theo-

King, but "the King years." In one of his rare lapses into meaningless pop jargon, Branch says he sees King's life as a "metaphor"—"the best and most important metaphor for American history in the watershed postwar years."

But what about those biblical titles? Is it America that God is leading out of captivity with his pillar of fire? Surely not. What grips us in *Pillar of Fire* is the melodrama of the civil rights movement, the bravery of the people who made it, the cruelty of the people who hated it, and in the end the nobility of Martin Luther King, who always knew he might be murdered at any moment, and always expected to be, and yet persisted.

Tales of heroism and villainy abound. There is the twenty-seven-year-old New Yorker Bob Moses running a one-man voter-registration drive in McComb, Mississippi.

For trying to escort would-be voters to register, he had been ar-

the town of Greenwood loses its patience with them:

Normally sullen guards greeted them expressly as recalcitrants to be broken, saying, "You're going to pay me." Shorn of hair from head to foot, every patch of stubble slathered in bluish delousing grease, they were marked apart from other inmates—the thirteen males crammed into cell number seven of the death house built around Mississippi's gas chamber, with seven sleeping on the floor and one on the toilet. From there, guards shuffled them in more or less random punishment between isolation cells and the sweatbox, six feet square without lights or windows, vented only by a crack under the door.

... The punishment [for singing freedom songs to keep up their spirits] came to be hanging in handcuffs from a horizontal bar of his



The march from Selma to Montgomery, March 1965. Photograph by James H. Karales

dore Dreiser. Like Dreiser's, Branch's writing sometimes seems so plain and plodding that you wonder how he could have had a moment's pleasure in the act of creation, but, also as with Dreiser, the final, cumulative effect is overpowering. The sheer volume of fascinating stories accounts for this success.

We learn a great deal about the Black Muslims, their adulterous leader, Elijah Muhammad, and the murder of Malcolm X. The Vietnam War, soon to be a serious impediment to the civil rights movement, begins to develop. The war on poverty is launched. A landmark Supreme Court ruling on press freedom is issued. Harlem's playboy congressman, Adam Clayton Powell, loses a libel suit. We spend a depressing amount of time watching J. Edgar Hoover's half-demented struggle to preserve a dying past. President Kennedy is murdered and succeeded by the human hurricane that was Lyndon Johnson before Vietnam ruined him.

Branch is trying to write modern American history on an epic scale. It is not merely the story of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement that he wants to tell. He is aiming for a big score: a full-length portrait of the United States during a crucial moment in its existence. His preface says the focus of his story is not Martin Luther

rested more than once, pummeled by a courthouse mob, and beaten severely near a town square in open daylight by a cousin of the Amite County sheriff. Still bleeding, he walked into the courthouse to file criminal charges, then testified against the cousin, and, until the local prosecutor advised him to flee for his life before a jury brought in the customary verdict of acquittal, continued doggedly to behave as though he possessed the natural rights of a white person. This presumption shocked Mississippi people more than the blood and terror.

There are the benighted sheriffs and police chiefs—Eugene T. "Bull" Connor of Birmingham, Jim Clark of Selma, Lawrence Rainey of Neshoba County, Mississippi—faithfully supporting the Hollywood image of the South as a land of Gothic horrors. Under their management, dogs are set upon demonstrators, high-pressure fire hoses turned against children, unarmed people punched and clubbed and kicked, houses dynamited, skulls fractured, churches burned, murders committed.

We visit Mississippi's infamous Parchman Penitentiary to which thirteen workers in a voter-registration campaign have been sentenced after

cell door. A guard informally sentenced Douglas MacArthur Cotton to stretch beneath the handcuffs for forty-eight hours but took pity on him after three. Willy Carnell hung sleepless for a full thirty hours. Watkins and others lost track of how long they hung, but all of them, still singing or not, eventually gave way to helplessness and let their wastes fall down their prison-issue trouser legs.

## 2.

Long before King, everybody had known that America had a serious race problem, but there never seemed to be a convenient time for dealing with it. So much other serious business was always calling for immediate attention. Presidents especially were cruelly harried by other matters. The cold war, for instance. Taking on the race problem would have been highly inconvenient when survival of the free world was at stake. There were the newly warlike Chinese. You couldn't put Chairman Mao on the back burner, could you? He had the atom bomb. And what about the infestation of Communist conspirators working to destroy American democracy from within? Here was a truly dangerous domestic problem, and it consumed most of the political energy available