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The Race Crisis

A Non-Violent Man Is Martyred

My creed of non-violence is an extremely active force. It has no room for cowardice or even weakness. When a man is fully ready to die, he will not even desire to offer violence. And history is replete with instances of men who by dying with courage and compassion on their lips converted the hearts of their violent opponents.

These ideas were spoken by an Asian man of color, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was struck down by an assassin. But they could have been the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., an American of color, for the Negro leader lived—and died—as a disciple of the Indian leader's principle of nonviolent political action. "From my Christian background I gained my ideals," Dr. King said, "and from Gandhi my operational technique."

After a stunning week in American life, beginning with a glimmer of light that a war of violence abroad might stop and ending with an assassination and the darkness of racial violence, Government officials in Washington and the cities and leaders of the inchoate civil rights movement pondered the meaning and permanence of Martin Luther King's doctrines. In sullen corners of the country, revenge was sought in the name of the man who had preached against it. The root question in early spring is: Has nonviolence died with the death of Dr. King?

Dr. King had gone to Memphis to lead another demonstration in support of striking garbage men. Last Thursday evening, about to depart for dinner at the home of a friend, Dr. King was standing on a balcony at the Lorraine Hotel when a shot, thought to be fired by a white man with a high-powered rifle from a flophouse across the street, struck him in the neck. Rushed to the hospital, Dr. King died within an hour. A massive manhunt under Federal guidance was immediately started for his killer.

While he lived, Dr. King was a

powerful force for sanity in race relations. His organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, opened new contacts with religious leaders, engaged many in the cause of civil rights, and served as a conduit for social and political activism. The S. C. L. C., because it is both integrated and nonviolent, has an accepted philosophical position with important political leaders. The fact that it is located in Atlanta is another source of its strength in the great constituency of the disadvantaged.

But Martin Luther King was

something of a loner. His organization gained its identity from his personal appearances, his brilliant elocution, his international renown and, of course, his great courage on the firing line of civil rights and wrongs.

For Dr. King had emerged in the past decade as a man both above the battle and in it. He undertook not simply one cause but three—a war for equal rights, a battle for economic opportunity, and a skirmish against the "unjust and immoral" involvement in Vietnam.

Until the appearance of Dr. King, the drive for civil rights had been led mainly by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and its legal aim fought mainly in the courts. But litigation was slow and the patience of Negroes, in the mid-1950's, was growing short. Negro youths, in particular, were no longer willing to wait years for signs of change. Dr. King gave hope of immediate action.

The war for equal rights catapulted him from the pulpit of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., to national attention. It all began because a Negro seamstress, Mrs. Rosa Parks, had tired feet at the end of the day and refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person.

Her arrest sparked a citywide Negro boycott that caused the famous "stride toward freedom"

rather than ride the buses. Dr. King led the organization, and in November, 1956, the United States Supreme Court declared the Alabama segregation laws unconstitutional. When his house was bombed, he quieted Negro crowds and pleaded forgiveness.

Drive Against Bias

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, representing Negro leaders from 10 states, continued to concentrate against discrimination in transportation and for voter registration. Crisscrossing the country, Dr. King evolved his nonviolent philosophy.

Militant nonviolence, as Dr. King called it, was not passive resistance. It was civil disobedience of unjust segregation law and direct confrontation of authorities in an effort to overturn those laws. It was massed marches in the streets by men, women and little children with their arms linked, their voices raised in, "O, Freedom," and, "We Shall Overcome," risking being beaten and jailed for their beliefs. It was sit-ins and lie-ins and pray-ins. It was pressure, and more pressure, and if often produced violent retaliation. And the sight of bombed churches and homes, of police beating

demonstrators, of police dogs attacking women and children, of packed jail cells created strong indignation in many parts of the country.

Dr. King said: "In the spirit of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair, we must not become bitter—we must not lose faith in our white brothers."

High Point

The high point of Dr. King's war for civil rights came during the 1963 March on Washington when he spoke to hundreds of thousands of people, including many whites.

In the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, he evoked the Bible, the National Anthem and the Constitution. The following summer, Congress passed the most far-reaching civil rights bill. And a year later, after the dramatic events in Selma, Ala., and the King-led march from Selma to Montgomery, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. But, today, three years later, the improvements promised by these measures are still just promise with-

out reality.

It was the battle for economic rights that cut close to the bone and engaged Dr. King's attention

Johnson on King

I know that every American of goodwill joins me in mourning the death of this outstanding leader and in praying for peace and understanding throughout this land.

We can achieve nothing by lawlessness and divisiveness among the American people. It's only by joining together, and only by working together, can we continue to move toward equality and fulfillment for all our people.

last summer and this year. He was in Memphis—his Dallas—to support striking sanitationmen, of whom 90 per cent are Negroes, when he was assassinated.

"The fact is," Dr. King explained in the days before he died, "there is a major depression in the Negro community. The unemployment rate is extremely high, and among Negro youth, it goes up as high as 40 per cent in some cities. We need an Economic Bill of Rights. This would guarantee a job to all people who want to work and are able to work. It would also guarantee an income for all who are not able to work. A program that would really deal with jobs could minimize—I don't say stop—the

number of riots that could take place this summer. Our whole campaign, therefore, will center on the job question, with other demands, like housing, that are closely tied to it."

The skirmish against the war in Vietnam was begun by Dr. King as a result of his Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. "Non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time," he declared in Oslo. "It is the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression."

Many Americans felt proud that he had received the prize, but F.B.I. Director J. Edgar

Hoover was not among them. He called Dr. King "the most notorious liar in the country."

Dr. King, to the chagrin of those who felt that domestic and foreign nonviolence should not be paired, began to speak as if peace at home and abroad was indivisible.

He said, "We are spending all this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development."

In Washington two months ago, he took part in a two-day antiwar mobilization of 2,500 Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. But his sporadic speeches against the war appeared to have little effect in moving Negroes one way or another as a group on this issue.

Background For Death

It was against this background of triumph, fame, honor and new battles that Dr. King went to Memphis, and his death. The repercussions were immediate.

Across most of the United States, and around the world, people, black and white, were shocked and numbed by the tragedy. For more than any other man, Dr. King had been the bridge between what last month's Riot Commission Report had called the two societies developing in the United States.

Though he had often been under attack from black power militants on the left and white segregationists on the right, for the broad mass of Americans Dr. King had been the symbol of hope for reconciliation. No other man had ever reached the broad masses of Negroes as had Dr. King, and Negroes had never responded to any other man as they did to him. While black power youths might deride him, privately, as "De Lawd," poor Negroes in the North and South had no hesitation in calling him their Moses who would lead them out of the wilderness. In Negro ghettos and rural areas. Dr. King was universally hailed by almost all as the man who represented their aspirations.

Now that he is dead, the emptiness where he stood becomes all too apparent. There is no leader in sight to replace him, no leader who reaches his people as Dr. King did, no leader who comes close to bridging the two nations of black and white.

So, in these first days after the assassination, a shiver of violence has filled the emptiness

in the country. There have been outbreaks of rage, followed by shooting, burning and looting in Harlem, Detroit, Chicago and elsewhere.

The worst demonstrations and damage occurred in Washington itself, where a state of violence was declared by President Johnson, who was forced to delay his Pacific trip on the road to peace.

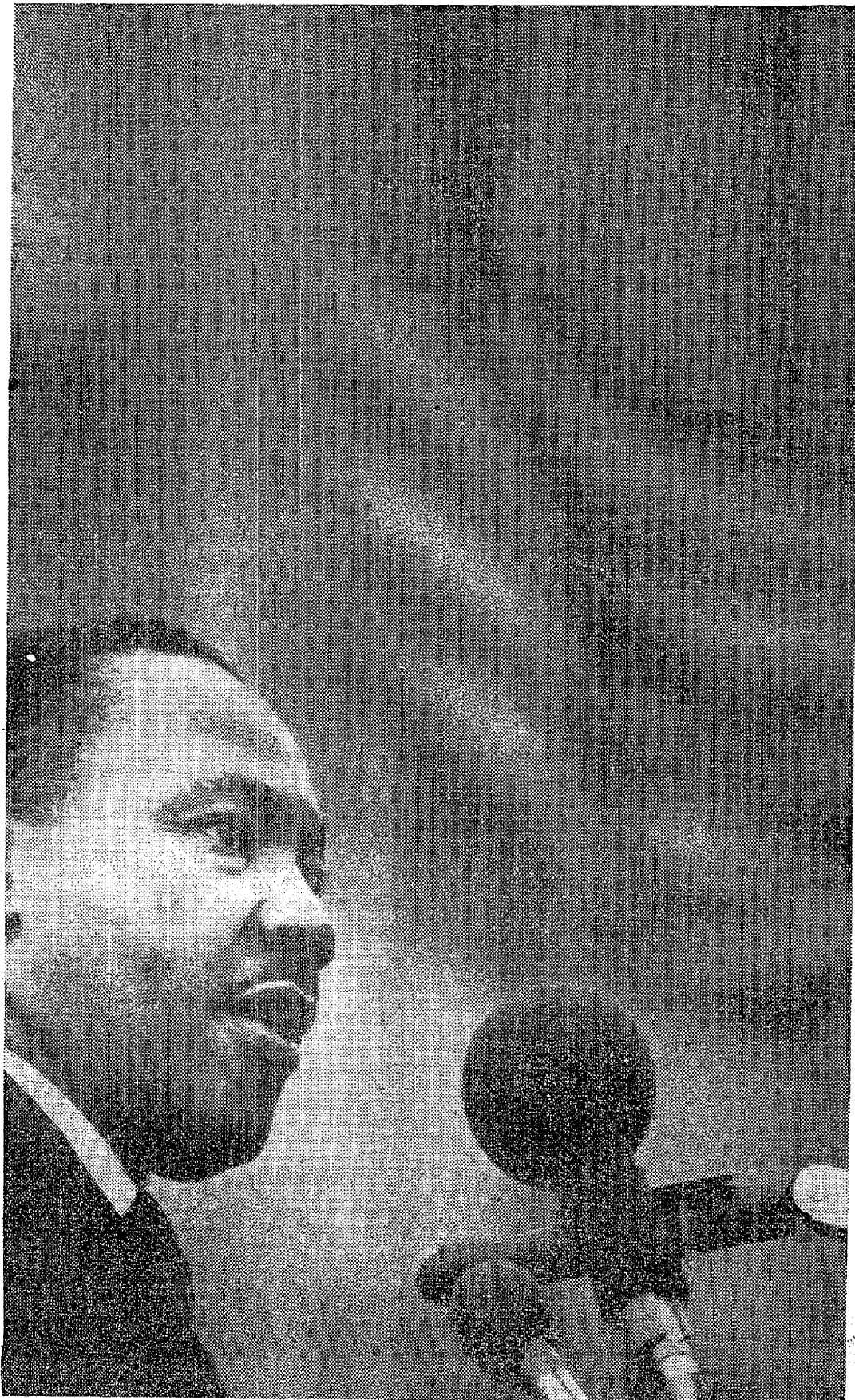
The flags went to half-staff, the all-too-familiar mood of a national mourning fell over the cities and hamlets, and the President called for a special session of Congress tomorrow night to speak about the civil rights denied the Negro people. On Tuesday the man from Georgia who had a dream of nonviolence will be buried.

There are not many men of whom it can be said that their lives changed the world. But, at his death, the world of white and black in the United States, was a far different place than it had been when Martin Luther King appeared in the midst of that bus boycott in Montgomery little more than a decade ago.

And his death, perhaps, may lead to even greater change. The flags are flying at half-staff for a Negro. A President has made a major change in his plans and will go before a joint session of Congress, because of a Negro.

"We've got some difficult days ahead," Dr. King said on the day before he died. "But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. I won't mind."

—HERBERT MITGANG



Ben Fernandez

1929—1968: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.