

# Race war: who now can speak up for peace?

by COLIN LEGUM

POSSIBLY the one Negro leader the Americans couldn't afford to lose at this moment was Dr Martin Luther King. Committed equally to the struggle for Negro emancipation and against the war in Vietnam, he had emerged from a period of eclipse as the only potential mediator with sufficient prestige to narrow the divisions between whites and blacks, as well as between blacks and blacks.

To reach this position of influence, Dr King had stood out, deliberately and courageously, against many of his closest friends. He took on the white Establishment, the black Establishment, and the Black Power militants.

His quarrel with the white Establishment was primarily over his decision to oppose President Johnson's Vietnam policies. From being a favourite visitor to the White House he found himself totally excluded. Congress, too, turned cold.

Many of his white liberal friends turned against him because in 1966 they were still ready to argue that the civil rights movement should not become mixed up in the Vietnam controversies—a position adopted also by the black Establishment. He angrily rejected the arguments that black leaders should forgo their duty to criticise American foreign policies in exchange for possible hand-outs for the ghettos: 'I can't segregate my moral concern. We are engaged in a war where we are the aggressors, and I think it's necessary to say to the policy-makers of our country that we are wrong. We

an organisation. His flair lay in different directions.

His break with Black Power militants like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown came over his dedicated refusal to abandon non-violence as the only method of struggle. To his last day his lodestar was Gandhi.

Martin Luther King's other grounds for opposing the Black Power militants was because he felt their slogan offered no constructive programme of action. To him, it was a 'nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win.' While he understood the reasons for the nihilistic reaction to the intransigence of the white power structure, he felt that Black Power carried 'the seeds of its own doom.'

He rejected black separatism—although under the pressures of Black Power he came to believe in transferring more political and economic power into the hands of the ghetto-dwellers. He insisted there was no answer to the American dilemma other than complete political integration and a sharing of power.

But for the angry young Negro who grew out of the disillusionment of the decade of civil rights, Dr King's recipe of non-violence and prayer was not enough. His mother and grandmother had been praying to God and singing lovely psalms for too many generations, without any success, to encourage them to follow a leader who was so essentially a man of the cloth. They fell into the habit of referring to King as 'De Lawd.'

But it wasn't only the young Negro who had become enraged: the rage had spread throughout the black middle-class. The question was what to offer people who were in a mood for setting fire to the cities?

'It is purposeless,' King used to argue, 'to tell Negroes they shouldn't be enraged when they should be. Indeed, they'll be mentally healthier if they don't suppress rage, but vent it constructively and use its energy peacefully but forcefully to cripple the operations of an oppressive society.'

He was quick to see what the end of the road was likely to be: 'the cohesive, potentially explosive Negro community in the North has a short fuse and a long train of abuses.'

The turning-point for him

should admit to the world that we made a tragic mistake in Vietnam.'

But the black Establishment—the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People), the Urban League, the Democrat and Republican Negro politicians—also resented his refusal to work with them. They felt—not without reason—that Dr King wanted to be the leading figure in every action in which he was engaged, leaving them to carry on where he broke off the engagement. He certainly had a great talent for capturing the headlines—and for attracting huge financial subventions. And he had no talent for building up

came in Chicago in the summer of 1966 when he was booed by his own people. 'I had urged them to have faith in America and in white society. Their hopes had soared. They were now booing because they felt that we were unable to deliver our promises. I went home that night with an ugly feeling.'

His response to the dilemma in which he found himself—how to reconcile his own belief in non-violence with the gathering mood of violence—was to escalate non-violence 'by seeking to make it as dramatic, as attention-getting as anything we did in Birmingham and Selma, without destroying life or property in the process.'

This is what he sought to do over the strike of Negro dustmen in Memphis, Tennessee, when he was killed. And this is what he was planning to do in organising his great March on Washington next month.

But it was not only his methods that were becoming sharper: his attitudes had changed, and with them his policies. His language and ideas increasingly became those of radicals and socialists.

Reluctantly he came to accept the late Malcolm X's analysis of the Negro's place in American society as being on a level of 'domestic colonialism'; even more reluctantly he was forced to agree that 'most white Americans are unconscious racists'—a view that has now been given the stamp of Establishment approval by the Presidential Commission on Civil Disorders.

'For years,' Dr King said, 'I laboured 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.'

He even went so far—for an American—as to advocate the possible nationalisation of certain industries.

By transforming his own ideas and sharpening the instruments of non-violent challenge to American society, he managed to do what the rest of the black Establishment had failed to do: to speak in terms that found some echo in the mood of the ghetto. And even though black militants sharply attacked him, they didn't lose their respect for him—especially be-

cause of his bitter attacks on the 'American disease of militarism.'

In responding to the changing temper of his own people, as well as to the loss of white American interest in doing anything substantial about the crisis in the cities, Martin Luther King found himself increasingly divorced from the rulers at Washington. But with the change of the President's policies on Vietnam—and with a greater awareness of the crisis at home—it seemed for a brief moment as if King was about to reap the reward for his courage in breaking with his old patrons and friends.

Certainly if America was moving seriously towards heeding the lessons of the Commission on Civil Disorders, it would need somebody like King to act as a mediator between the white and black Establishments, the Black Power crowd, and the ghettos. The bullet that struck him down on the balcony of his Memphis hotel has left the Americans with nobody else who, at the moment, can clearly fill this role.

Suddenly, the dangerous approaching summer has begun to look even more ominously dangerous.



**Negroes looting in Washington following Martin Luther King's murder.**