

A Continuing 'King' Controversy

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By Jacqueline Trescott

The controversy that started last summer over the made-for-television movie "King" accelerated yesterday after the first of the three-part series was aired Sunday night.

Hosea Williams, national executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the group Martin Luther King Jr. founded in 1957, called the portrayal of King and some of his aides in the civil rights movement 'garbage.'

John Lewis, who was active in almost every phase of the movement in the 1960s, said, "Some segments last night were a distortion of history."

A spokesman for NBC Television, which is showing the six-hour biography (continuing last night and tonight on Channel 4), said the network had received about "100 telephone calls, mostly about the placements of commercials and the fact that the network didn't indicate 'part one' but nothing about inaccuracies." The drama was written and directed by Abby Mann.

Several civil rights activists criticized historical inaccuracies, the exclusion of key people, such as Wyatt Tee Walker, former chief executive officer of SCLC, the enlarged role of both Coretta King and white lawyer Stanley Levison, and the alleged manipulation of King by whites.

"My omission is minor compared to the great damage that's been done to Martin's personality," said the Rev. Walker yesterday. He saw part of the film at a special preview in New York last week. "After seeing three hours, I wanted to scream. King is shown as a man who was indecisive, manipulated by people and tortured by decisions. There was nothing akin to the King I knew. The only convincing portrayal I saw was that of Bull Connor and that's a sad commentary."

In a statement, Williams said, "It certainly distorts the true image of Dr. King because it projects him as

being uncertain, unopinionated, scary and not sure of himself." John Gibson, a Washington businessman who worked with SCLC from 1962 to 1965, said, "I found the first episode very negative, shallow. It did not deal with the complexities of the man and some of the things it portrayed were false. . . It left me kind of bitter."

Like many critics yesterday, Williams particularly objected to the role of the white lawyer, Levison. ". . . For to show blacks around the world and black youngsters a white man having been the thought process behind the

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modern black struggle is criminal. I really think the docu-drama is garbage."

Levison, a New York-based attorney and close friend of Coretta Scott King, who approved the script, was associated with the movement from its early days in Montgomery, Ala.

"It would sound immodest if I said my role was not enlarged," said Levison. "But the reason some people draw that conclusion was that my relationship with Dr. King was not always that public. We talked so much on the phone that the FBI has thousands of intercepted conversations." Asked to specify his role with King, Levison said, "In the early days, Dr. King didn't know a great many of the organizations. He needed somebody that was 20 years older than he. It was awfully easy for him to be victimized. I was the link with the organizations, an adviser, public relations man, an analyst of other public figures and fund-raiser."

However, some viewers felt his role was exaggerated, while the importance of the blacks around King was diminished. "It de-emphasized all the major actors in the black community—the Hosea Williams, the Jim Bevels, the Jesse Jacksons—(Rev. Ralph

Albernathy was totally insulted," said Courtland Cox, a former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee official. "The black community were the actors at the time and the white community was reacting. But in this film the white community was put up front."

Albernathy, a close associate of King initiated the criticism of the production last summer, taking particular exception to what he called its depiction of King as a "coward," even calling for a boycott of the network. Coretta King's quick defense of the effort, however, in effect dampened the dispute. "'King' is a drama and not a documentary; therefore it should be judged as such," she said at the time. "No one could be more concerned than I about how my husband's image is being projected."

Since that time writer-director Mann has vigorously defended the characterizations. "There may be flaws in the film, but showing him (King) as a coward is not one of them. At moments he may be afraid, but that makes him all the more courageous."

"As history, it was full of inaccuracies. King did not go to Philadelphia, Miss., by himself; he was there with the full protection of the U.S. government, he was surrounded by FBI agents and police. He was not a man alone, he was not the Daniel in the Lion's Den. I was there," said Cox.

One former activist found it enjoyable. "I thought it was a great film, especially as a black parent, because King is one of the few blacks our kids have enough to read about. Now they have seen him in a good film," said Frank Smith, a field organizer in Mississippi for SNCC. "I think the writer and producer had the right to take liberty with some things. I don't think it was distorted. I was a little disturbed at one point in the emphasis on King's ego and his interest in fame. I have always considered him more modest."

'King's' Poor Start 2/14/78

"King" . . . NBC's three-night docu-drama about the last years of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. . . . did poorly in its Sunday night premiere in the country's three biggest TV markets . . . according to A. C. Nielsen overnight ratings in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago . . .

Strong counter-programming by ABC and CBS was undoubtedly aided by NBC's decision to lead into "King" . . . which began at 9 p.m. . . with a weak two-hour movie about the Flying Wallendas . . . as a result . . . NBC's ratings stayed low throughout prime time . . .

ABC relied on a three-hour premiere of "How the West Was Won" starring James Arness . . . while CBS, aided by "All in the Family" and "Rhoda" as lead-ins, countered "King"

between 9 and 11 with "Gator" . . . a first-time-on-TV movie starring Burt Reynolds . . .

On NBC . . . the "Wallenda" and "King" combination averaged 21 and 22 percent shares of the viewing audience respectively for the whole evening in all three major cities . . . ABC's "How the West Was Won" . . . averaging about a 34 percent share in the three cities . . . barely beat out "Gator" . . . during the two hours when both were competitive with "King" and . . . "Gator" averaged a 33 share . . .

Last week, actor Paul Winfield . . . who plays King . . . had predicted in Los Angeles that the show would draw bigger audiences than ABC's fabulous "Roots" a year ago . . . but it is clear that rival networks weren't going to be caught napping with ordinary fare (as was the case in 1977 with CBS and NBC during "Roots" week) . . . at least for the opening segment . . .

Another rating note: Nielsen overnights in the same cities Friday . . . indicate CBS' version of "The President's Mistress" finished third in all three against ABC's "Freebie and the Bean" and NBC's regular "Rockford Files" and "Quincy" competition . . . in that order . . .

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