

HENRY MITCHELL

Looking Back on Those Sad Days in Memphis

The last thing he wanted to do was go to Memphis or get sidetracked on the sanitation workers' strike there, and the last thing anybody in the city wanted was for him to get killed there.

Martin Luther King's doctor had insisted he take it easy, as pressure from King's forthcoming Poor People's Campaign mounted—that was his big project, for which he needed every atom of energy he could command.

But he had no choice. The 1968 garbage strike in Memphis lasted more than two months, and what had begun as a labor action became almost immediately a racial crisis. King went to Memphis not to settle a labor question but in response to pleas that his presence was necessary to prevent race war.

If anybody wishes to understand these events he should begin with a new book, "At the River I Stand," by Joan Turner Beiffus, which is the best account I know of the tragedy-of-errors preceding Dr. King's murder by a man who knew and cared nothing of what had gone before, or what was involved in the strike that brought King to Memphis in the first place.

The base of the book is a series of taped interviews conducted by 80 people of several hundred people concerned with the strike and the death of Dr. King. I was one of the 80 who got together within a few days of the murder, to put together as well as we could the innumerable complexities of that time. We were lucky to conduct the interviews before anything had settled down, and the chief characters had had time to rethink their words and actions. The tapes are housed at Memphis State University. Beiffus, one of the group of 80, has spent the years since 1968 trying to make sense of the terrible spring.

The 80 were virtually all white and middle-class, virtually all politically liberal, and sympathetic to King in the first place. Their—our—assumptions no doubt color the interviews, and none of us presumed to boast we were historians. We were citizens of the city, however, and loved it. Some of us knew a great deal about it, others less. All of us lived through that spring and daily observed the progress of events from an ill-conceived strike to a national tragedy, and like a great many others—thousands who were not chief participants—we were certain that these events were not the result of blind impersonal forces but the deeds of men we knew, in a city of which we were not anonymous citizens.

But no one of us, and not one of the political, labor, religious or media figures, knew more than part of the story. Beiffus would be far from insisting that even after years of thought and consulting all manner of material, we know everything now. I, at least, find her book the best exposition of these events, many of which are not known in general.

The strike was stupidly conceived, from a practical point of view. It began in defiance of a court injunction, and without the approval, let alone the blessing, of the international union, which was caught by surprise. Its goals were not clearly conceived at the beginning, and few experienced labor leaders would think the cold weather of late winter and early spring the most effective season to stop collecting garbage in Memphis, which has summers like Hyderabad but winters as cold as Washington.

Since it was a small strike by a new unrecognized union, the best brains and experience of the labor movement did not assist to begin with. The labor representative appeared with the popular mayor on television and stuck his finger under the mayor's nose. "Keep your big mouth shut."

The mayor was new in office. He was extremely handsome, extremely popular, rich, educated at Andover and Brown, and perhaps unfortunately (as a practical matter) a man of such personal integrity that I have rarely met his equal.

You can imagine the public reaction to such scenes on television, the golden-boy mayor publicly taunted by a not very prepossessing union organizer from out of town, named Ciampa. In Memphis it took us years to master such an ethnic name as Roosevelt.

It was not quite the way to win public support for an all-black union that had struck despite court injunction.

This was the real beginning of the tragedy, and it is



The message of the sandwich board was the essence of the whole tragedy.

BY SUSAN DAVIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST, FROM THE COVER OF THE BOOK "AT THE RIVER I STAND"

disheartening to think how large a role the comments of an unimportant, obscure and uninformed loudmouth can play, on a stage much greater than his own.

Two garbage collectors fell into one of those trucks that grind up refuse. They were ground up. Safety had not been one of the argued grievances of the union, and in fact the men were killed because they acted imprudently and were standing in a place they should not. Still, the horror of their deaths, with the implicit symbolism they were just garbage and could be ground up with the rest, and the fact that no provision was made for their families or even for their funerals, added greatly to the tension of the day.

The city leaders, angry at having this unexpected strike deal with, only a few days after they had taken office (in a new form of city government), saw the strike as the first challenge to the new mayor-and-council system.

The mayor, in particular, did not see how a settlement could be achieved by saying, in effect, "We're brand new in office but sure, you guys can get anything you want because our new government doesn't care a damn about court injunctions, or the law forbidding you to strike, and we welcome this illegal action of yours to bring us round."

Even now, all these years later, this remains a thorn. It is easy enough to say the mayor should have seen the strike was evolving into a racial struggle, not a labor argument. It is not quite so easy, at least for me, to say a head of government should solve an initially small problem by openly defying the law himself.

In any case, the mayor could not do it. He thought he could negotiate a settlement if the men returned to work. Then they would not be defying the courts and he could soon come to agreement. But the men thought the only chance they had in the world was the pressure of their refusal to collect garbage. The minute they returned to work, they thought, the heat would be off, and the city government would mumble and futz about and they'd be where they started.

It was this impasse that could not be resolved. But not for lack of effort by a startling number of people who saw that the matter was getting quite out of hand, and taking on dimensions nobody ever foresaw.

The story as it developed was a matter of some agony in that city, and is worth attention now, long after the superficial accounts are done, and nobody any longer has much interest in reviling the other side.

The 370-page soft-cover book requires the reader to get all

the characters straight, and to remember as he reads along just what has happened thus far and what has not. I could not put the book down. The sit-down in the City Hall, the demands of the Memphis housewives in their white gloves, the march of local preachers on City Hall with the dean of the cathedral brandishing his golden processional cross—the book is packed with facts of enormous interest. If the American book publishing industry were better than it is, the book would be issued by one of the giants, instead of B&W Books, 445 Meadowcrest Cir., Memphis 38117 (\$15.70 postpaid).

Things seemed almost to be settled just before Dr. King was shot and pronounced dead an hour later. Then, we all thought, everything was truly lost.

We were wrong. There was less rioting in Memphis than in, for instance, Washington. The strike was settled, at a price still being paid.

I think of the book title, "At the River I Stand." Maybe it's from a spiritual. Or maybe it means the great river (which I instinctively write with a capital R until I remember it's not that big a deal for most people) on which the city stands. Or Jordan's stormy banks, with the promised land on the other side. Or the river the pilgrim crosses to come to his citadel.

And I like the guy on the cover with his back to the camera and a small sandwich board, more like a backpack, only you can't read the sign.

I can tell you what the sign said, even if it doesn't show up in this cover picture.

"I Am a Man" is what it said. Having just suggested the wisdom of checking out the facts of the strike that led to King's murder, it may now sound dumb to say the message of the sandwich board was the essence of the whole tragedy.

It had been known for so long. It wasn't just the pay, or the dues check-off or the court injunction, critical though all those things were.

In 1951 a reporter urged the editor of the main Memphis newspaper to start calling black men Mister. It was unheard of, and it was not done, until the pressure of events forced it. There was no grace to make the small voluntary gesture, even if it were no more than minimal public courtesy accorded to any white jerk. The great editor knew, or thought he knew, what his readership would tolerate and was "ready for." The strike and the murder are what it was ready for.

There were times I thought my own city was all loons. That was before I noticed the whole world is. And long before I saw I was one of them. Meaning no harm, doing good here and there, and the whole damned train headed straight for hell.