

Ralph Abernathy Dies at 64

Civil Rights Leader Was Top King Aide

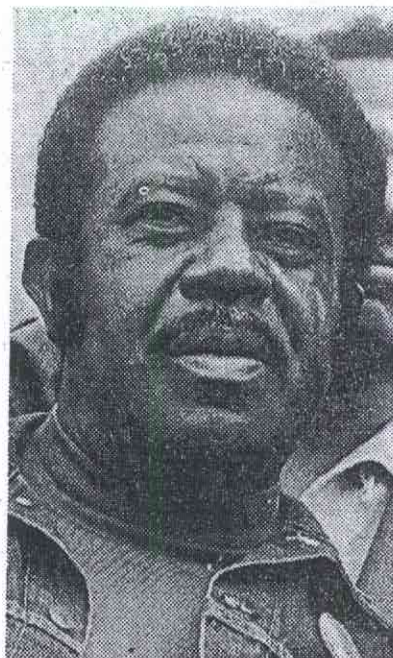
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By Bart Barnes
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, 64, the top aide and alter ego to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and King's successor as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after his 1968 assassination, died yesterday at a hospital in Atlanta after a heart attack. He had been hospitalized since last month for a sodium deficiency and had suffered strokes in 1983 and 1986.

Abernathy's first major task following King's assassination was the organization and direction of King's

last grand dream, a Poor People's Campaign in Washington to sensitize the federal government and the nation to the plight of the poor in America. It became an encampment of up to 2,600 protesters in a tent and shanty town near the Lincoln Memorial. On June 24, 1968, the encampment was cleared out by D.C. riot police after six weeks of controversy and disorder in a capital city that was already racially tense and on edge in the aftermath of the riots that followed King's murder.

Absent from the public spotlight for much of the 1970s and 1980s, Abernathy provoked a major news See ABERNATHY, A6, Col. 1



1971 PHOTO
Ralph Abernathy, shown at a D.C. rally, led the Poor People's Campaign.

ABERNATHY, From A1

story last year with discussions in his autobiography, "And The Walls Came Tumbling Down," of King's alleged extramarital affairs on the night before he died in Memphis. Black leaders, including Jesse L. Jackson, former Atlanta mayor Andrew J. Young, Del. Walter E. Fauntroy (D-D.C.), Rep. William H. Gray III (D-Pa.), NAACP Executive Director Benjamin L. Hooks and Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), accused him of betraying his friend and the civil rights cause by including the material.

Juan Williams, a Washington Post reporter who reviewed the book in this newspaper, called it "a very human, realistic look at Abernathy and King. All childish deification of King is dismissed here by his best and closest friend."

"I have told no lies. I have written the truth and nothing but the truth," declared Abernathy. "I'm not Judas," he said when handed a telegram warning that including the material about King's extramarital affairs in his autobiography could "rob you of your place in history."

Although he remained at King's side during the early struggles of the civil rights movement and went to jail with him 17 times, Abernathy insisted he had never wanted to replace King. "I always wanted to stand with him and not ahead of him . . . I never had any desire to lead the movement," he said.

His style of oratory was plain, full of simple words and humor, but it lacked the charisma and eloquence of King's oratory, and as a leader Abernathy did not have the personal magnetism that King did. He resigned

as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1973, complaining that King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change that she headed, were draining money and support that might otherwise have gone to the SCLC.

"His total life and passion was his support of Martin Luther King," said Young, another key aide to King in the early years of the civil rights movement. If Abernathy had a weakness, Young said, "it was trying to fill Martin Luther King Jr.'s shoes after his death, and that was an impossible task."

It was as a graduate student in sociology in Atlanta that Abernathy first met King, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where King's father was pastor.

The two men later became professional colleagues in Montgomery, Ala. Abernathy

was named pastor of First Baptist Church there in 1951, and King was appointed pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery three years later.

After the arrest in Montgomery on Dec. 1, 1955, of a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, Abernathy and King organized a bus boycott that lasted just over a year and ended with the desegregation of Montgomery buses.

In 1957, the two men met with black leaders from 10 southern states in Atlanta to organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King was elected president of the organization, and Abernathy became secretary-treasurer.

While Abernathy was attending the organizational meeting in Atlanta, his home and church in Montgomery were bombed.

His house was badly damaged, but his wife and baby daughter escaped unharmed. The church was destroyed and had to be rebuilt.

Over the next decade, the SCLC would become a major force for civil rights throughout the South. Abernathy and King would be jailed in cities from Selma, Ala., to Albany, Ga., for civil rights activities ranging from protest sit-ins to voter registration drives.

"Whenever Dr. King and I would go to jail together we would spend the first 24 hours fasting to purify our souls in order that we would have no hatred in our hearts toward the jailer, and a stronger determination to tear down the system responsible," Abernathy once recalled.

In 1963 he participated in the March on Washington that attracted an estimated

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Rev. Ralph Abernathy, right, and the Rev. H. Ralph Jackson, left, flanked the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during a civil rights march in Memphis in 1968. Abernathy was King's top aide.

ABERNATHY, From A6

200,000 people and is probably best remembered for King's "I Have a Dream" speech. In subsequent years, the SCLC leadership began to focus increasingly on jobs and income, and in December of 1967 King developed his idea for the Poor People's Campaign in which poor people from all over the United States would engage in a massive protest in Washington to demonstrate their grievances to the federal government and the nation.

That protest had originally been scheduled for March 1968, but it was postponed when King and Abernathy diverted their attention to supporting a Memphis sanitation workers strike for higher wages and recognition of their union.

They were in Memphis to organize a rally in support of the strikers when King was

mortally wounded by a sniper's bullet while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April 4. After an all night staff meeting following King's death, Young announced that Abernathy was King's "unquestioned" replacement.

Under Abernathy's leadership, the SCLC promptly resumed work on the Poor People's Campaign, and in early May, caravans of poor and unemployed people from various parts of the nation began converging on Washington.

Almost from the beginning, it rained. Grassy parkland turned into mud, food rotted in cardboard boxes, drug use, thievery and fighting were rampant, and anarchy prevailed. Abernathy did not stay at Resurrection City, whose peak population was 2,600, but instead remained at the Pitts Motor Hotel, and for this he was heavily criticized.

Born on a farm in Marengo County, Ala., Abernathy was the 10th of 12 children. He served in the Army during World War II before being ordained a Baptist minister. He then graduated from Alabama College in Montgomery and received a master's degree in sociology at Atlanta University.

At his death, he was pastor of West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, a job he had held since 1961.

He had run unsuccessfully for a Democratic nomination to the House of Representatives in 1978. In 1980 he supported the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan, a stand that brought criticism from many black leaders.

Survivors include his wife, Juanita; two sons, Kwame and Georgia state Rep. Ralph David Abernathy III; and two daughters, Juandalynn and Donzaleigh.