

# Book World

## Brothers In the Cause Of Freedom

### AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN An Autobiography

By Ralph David Abernathy  
Harper & Row, 638 pp., \$25

By Juan Williams

**R**ALPH ABERNATHY spent the most important years of his life as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sancho Panza, his best friend, his second-in-command in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and even, when necessary, his stand-in. Now when Abernathy might finally have center stage to himself, there is great irony in finding that Abernathy's own life story is the closest that researchers and students will ever get to a full autobiography of King, much closer than the brief account of his own career that King himself wrote.

Unfortunately, this valuable personal portrait of King may be missed in the uproar surrounding Abernathy's revelations about the night of April 3, 1968, the night before King's assassination. Abernathy's account suggests that King separately slept with two women that night—neither his wife—and he writes that he witnessed King striking another with whom he had had an ongoing sexual affair. They fought because the woman was angry at finding King's bed empty when she came to have sex with him at 3 a.m.

That report comes in the middle of a book that offers a very human, realistic look at Abernathy and King. All childish deification of King is dismissed here by his best and closest friend and replaced by the reality of King's mortal struggle to deal with the pressures of competitors, the media spotlight and the civil rights struggle. The book deserves attention for its loving depiction of the true friendship between Abernathy and King, its insider's account of major moments in the civil rights movement and of the personal crises in King's life as he struggled to become a great American leader.

Even before the two met, there were close parallels between the lives of Abernathy and King. Like King, Abernathy came from a strong, basically middle-class family that enjoyed a certain status in its community despite the realities of South-

*Juan Williams is a staff writer for The Washington Post Magazine and author of "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965."*



ILLUSTRATION BY GARY VISKUPIC FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ern segregation. Both families lived well. Abernathy in rural Alabama, King in Atlanta. And, like King, Abernathy had almost no brushes with racist whites as a child. When he did happen into a drunken white man in a grocery store who called him a "nigger" and threatened to hit him if he didn't finish the drunk's Nehi soda, the white storeowner defended young Abernathy. "Don't you touch that boy," he cried. Then he added, "That's the son of W.L. Abernathy."

Abernathy's account of his childhood, his family and even his time in the segregated Army is a charming memoir. There are beautiful anecdotal touches: Abernathy and his 11 siblings anxiously waiting for their favorite treat—the sugary dregs of

their parents' evening cups of coffee. In this loving family, young David came to realize that "the preacher, after all, was the finest and most important person around, someone who was accorded respect wherever he went."

Once he left the Army and Alabama State University—where he honed his leadership skills as a sergeant and as president of the student council—Abernathy began to follow the preacher's path. He spoke at various churches in Alabama, and then, at the surprisingly young age of 24, was selected as pastor of the prestigious First Baptist Church in Montgomery. Abernathy's account of his life as a successful young black Southern preacher is a sociological

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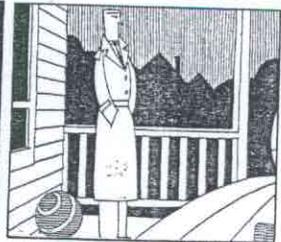
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# Abernathy

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Abernathy writes of talks with King during his last weeks that revealed King was "troubled by the thought that Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Willie Ricks, and others like him might capture the leadership of the black youth and lead as many as would follow to their destruction." It is this kind of direct account that makes Abernathy's book so valuable. Who else but Abernathy could write with authority of King's attitudes? Who but Abernathy could write with credibility that when King and Abernathy were arrested by Birmingham's Bull Connor and ordered to solitary instead of put together in a cell, King whispered that Connor is "a smart old crackpot." Who but Abernathy could write that he and King relished the television pictures of Connor's dogs lunging at black demonstrators because it was "just what we wanted," because it dramatized the lack of freedom for blacks in Alabama and would encourage financial contributors around the nation.

It is this authoritative voice of the man who was indisputably like a brother to King that sets Abernathy's book apart and gives it a special place among civil rights histories. Only Abernathy can write with understanding about King's unattributed use of ideas and words from other writers and speakers. Abernathy explains that King studied others' works and didn't consider it plagiarism to use their best thoughts to inspire his audiences. Only Abernathy can share with a reader King's mood when King got a note urging him to kill himself or have a tape recording of his sexual infidelities made public. King told

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A BERNATHY has little new to add to previous accounts of these events, but there is a first-hand quality to his story that sets it apart, for better and for worse. This is a personal account—one man's story, a limited picture that focuses on Abernathy and King, excluding other players, even some who worked closely with them.

And biases are apparent. Abernathy, whose life had been comfortable and middle class, was unused to the hit-and-run competition for leadership in the movement. He does not speak to his own limitations, and while he does a good job of talking about competition among the civil rights groups, he hides his feelings about his personal competition with King.

For example, notably absent from these pages is an account of the ceremony where King received the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Other chronicles of King's trip to Sweden reveal Abernathy's desire to be treated as an equal to King and his hurt at the realization that King, not he and not the team, was being celebrated. Similarly, because of Abernathy's and King's distaste for the young people in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, there is no mention in this book of the sit-ins by students who were frustrated by the lack of action from King and Abernathy in the late 1950s and who kicked off the '60s with defiant activism, breaking away from King's leadership.

Abernathy makes it plain that he and King felt the NAACP was also

fighting them for the media spotlight. After King's failure to win any concessions from the white leadership following demonstrations in Albany, Ga., Abernathy writes that he and King "learned a bitter lesson about at least two other organizations, the NAACP and SNCC. Neither one of the groups was willing to put the cause of black freedom above its own welfare." Abernathy writes of informers in the Albany NAACP—his contention is supported by other accounts—and of the rivalry that SNCC's leaders felt toward King.

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Abernathy the tape was a composite of several nights of activity in different places and it had to be the work of the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover. "How dare they interfere with my private life," Abernathy quotes King as reacting. "It's nobody's business but my own."

Only Abernathy was at King's side when he went to Chicago and "encountered for the first time a crowd of blacks that he could neither reason with nor overpower with his rhetoric."

From this uniquely intimate portrait of King comes a growing sense of King as a badly depressed man by 1968, a man who bravely struggled nonetheless to continue his fight against racism and poverty. Abernathy's portrait of King screaming during an SCLC planning session at an egotistical and ambitious Jesse Jackson to leave him alone has a melancholy feel as we see King fighting demons from every direction, even among his own group. Later, even after King is dead there are people trying to profit from the tragedy: militants encouraging riots and Jackson's lie to reporters that he was the last to speak with and to hold King. Abernathy writes of these betrayals with a pain and sadness that seem to reflect King's mood of sadness and depression in the last days of his life.

Sadness hangs over the end of Abernathy's book—at King's death and when the SCLC board tells Abernathy he has "outlived [his] usefulness." There is sadness as well as seeing King's fears about the growing infatuation with black separatism and violence come true. And, finally, there is sadness at having lost the most important friend of his life.

"It has been more than 20 years now since Martin died. . . ." Abernathy writes. "But I have never quite gotten over it. Every so often I will see or hear something and reach for the telephone, saying, 'I need to tell Martin about that.' Then I remember that he is not sitting in his study at Ebenezer Church, but lying in a crypt on a small island—separated from the rest of us by the deep water surrounding him and by the widening years."

"At the Top of Washington's Reading List."—Newsweek

## GORBACHEV'S STRUGGLE FOR ECONOMIC REFORM

Anders Åslund

"[Åslund] here provides a behind-the-scenes analysis based on three years in the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and unprecedented access to Soviet economists and top officials. . . His conclusion: the Soviet leadership faces a bleak choice between a radical overhaul of their system, or continued decline. There is no middle way."



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—New York Times Book Review

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