

THE MORNING

THE CIVIL RIGHTS

Reviewed by

**Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray
and the Assassination of
Martin Luther King, Jr.**

By Gerald Posner
Random House; 446 pages; \$35

Dreamer

By Charles Johnson
Scribner; 236 pages; \$32

The Children

By David Halberstam
Random House; 783 pages; \$39.95

**Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years,
1963-65**

By Taylor Branch
Simon & Schuster; 746 pages; \$42

BY ALL THE STANDARD MEASURES, few decades in U.S. history can claim more triumphs or sweeter ones than what is often called the Civil Rights Era, running from 1954 to about 1965. When the august justices of the U.S. Supreme Court ordered states to integrate first schools, then restaurants, waiting-rooms and bus lines starting in 1954, the southern states had simply ignored them, but before 11 years of popular protest were over, a Congress still stuffed with Democrats passed the most comprehensive civil rights and voting rights acts in U.S. history.

The effect on individual lives was stunning. In 1961, a white mob had beaten John Lewis, the son of a poor black farming fami-

ly, nearly to death just for trying to ride on an integrated bus. When he revisited southern towns in 1970 the sheriffs who had once jailed people like him were friendly, and tramped out to churches and rallies to ask, sometimes to beg, blacks for their votes. Within two decades, Lewis was a prominent congressman. By then even his white southern colleagues were praising Martin Luther King Jr. as a great leader, and equal opportunity was properly conceived as a bulwark of American life. The radical idea of 40 years ago had become so conventional that even its most fearsome opponents couldn't speak against it.

And yet there had always been a headiness to the movement that ran far ahead of its concrete achievements. Its first leaders were black ministers steeped in a social gospel, inspired by Mohandas Gandhi, people who spoke of the "beloved community" of mutual respect they were trying to create. King put the kernel of it all most memorably in his "I have a dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, speaking like the preacher he was, with hundreds of thousands of black and white Americans standing together in front of him on the Washington, D.C. parkland. He blurred the line between politics and religious revival in a way it has often been blurred since New England ministers spoke of building a society that was a "city on a hill." There were hundreds of speeches like that in the King years, and millions of Americans who developed a taste for them.

On April 3, 1968, in the midst of a bitter

**King's audience had roared with spiritual fervour
"has allowed me to go up to the mountain
And I've seen the Promised**

AFTER

ERA IN RETROSPECT

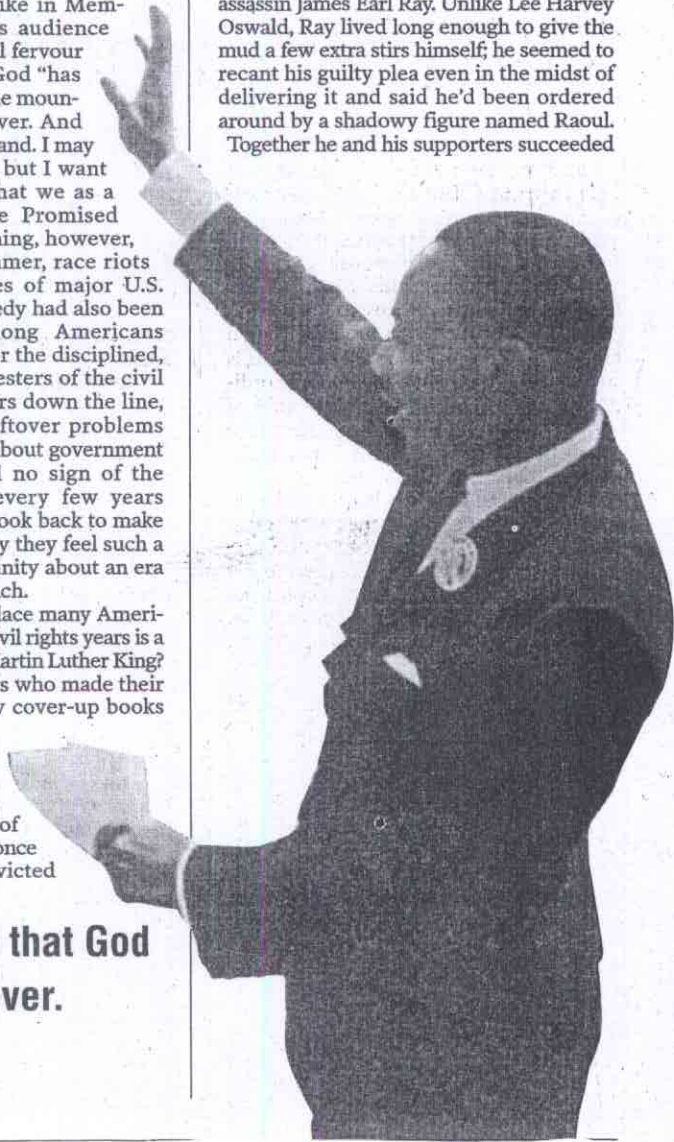
ARTHUR CHARITY

sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee, King's audience had roared with spiritual fervour when he shouted that God "has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land." By the next evening, however, King was dead; by summer, race riots were burning the cores of major U.S. cities, and Robert Kennedy had also been assassinated; before long Americans would grow nostalgic for the disciplined, clean-cut peaceful protesters of the civil rights years. Thirty years down the line, mired in intractable leftover problems and tedious arguments about government and race, there is still no sign of the Promised Land, and every few years Americans collectively look back to make sense of it all, asking why they feel such a sense of missed opportunity about an era in which they won so much.

Revealingly, the first place many Americans turn to explain the civil rights years is a conspiracy: Who killed Martin Luther King? Some of the same writers who made their reputations on Kennedy cover-up books have weighed in on the King assassination too, as have a handful of the many, many investigators, lawyers and producers of TV documentaries who once worked for or with convicted

assassin James Earl Ray. Unlike Lee Harvey Oswald, Ray lived long enough to give the mud a few extra stirs himself; he seemed to recant his guilty plea even in the midst of delivering it and said he'd been ordered around by a shadowy figure named Raoul. Together he and his supporters succeeded

when he shouted that God
... And I've looked over.
Land ... "



in creating "some reasonable doubt," to the point where even the King family demanded that Ray get a trial just to clear the air. When he died this spring at age 70, you could almost hear the whoosh of truth's door shutting behind him.

It's hard to believe there's anything you could want to know about James Earl Ray that you won't find in Gerald Posner's *Killing the Dream*. With the same wearying exactitude he brought to the John Kennedy assassination in *Case Closed*, he not only sketches but goes on to cross-hatch, shade, colour, double-coat and underscore a picture of Ray as a bone-deep petty criminal and liar, a racist by temperament if not by sense of mission, who believed in little besides himself, would try anything if it promised a profit, would manipulate anyone who might be of use to him, and who did little in the King assassination that he hadn't done before in connection with one or another of his earlier crimes. Posner is a stunning investigative journalist and his picture rings true on a level that conspiracy theories rarely do. He concludes that Ray probably heard about a bounty on King's head while in prison and killed him in order to collect it. By the end you'll tend to agree with him, but you'll also be thankful that you don't have to read one niggling iota more about the life of James Earl Ray.

And where in the end does it actually get us? While the conspiracy writers and their critics square off over Ray's guilt, they all concede that, by 1968, the death threats against King were pouring in from everywhere. At least one wealthy segregationist, John Sutherland of Missouri, was spreading the word that he'd pay \$50,000 to anyone who'd pull the trigger. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover nursed such an irrational hatred of the civil rights movement that he hesitated only momentarily before tapping phone lines or co-operating with segregationist police in order to discredit King.

Out among the public, meanwhile, the coalition that had won the great civil rights victories was crumbling. As protest spread north and moved free of the church, fewer and fewer black leaders showed much interest in Gandhi, the practice of nonviolence or loving their oppressors; on the flip side, white Americans who had supported King on civil rights were nonplussed by his opposition to the Vietnam War (though they would learn, later on). Protest march-

es turned to riots, press conferences to damage control. Not long before his death, King said despairingly to his friend Ralph Abernathy, "Maybe we just have to admit that the day of violence is here, and maybe we have to just give up and let violence take its course." What could knowing the "real" identity of King's assassin add to this picture of an age going sour?

This is the blunter truth about the civil rights years that National Book Award-winner Charles Johnson lays out in *Dreamer*, a sincere and frequently moving meditation on human failings rather clumsily disguised as a novel. The harried, tired Martin Luther King whom Johnson places on the periphery of his story is less a dreamer than a brooder who, despite years of experience, is still trying to figure out how to force ordinary people to confront the ugly truths of their society without pushing them into hating one another — the essential technique of Gandhian "nonviolence."

In Birmingham in 1963, when the police responded to peaceful marches with water cannon and attack dogs, it had worked perfectly: The ugliness had shocked both black and white Americans into taking constructive action. In Chicago three years later, however — where Johnson picks up the sto-

ry — the marchers have lost their patience, the issues their simplicity, and the police their naivety about how to act in front of network news cameras. Everyone behaves rottenly, and justifies their rottenness in terms of the rottenness they're responding to. That this happened is neither a surprise nor one of those peculiarly American diseases: Getting people to look injustice in the face and then love their enemies is simply a difficult trick; if anything, it stirs up more passions than it can channel. So, in Johnson's book, when one of the supporting characters asks who killed Martin Luther King, the narrator says, "We all did."

Taylor Branch, (*Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965*), and David Halberstam (*The Children*), seem more curious about the success of those first 11 years of protest than about the aftermath. They accept, gracefully and sadly, that ingrained habits like violence, self-interest and complacency brought the whole show down; what they want to know is what was the active ingredient that kept it going for so long — long enough for improbably weak stuff like sit-ins, Freedom Rides and street marches to bring a seemingly impregnable white southern order down. For Halberstam, who thinks and writes in the breezy way of a Hollywood screenwriter given somewhat too large a budget, the answer is



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ralph Abernathy, left, and Martin Luther King, Jr., lead a protest march through Birmingham, Alabama, in April 1963.

simple: It was the power of disciplined idealism.

The Children traces the lives of half a dozen black men and women drawn as college students into the orbit of Rev. Jim Lawson of Nashville, a disciple of King and Gandhi whose workshops in nonviolence were preparing volunteers for the lunch-counter sit-ins of 1960. Lawson trained his people simply to do what they felt they had a right to do — sit down to lunch at a downtown department store, use a white restroom without argument or anger; to respond with kindness when

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they were treated roughly; to challenge, but never to hate. They would force people to look at themselves, in the Gandhian fashion! He told them that even a few people acting this way could force a compla-

cent multitude into action.

Lawson lived his method like a natural, encouraging people to do what he did, not just what he said. During one of the early Nashville protests, a white motorcycle tough spat on him and then waited for an angry response. To his disappointment Lawson calmly asked the man to give him a handkerchief; the startled biker did. Then for several minutes the minister struck up a genial back-and-forth conversation with the hoodlum about motorcycles. By the time Lawson left (waving goodbye), the biker, who had intended to humiliate him, didn't know how to respond, whether as friend or bully. It was, as Halberstam says, "a marvelous example of Christian love."

Most of the Nashville students (future Congressman John Lewis among them) had never intended to become activists, but as they saw and participated in events like this, gradually an awareness crept up on them that their medical classes and fraternity parties felt hollow compared to the time they spent trying to remake their segregated communities. Working with Jim Lawson, they felt the irresistible pull of

conscience and the chance to act upon it.

The facts are right and the story compelling, but the focus is deceiving. Just as conspiracy writers try to pass off a villain theory of history, docudramatists like Halberstam give us a hero theory. But Lawson, Lewis, King and dozens of others like them were floating on top of a whirlwind, and the success of the civil rights era really came in the often compromised, naive, halting actions of the hundreds and thousands of people beneath them — the same people who "killed the dream" in the end.

In *Pillar of Fire*, the second in a biblically

titled trilogy of histories of the King years, Taylor Branch looks at this cast of thousands from a respectful and sometimes darkly comedic distance: at President John Kennedy, who's afraid to meet privately with King because he's "so hot these days it's like having (Karl) Marx coming to the White House"; at the FBI's wiretappers, who come to respect King's vision and charm as they listen for evidence of adultery through his motel-room walls. Integrity and moral idealism float in and out of these people, struggling for the controls with dozens of less-admirable motives. That the Voting Rights Act of 1965 came out of this stew is a tribute to what a touch of conscience in the many can accomplish, rather than a full dose of it in the few.

Forty years ago King and leaders like him gave the public the nudge it needed to act on conscience and empathy, using the peculiarly American language that throws together terms like "congressional bill" and "promised land" in the same sentence; men and women great and small responded in their limited way; and through this democratic mess the great creaking engine of social change leaped forward. When the fall came, it came because Governor George Wallace of Alabama and Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago and Movement leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X

nudged us to act on self-interest and resentment, and, in their limited way, people responded. This is human nature, plain and simple, neither exalted nor debased, with a trace of both apes and angels about it.

If you want to draw a lesson from the civil rights era to carry forward to the millennium, you could do worse than remind yourself that the best and the worst in our character is always, like the apple on the tree of knowledge, just within our reach. *

Arthur Charity is a writer living in Oakland, California.



Martin Luther King, Jr., reaches out to the masses in Baltimore, Maryland, Oct. 31, 1964 on the cover of Pillar of Fire.

LEONARD FREEDMAN/AGF PHOTO