## Dr. King, One Year After

# "HE LIVES, MAN!"

**He does live, not only in the hearts of friends but in a legion of men... tougher now, still committed**

"IF DR. KING HAD LIVED, there would never have been a Poor People's Campaign." The Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, told me that late one afternoon several weeks ago, as we strolled down Hunter Street in Atlanta, a few blocks away from his church.

Contrary to what many want to believe, Martin Luther King's faith in the power of nonviolence was not ironclad. National apathy over the plight of garbage workers in Memphis and censure from friends and foes had drained nearly all of what some felt was his vast, bottomless store of faith that nonviolence would one day overcome. Abernathy's words hit me with the impact of a fist in the face. For even among those who had scoffed loudest at Dr. King's optimism there was a deep need to believe that he, at least, would never have given up hope. There was security in thinking he would not.

"I never told anybody that," Abernathy said, as we passed the all-black corner pool hall where "regulars" waved hello. Abernathy would not elaborate beyond that admission, but his words were already beginning to jar loose disjointed recollections of conversations I had with the SCLC leaders during those hectic weeks last April when reporters rummaged through the avalanche of daily events in Resurrection City, trying to find a coherent story about what was really going on there.

Now, I can fit pieces together for a new, changed picture of Dr. King and the puzzling coterie of lieutenants he overshadowed, at least in public—partly because of his overwhelming presence and partly because he gave the press a peg on which to hang what was, unfortunately, only a piece of a larger story.

"Dr. King's faith was draining because even people inside the organization were running around the country spouting talk about violence," recalls the Rev. Andrew Young, SCLC's cool executive vice president. "Some cost us money for jail bonds. More damaging to Dr. King was the flak we were getting from friends. They kept telling him he was failing. Dr. King was in good shape physically, but he needed rest. He was spiritually exhausted, and he took personal criticism very seriously."

Chauncey Eskridge, a Chicago attorney and SCLC board member, remembers the critical weeks in Memphis after the garbage men persuaded the reluctant leader to come there and help them fight for higher wages. "It was disgusting," says Eskridge, "to see how apathetic the nation was over the plight of those men." The dispute between spokesmen for the sanitation workers and Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb flared into the open on February 12, when the men announced they would strike over the city's refusal to grant them a 33 percent pay raise. Laborers had been getting a rock-bottom $1.60 an hour. They demanded $2.35. Throughout February, the fight dragged on, and the city tensed. Both NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins and civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin flew to Memphis to help rally community support for striking workers. The black community coalesced. So did white opposition. On March 28, Dr. King led the ill-fated march. On that day, what began as a nonviolent demonstration ended in blood. A black youth was killed; 60 people were injured.

"That was the last straw," says Eskridge, who had joined King in Memphis. "He couldn't sleep. He agonized over the march as though he had committed the violence with his own hands."

At a news conference held the next day, Dr. King showed he was disturbed over the demonstration. "If I had known there was a possibility of violence yesterday, I would not have had that particular march," he told reporters, and went on to say: "Riots are here. Riots are part of the ugly atmosphere of our society. I cannot guarantee that riots will not take place this summer. I can only guarantee that our demonstrations will not be violent."

At a staff meeting with subordinates at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, Dr. King was deeply despondent, fed up with Memphis and fed up with his critics. "He felt we might do well to withdraw from the movement and let militants take over," Andy Young recalls. Dr. King was still convinced nonviolent strategies provided the only real solution for liberating American blacks, but he believed that too many people felt otherwise. Andy remembers that Dr. King said he might withdraw for a time and then return with more people—black and white—more deeply committed to nonviolence.

Dr. King had already had job offers from representatives of New York's Union Theological Seminary and the Riverside Church, both of which wanted him. He had turned them down. Would he have reconsidered now? Probably not, says Young. "But if he had agreed to postpone the Poor People's Campaign for a rest, I would have been in favor of it."

With the gnawing fear of approaching summer violence, Dr. King pursued the idea of trying to channel black frustration into nonviolent action, with the focus drawn on Washington. "President Johnson was boasting about the 1965 Voting Rights Act," says Young, "even though the Justice Department never sent even 100 voting examiners to the 900 Southern counties where complaints of civil rights violations had been filed. There were flagrant violations then. There are today. The anti-poverty program was under attack, and the Government was freezing welfare rolls. We were trying to hold ground we had won. We weren't trying to win new victories." Most people

BY GEORGE GOODMAN LOOK ASSISTANT EDITOR

continued

## "...if you think you've seen the last of Martin

read the bulky SCLC petitions as a drastic demand on the Federal Government.

In January, Dr. King convened a group of New York City liberal intellectuals he called his braintrust to plot strategy. At their meetings, lengthy arguments developed on the pros and cons of staging the campaign. Michael Harrington, who moved two administrations to face the reality of poverty in America, remembers those sessions: "Dr. King was torn and unsure between the pressure of militants and the counsel of experienced advisers. I made the point, and Bayard Rustin made the point, that the current Congress was a miserable one. We felt that another demonstration would make a strong moral point, but we were afraid it wouldn't register as a victory in the public eye. We felt Dr. King needed a victory that would increase his public prestige." So, until the end in Memphis, Dr. King was forced to wrestle over the campaign plan. Up until the time he told Reverend Abernathy his final decision against going ahead, probably no one else, except for his wife Coretta, knew he had decided not to lead the poor to Washington.

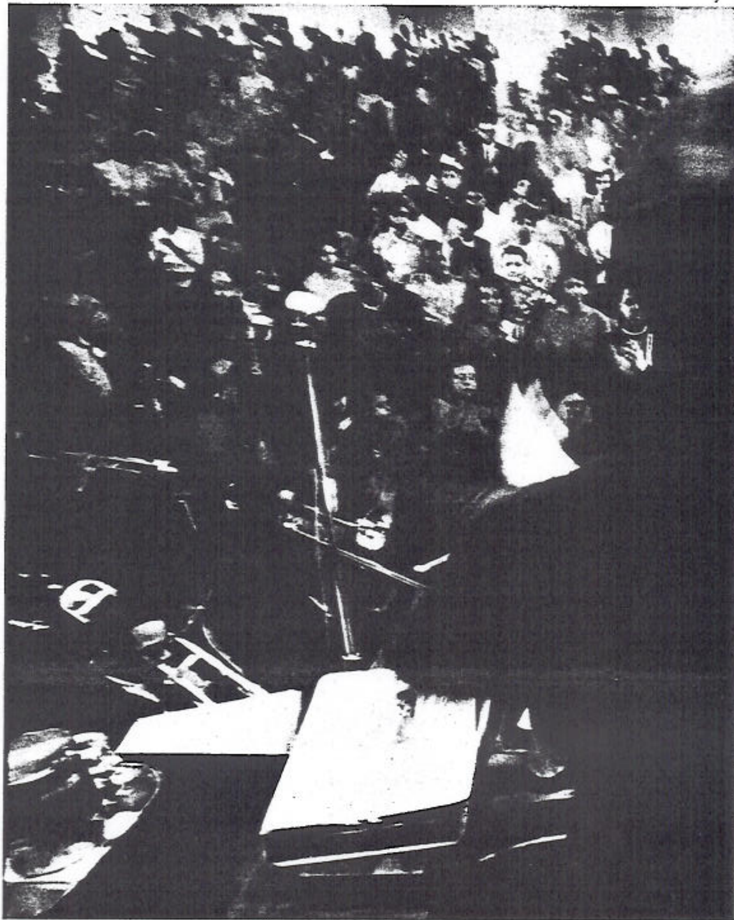
"Just thinking about that day gets me right now, Doctor." The Rev. Jesse Jackson, 27, gracefully catapults his strapping, six-foot, two-inch frame from out of the chair in the oversized living room of his South Side Chicago apartment. He walks past a colossal photograph of Dr. King and stops at the window, where he gazes out at nothing in particular. His eyes moisten, and he turns to pace back and forth across the floor, hands in his pockets, speaking in the word-chopping drawl and twang of his native Greenville, S.C. Picked by Dr. King to develop and oversee a multimillion-dollar umbrellaful of black-run economic projects, called Operation Breadbasket, Jesse Jackson is a preacher.

"People ask what good did he do? Nobody but fools can ask that question. There wasn't anybody hardly doing anything before Dr. King came on the scene. Today, black militants run up and down shoutin', 'Liberation by any means.' Well, Doctor, I can remember just ten years ago, those same militant cats didn't get thirsty in a lot of places downtown. They didn't get hungry, and they didn't even have to go to the bathroom. Not downtown in a lot of cities.

"Now, they walk around talkin' bad. Where were those cats when Rosa Parks decided to ride in the front of the bus in Montgomery in 1955? Doc, their *minds* were in the back of the bus then, and Dr. King was workin' on the case."

Jesse's oratory picks up. His argot is the measured rhythm of a Baptist. It's the style of preaching that draws Chicago blacks, in thousands, along with whites—among them several Ph.D.'s—to work for Breadbasket. "I talk to these militant cats," says Jackson, "and in many ways, I'm with them. Particularly when they talk about the black-pride thing. But did you know it was Dr. King who coined the phrase 'Black is beautiful'? Dr. King was talkin' about more than social integration. He was talkin' about liberation, but not by *any* means. Blacks are in the minority in this country, and I'm not goin' out to send black women and children into the streets to get executed by racists with guns. That's where I leave off with a lot of so-called militants. And there are a lot of cats *talkin'* about violence who don't want it for themselves. I tell white businessmen I won't burn your store down, but I'll put rust on your cash register and cobwebs on your books. And, Doctor, I can do it too. People forget about 381 days of boycott in Montgomery. They forget about the dogs in Birmingham. They forget Dr. King had his house bombed and was harassed by police—even stabbed. Did that take courage? Did he risk all of that to make people love him? He was workin' for black economic integration in America, Doctor. He was workin' for black peoples' freedom." The sermon is concluded.

Jesse Jackson pauses and talks softly now: "I think about what Dr. King did for me, for you and for all us black folks, and I think about that evening when I stood under the balcony at the Lorraine. I still can't deal with it. I can't listen to recordings of his speeches. I can't stand the fact that he's not with us. But if you think you've seen the last of Martin Luther King, then Doctor, take another think." To those who say Dr. King's movement was crunched under the political weight of Mayor Daley, Jackson's words have a special relevance.



*On a sub-zero Chicago Saturday, at 9 a.m., 3,000 turn out to hear Jesse Jackson (top) preach the gospel of Dr. King. The sermon: Economic integration of black America in the mainstream cash box. Above: Bevel, Abernathy and Jackson at Washington in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. Andy Young and Hosea Williams (not shown) complete SCLC's first-string leadership.*

It is now one year after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King. The Poor People's Campaign, whether it was a total failure or a qualified success, has sent the organization's standing plunging to a new, all-time low. There is today no single figure with the power to raise it. The Rev. James Bevel, the brilliant strategist-philosopher whose complicated tactics often elude newsmen, has announced a preposterous scheme to defend James Earl Ray, accused assassin of Dr. King. Ralph Abernathy gave Bevel his support and, almost immediately after, withdrew it. Taking the contradiction one step further, he then publicly censured his lieutenant. Stories of the conflict that appeared in the press further confused matters. And, as a result, relations between the two men were strained.

Jesse Jackson remained closemouthed when

asked about SCLC leadership, but the embarrassing question was raised again. Reaching for the reins of power is a notion he will not admit he ever entertains. Defensively, he brushes such queries aside—too defensively. But privately, internally, he agonizes over a dilemma. Those who are close to him and those who are not can see the day coming when he will no longer be able to sidestep the issue. He will have to take the mantle of SCLC leadership because, they feel, it will be thrust upon him. And though he may shun it or, finally, share it, he will, no doubt, shoulder it. For inside the organization, there is no man better equipped to match wits and the argument of ultra-militant blacks in the cities, today's flashpoints of black-white confrontation. Jesse Jackson has the size and the brains and the power of a workable program to marshal human force behind him.

Few people understood the conflict between Bevel and Abernathy. Even fewer understood the lofty moral logic of Bevel's proposal. The issues were aired in Atlanta late last February, at a closed staff meeting during which SCLC leaders mapped strategy for the spring and summer. Members of the working press were barred, although LOOK photographer John Shearer and I were allowed to attend.

James Bevel won the hearts if not the minds of the SCLC leaders when he explained the details of his proposal and his moral reasoning. "We should not let this country give us a poor, defenseless goat in sacrifice for the body of our lamb," he said. "I don't believe Ray was capable of killing Dr. King, but whether he did or not really doesn't matter now," Bevel said. "Ray's execution would not take us one step further in recognizing Dr. King's dream. It would furnish our enemies with a scapegoat. They could wash their hands of guilt. A more fitting memorial to Dr. King would be to send Ralph and Mrs. King around the world asking heads of governments to cut back on spending for military armaments."

When someone said the delegation would run the risk of being ignored, Bevel discounted his arguments: "The important thing is that we would be making our position clear. We would be putting the phonies on the spot—all the people who run around talking about peace without contributing anything to it. We would be making a living memorial to Dr. King, a more important one than the stone statues these sick people erect to glorify death."

Bevel's proposals didn't end there. He suggested enlisting white student radicals, black students' organizations and anti-war groups in massive nonviolent demonstrations, with the Philadelphia public school system as the target. "The point would be to show how black youngsters suffer inferior education and to protest the creation of sick human beings this nation turns out of its schools to keep wars going around the world. We would demand that black children learn their history. We should demand that all children learn the philosophies of nonviolence, through school curriculum." More importantly, Bevel argued, "We've got to stop people from running around saying Dr. King is dead. The phonies have my children believing it. He lives, man! We've got to flush out all the lying people hiding behind the coattails of James Earl Ray—all the people who stood in the path of Dr. King."

Two SCLC attorneys argued against the Bevel proposals—not on moral grounds, but on the basis of practicality. And because, as one staffer said, "There are too many Negroes in this country who want blood too." Ralph Abernathy did not object to the proposals as presented in Atlanta. In principle, he never had. Reportedly, he rebuked Bevel in response to a plea from Dr. King's father, who, allegedly, was upset at hearing the plan. Like most people, he could not accept the moral reasoning Bevel used. Abernathy censured Bevel because the anguished father of an old friend had asked him to. SCLC staff members, including Bevel, respected Abernathy's action when it was explained to them.

Admittedly, Abernathy revealed a lack of concern for his own public relations and SCLC's, but he also demonstrated a depth of integrity that most people in public life simply do not have.

"That's why you'd never get me to say one word against him," says Jesse Jackson. "Whether white folks or reporters like it or not, Ralph is our leader, and all of us are behind him."

The meetings ended, and Bevel departed for private talks with African delegates to the United Nations. Jackson returned to Chicago to lay the groundwork for a Black Easter project, involving selective boycotts. Andy Young, who is publicity shy, although he's now the organization's official number-two man, went back behind the scenes, performing what a board member says is a thankless job: "picking up pieces." Burly, volatile, hoarse-voiced Hosea Williams, whose name is legendary in the Deep South, headed home to lead various political campaigns. A score of lesser SCLC leaders scattered across the nation. They planned to meet again.

"It would never have happened that way in the days of Dr. King," says a longtime friend of both "Ralph and Martin." "He could always bring the staff together behind an issue." But Andy Young counters with a negative: "That's not really true. It looked that way on the outside. Things were never settled with us. They never will be because we are, essentially, a bunch of Baptist preachers, and we don't make decisions that way. The organization worked together like a basketball team, and Ralph and Martin were like captains. There were always furious arguments among the staff members. When there was trouble between two or three people, Dr. King could call them aside, privately, and settle troubles. That was another aspect of the problem his death left us. Each one of these guys is terribly egocentric. All of them are used to working with each other, sharing authority as equals. They don't like to follow directions from anybody—still, they did follow the directions of Dr. King. It looked like he called shots. But you can be sure the nation hasn't seen the last of us. We are tougher and more deeply committed to his philosophies than we were when Dr. King was here to lead us. Now, we are in a slump like the one after the 1961 Albany, Ga., campaign. Then, they said Dr. King was finished too. But after that came Birmingham. We are getting ready to work, and the nation better get ready for us. America still has to deal with Martin Luther King, Jr."

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