

**THE KING GOD DIDN'T SAVE:
Reflections on the Life and Death
of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

by John A. Williams

Coward-McCann, 221 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Emile Capouya

■ This summary political biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., is fragmentary, poorly organized, and often self-contradictory. Nevertheless, as far as the essential questions are concerned, it seems to me to be most intelligent.

The central point in any useful study of King has to be the significance of the nonviolent methods of political agitation that he espoused. No one in his right mind doubts the necessity for social change in the United States. The problem is how to accomplish that change with the least damage to all of us. King thought it could be brought about by moral suasion.

In my opinion, he was right—within limits that proved fatal to his design but need not have done so. John A. Williams, a novelist, journalist, and participant in the civil rights movement, is particularly keen in describing the limits. Firstly, King's natural style was to conduct a dramatic one-man show, and the show at any given place was likely to collapse when he left the

scene, as he was often moved to do for reasons of varying urgency. Secondly, his strategy of conciliation tended to shade into compromise, what is called in political jargon "making deals." (The Washington March of August 1963 was the high-tide mark and the beginning of the ebb for the integration movement. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" address. He might better have presented a list of political resolutions. Presumably, the Kennedy administration had given him assurances in exchange for his discussing aspirations rather than programs. Any other explanation would be a libel on King's talents as a leader; this one proposes that he made the natural mistake of compromising with the government when he need not have done so.)

In itself, the policy of conciliation was absolutely correct, and the language of brotherhood perfectly appropriate—they always are. Men being men, what other strategy, what other language, would one propose? But there is a world of difference between King's basic position—Christian meekness combined with Christian fortitude—and his temporizing with men of power, his acclaiming small concessions as if they represented great victories.

And, lastly, the problem of racial justice was complicated, in ways that King chose mostly to ignore, by the

problem of racial economics. The "disadvantages" of the disadvantaged, whether material or psychological, are ultimately assessable in terms of money—in this case, less money for blacks, more for whites. Now, when confronted with the power of money, moral suasion is not necessarily powerless itself, but the persuaders have to remember that they are in fact struggling against money, and not against metaphysical evil. An attempt at exorcism is out of place. Money coerces those who possess it as well as those who have none. It forces the powerful to act in ways that are consistent with getting, keeping, expanding their control over money. In other words, while King was fighting for dignity and freedom, his opponents could concede only such shares of those good things as cost next to no money, or whose cost could conveniently be shifted to the blacks themselves.

Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King began to understand the nature of his opponents. He attacked the war in Vietnam, the great Asian rathole down which the working people of America have been induced to pour their earnings, and he organized a so-called Poor People's March. It was time for him to be killed, Mr. Williams suggests. And, as we know, there is a special providence, alluded to in Mr. Williams's title, that takes care of these matters when the time comes.

The author of this book more or less formally contests the efficacy of non-violence as a weapon of political and social struggle, and in doing so he expresses the frustration and disillusionment of many of the black citizens of the United States. His reasons are the supposedly innate racism of the whites, which will not yield to anything short of violence, and the received notion that genuine social change cannot be accomplished without force because the masters will always defend their privileges with the armed power of the state. There is much to be said on both heads. Here I would suggest only that racism, too, is to a great extent a question of economics in our society; it is the expression of certain relations of power, and with us power is in the last analysis economic power—black millionaires suffer less from the effects of racism than black laborers. Also, in a modern state power is so organized that it can resist armed insurrection more easily than it can the mass demonstration backed by boycott and general strike. That was the lesson of Paris in May of 1968.

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H. Martin

"No matter what ecological data we feed in, the print-out always reads: 'It's too late to save me, just save yourself.'"