

INTRODUCTION

I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman.

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (1958)

During the days after Montgomery police arrested Rosa Parks for refusing to give her bus seat to a white man, Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as the acknowledged leader of a major mass protest. King's formative experiences had prepared him well for this unexpected calling, but his abilities would be tested repeatedly as he offered guidance to a movement he had not initiated and could not control. Although the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery was not the first collective protest against the southern Jim Crow system, it attained unique historical significance by demonstrating that an African-American community could remain united and resolute in its determination to overcome segregation. The Montgomery struggle marked the beginning of a new era in African-American history; it also enabled King to begin a new phase of his ministry.

When Parks's solitary protest occurred on 1 December 1955, King was a twenty-six-year-old minister, serving in only his second year as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Nevertheless, he already embodied an African-American social-gospel tradition to which his father and maternal grandfather had contributed. King's prophetic vision, politically engaged preaching, and expansive pastoral leadership derived from his experiences at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where admiration for his father's "noble example" had moved him to "serve humanity" as a minister himself. Martin Luther King, Sr.'s, decades of successful church management served as a model for the younger King as he asserted control over the Dexter congregation. His first annual report had insisted that the pastor's "authority is not merely humanly conferred, but divinely sanctioned." King reminded church members that this implied an "unconditional willingness of the people to accept the pastor's leadership. This means that leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but it invariably descends from the pulpit to the pew."

Even as he advocated pastoral authority, however, King was also aware that effective leadership required enthusiastic lay participation. He urged members of the congregation to participate in various church committees in order to "assume an equal responsibility" for implementing his plans. Among King's first

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actions after ascending to Dexter's pulpit was to establish a Social and Political Action Committee that would remind the congregation of the need to "unite with" the NAACP and the "necessity of being registered voters."¹ By the time of Parks's arrest, King had confidently set forth ambitious expectations for the congregation: "Let each of us go out at this moment with grim and bold determination to extend the horizons of Dexter to new boundaries, and lift the spire of her influence to new heights, so that we will be able to inject new spiritual blood into the veins of this community."²

King could not have anticipated the unprecedented unity and militancy of Montgomery's black residents as they protested Parks's arrest; nevertheless, he brought singular assets to his new role as a movement leader. During the boycott he received support and advice from an extensive network of relatives, family friends, former classmates, and fellow ministers. Although the extant correspondence from this period understates the significance in King's life of those close to him—Coretta Scott King and Ralph David Abernathy, for example—the letters he wrote and received illuminate the extent to which King relied on established relationships. In addition, even as he acquired a more sophisticated understanding of Gandhian principles, King's public statements continued to reiterate the Christian and democratic values he had affirmed in high school oratory, academic writings, and earlier sermons. He drew upon African-American preaching traditions, transforming familiar Christian principles into rationales for collective protest against injustice. The contemporaneous documents relating to King's involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott reveal the evolution of his religious leadership in the context of a sustained protest movement. These primary sources reveal history as it unfolded, correcting and supplementing the numerous memoirs and recorded recollections of participants and the published accounts of biographers and historians.³

Before he learned of Parks's arrest, King had already established connections with Montgomery's network of civil rights activists. Earlier in the year he had

1. Quotations from King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," 22 November 1950, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1: *Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 363; King, "Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954–1955," 5 September 1954, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 2: *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 287, 290.

2. King, "Annual Report, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," 31 October 1955, in *Papers* 2:580.

3. Memoirs of participants include: King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969); Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987). Among the secondary accounts of the bus boycott movement, the following recent studies have been the most useful in the preparation of this volume: Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). Also of value are the primary and secondary sources assembled in David J. Garrow, ed., *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955–1956* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1989).

given a well-received talk to the Montgomery branch of the NAACP. That talk impressed former branch president E. D. Nixon, the most active and outspoken of Montgomery black progressives, who in the late 1930s founded the Montgomery division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and then promoted voting rights as head of the Montgomery chapter of the Alabama Progressive Democratic Association. King's talk led to an invitation—signed by Parks in her role as branch secretary—to join the executive committee of the local NAACP.⁴ King also became involved in the interracial Alabama Council on Human Relations, where he interacted with the few white liberals in the state willing to oppose segregation's worst excesses.⁵ Clifford Durr, for example, provided legal advice as well as friendly encouragement to Montgomery's progressive black leadership. His wife, Virginia Foster Durr, had arranged for her friend Parks to attend a school desegregation workshop in August 1955 at interracial Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, an experience that helped inspire her subsequent challenge to Montgomery's bus segregation.⁶

The morning after Nixon, with the Durrs' assistance, gained Parks's release from jail and secured her approval to use her arrest as a test case to challenge bus seating policies, he called King and other black leaders to inform them of the effort, already under way, to boycott Montgomery's buses. By this time Jo Ann Robinson, a leader of Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC) and of Dexter's Social and Political Action Committee, had already drafted, mimeographed, and begun circulating thousands of leaflets urging a one-day bus boycott.⁷ With the WPC actively mobilizing support for a boycott, Nixon, King, and Ralph Abernathy, pastor of Montgomery's First Baptist Church and a close friend of King's since his arrival in the city, invited black leaders to discuss the situation at a Friday evening meeting in Dexter's basement.

Although King hosted the initial planning meeting, the several dozen ministers and community leaders who gathered at Dexter did not see him as the obvious choice to direct the boycott effort. King recalled that Nixon would have presided at the Friday evening meeting if he had not had to leave town because of his work as a Pullman porter. In Nixon's absence, Rev. L. Roy Bennett, president of

4. Parks to King, 26 August 1955, in *Papers* 2:572.

5. Introduction to *Papers* 2:34.

6. See Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, ed. Hollinger F. Barnard (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 279.

7. See Robinson, Leaflet, "Another Negro Woman Has Been Arrested," 2 December 1955. (For the complete citation, including archival location, of this and other primary documents, see the Calendar of Documents. King and Abernathy's revision of her leaflet is published on p. 67 in this volume.) After herself being ordered to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Robinson had taken over leadership of the WPC in 1950, replacing Mary Fair Burks, the chair of Alabama State's English department, who had founded the political activist group in 1949. During the two years before Rosa Parks's arrest, Robinson, along with other black leaders, had contacted white officials on several occasions to convey complaints about bus company practices. During the spring of 1954 she informed Mayor W. A. Gayle that a protest boycott of buses was being considered (see Robinson to Gayle, 21 May 1954). The WPC again briefly considered calling for a boycott after the arrest on 2 March 1955 of high school student Claudette Colvin for refusing to relinquish her seat to a white person. See Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

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African Americans in Montgomery gave overwhelming support to the one-day boycott on Monday morning, 5 December. Montgomery City Lines manager J. H. Bagley estimated that 90 percent of the city's blacks refused to ride the buses, and King later recalled seeing "no more than eight Negro passengers" on the morning buses and insisted that black support for the protest "reached almost 100 percent." Despite inflammatory statements by Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers about "Negro 'goon squads,'" the first day of the boycott was peaceful, with only one arrest.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Judge John B. Scott convicted Rosa Parks of violating a state law requiring segregation on city buses and fined her ten dollars plus four dollars in court costs. Parks's lawyer, Fred D. Gray, announced that he would appeal the verdict to the Circuit Court of Montgomery.

That afternoon, eighteen black leaders met to plan the evening's mass meeting; to further their effort they decided to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a name suggested by Abernathy.¹¹ After approving an agenda for the later meeting, they unanimously elected King to head the new group. Although King did not seek the position, his selection reflected the reputation he had swiftly built as a congenial and articulate civil rights proponent. The motion to elect King came from Rufus Lewis, a businessman, Dexter stalwart, and voter registration activist, who served as president of the Montgomery Citizens Steering Committee. The minutes of the meeting give little sense of the discussions, but the later recollections of participants offered a variety of reasons for King's selection, with several participants, including Lewis, Nixon, and Abernathy, taking credit for pushing King forward as the best candidate to head the MIA.¹² King recalled that events "happened so quickly that I did not even have

8. A. W. Wilson, interview by Donald T. Ferron, 27 January 1956.

9. Joe Azbell, "Negro Groups Ready Boycott of City Lines," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 December 1955.

10. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 54; Joe Azbell, "Extra Police Set for Patrol Work in Trolley Boycott," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 5 December 1955.

11. Abernathy, interview by Donald T. Ferron, 3 February 1956.

12. See U. J. Fields, Minutes of Montgomery Improvement Association Founding Meeting, 5 December 1955, pp. 68–70 in this volume. At the meeting Nixon reportedly chastised the group for considering operating the new organization in secrecy: "Am I to tell our people that you are cowards?" he later remembered saying. King "raised his hand to signify that he was not. Before you know it, he was nominated, seconded and became president" (Nixon, 28 March 1956 speech, reported in *WRL News* 78 [May–June 1956]: 1). Abernathy recalled that he expected Lewis and Nixon to be nominated and was surprised when Lewis nominated King: "Opposed to Nixon, [Lewis] wasn't sure whether or not he himself had the votes, so he proposed a compromise candidate" (Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 148).

time to think it through”; he also suggested that he “would have declined the nomination” if he had considered its implications.¹³

That evening King delivered his first address as a protest leader to an audience of several thousand people that spilled out of Holt Street Baptist Church into the street. With only twenty minutes to prepare his remarks, he later recalled praying for divine guidance to resolve a “sobering dilemma”: “How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?”¹⁴ King’s dilemma reflected his characteristic desire to find a middle course between conflicting alternatives;¹⁵ though tactically restrained, his speech was nonetheless a stirring call to action. King depicted the bus boycott as resulting from an accumulation of racial injustices—the “many occasions” when African Americans were “intimidated and humiliated and . . . oppressed, because of the sheer fact that they were Negroes.”¹⁶

King referred only obliquely to prior indignities, but his audience was familiar with them. In particular, a protest had been considered the previous March in response to the arrest of a black teenager, Claudette Colvin, who had refused to give up her seat to a white passenger.¹⁷ Although the Colvin case did not prompt a legal challenge to segregation policies, the failure of the bus company and city officials to make even minor concessions had contributed to festering feelings of resentment among the black residents of Montgomery. As King saw matters, the buildup of such grievances had finally driven the black community to resist: “There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.” King concluded his speech with an admonition, drawing a phrase from his Dexter annual report, to transform resentment into resistance rooted in Christian principles:

As we stand and sit here this evening, and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with a grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together. We are going to work together. Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, “There lived a race

13. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 56.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

15. For example, while addressing the Birmingham NAACP branch earlier in 1955, King had rejected both extreme optimism and extreme pessimism, recommending instead a “realistic approach” that acknowledged that African Americans had “come a long long way but we have a long, long way to go” (quoted in “Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King,” 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330).

16. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, p. 72 in this volume. In certain instances King’s quotations from this recorded speech are somewhat different from the version found in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

17. The Colvin arrest led black leaders, including King, to meet with white officials of the city and the bus company, who rejected requests for even modest changes in seating policies. On 18 March 1955 Colvin was placed on probation after being convicted of violating the state segregation law and of assaulting a policeman who was removing her from the bus. The conviction was appealed to the circuit court, which on 6 May affirmed the assault conviction while dismissing the segregation code violation. Thus Colvin’s lawyers were unable to use her conviction as a test case to challenge the state segregation law.

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of people, a *black* people, 'fleecy locks and black complexion,' a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization."¹⁸

King's address responded to immediate events, but it also set forth the main themes of his subsequent public ministry: social-gospel Christianity and democratic idealism, combined with resolute advocacy of nonviolent protest. His interpretation of the Christian mission recalled his father's insistence that clergymen should become "part of every movement for the betterment of our people," as well as his own admonition to an NAACP audience in Birmingham that black Americans "must do more than pray and read the Bible" in order to secure civil rights.¹⁹ Now, speaking in a church to an audience that largely shared his religious reference points, King merged New Testament notions of transformative love with Old Testament prophetic imagery—"until justice runs down like water." While identifying nonviolent tactics with the teachings of Jesus, King also reminded his audience that "it is not enough for us to talk about love." He explained: "There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love." In order to achieve justice, King argued, black residents must be prepared to use not only "the tools of persuasion" but also those of "coercion."²⁰

In addition to identifying the boycott as an expression of Christian principles, King identified it with older American traditions of dissent and protest. Perhaps sensing that some members of his audience feared the consequences of opposing political authorities, King reminded them that "there is never a time in our American democracy that we must ever think we're wrong when we protest. We reserve that right." He cited the example of workers who saw themselves "trampled over by capitalistic power" and recognized that there "was nothing wrong with . . . getting together and organizing and protesting for [their] rights." Speaking during the Cold War era, when leftist dissent was generally suppressed, he justified his call for militancy by insisting that protest was consistent with American political traditions: "If we were dropped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime we couldn't do this," King explained. "But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right." The boycott, he argued, reflected the nation's fundamental ideals. "If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was

18. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, p. 74 in this volume.

19. King, Sr., Moderator's Annual Address, Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association, 17 October 1940 (quoted in *Papers* 1:34); King, quoted in "Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King," 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330.

20. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December, pp. 73–74 in this volume. King used similar language to describe both Reinhold Niebuhr's and Paul Tillich's conceptions of love and justice. King noted in his dissertation that, for Tillich, "justice is dependent on love. Justice," he continued, "is really an act of love protesting against that which violates love" (King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 15 April 1955, in *Papers* 2:442). See also King, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," 9 May 1952, in *Papers* 2:145.

merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie.”²¹

Inspired by King’s address, the several thousand residents attending the mass meeting voted unanimously to continue boycotting the city’s buses. During subsequent days and weeks, support for the bus boycott remained strong. Car owners volunteered to pick up riders, and black taxi drivers charged passengers the same ten-cent fare as Montgomery’s buses, rather than the required minimum charge of forty-five cents. On 8 December, King and other black leaders met with city and bus company officials and proposed that patrons be seated on a “first-come, first-served basis,” with black passengers seated from the rear and whites from the front. King also delivered two other conditions for ending the boycott: more courteous treatment of black passengers and the hiring of black drivers on “predominantly Negro” routes.²² The meeting, however, ended in an impasse. Although Montgomery’s municipal code required segregated seating while leaving implementation largely in the hands of bus drivers, local white leaders were unwilling to modify segregation practices.²³ Most believed that the boycott would be short-lived. “The Mayor’s attitude,” King wrote, “was made clear when he said, ‘Comes the first rainy day and the Negroes will be back on the busses.’”²⁴ Seeking ideas for extending the boycott, King contacted T. J. Jemison, who had organized an efficient car pool during a 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge. By 13 December Rufus Lewis, chairman of the MIA transportation committee, and R. J. Glasco, chairman of the financial committee, had coordinated drivers for forty-eight “dispatch” and forty-two “pick-up” stations.²⁵

Encouraged by the boycott’s effectiveness, King and other black leaders began to reconsider their goal: was better treatment for black bus riders sufficient, or might an end to bus segregation be called for? King’s personal opposition to segregation had been evident early in the year when he told the Birmingham NAACP branch that segregation was “wrong” and even constituted “a form of slavery.”²⁶ He later claimed that boycott participants knew from the start “that the ultimate solution was total integration,” but they were at first willing to accept “a temporary alleviation of the problem” while desegregation litigation pro-

21. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, pp. 73 in this volume.

22. The demands were also presented to officials at the bus company’s headquarters in Chicago (see King to the National City Lines, Inc., 8 December 1955, p. 81 in this volume). For King’s account of this meeting, see Interview by Ferron, 4 February 1956, p. 123 in this volume.

23. Chapter 6 of the 1952 edition of the code read: “Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and Negroes on his buses by requiring the employees in charge thereof to assign passenger seats on the vehicles under the charge in such a manner as to separate the white people from the Negroes.” The code allowed “Negro nurses having charge of white children [or a] sick or infirm person” to be seated with whites.

24. King, “Our Struggle,” April 1956, p. 240 in this volume.

25. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 75–77.

26. Quoted in “Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King,” 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330. During the boycott King was quoted by Tom Johnson, in “The Rev. King Is Boycott Boss,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 January 1956, as supporting “immediate integration,” although he later claimed that his statement referred to the policy of the NAACP (see Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 23 January 1956, p. 104 in this volume).

Introduction ceeded.²⁷ During the initial weeks of the protest, however, he and other MIA leaders continued to claim publicly that their goal was merely better treatment. A newspaper account during the first week of the boycott noted that King spoke “with no little authority” as he assured reporters that black residents were simply seeking fairness, not desegregation: “We don’t like the idea of Negroes having to stand where there are vacant seats. We are demanding justice on that point.”²⁸ After a committee appointed by Mayor Gayle failed to arrive at a settlement during December, and white leaders continued to insist that they could not compromise under existing law, the stances of the two sides stiffened. At a crowded public meeting in late January, the city commissioners revealed that they had joined the local Citizens Council, part of a southwide organization to defend segregation.

Recognizing that an acceptable compromise settlement was unlikely, King and other black leaders moved gradually toward a public acknowledgment that their goal was ending segregation, although, as late as 27 January, the MIA’s public stance was to seek only “a calm and fair consideration of the situation which has developed as a result of dissatisfaction over Bus policies.”²⁹ MIA leaders were forced to clarify their objectives after city commissioners tried to settle the dispute by arranging a meeting with three black ministers who did not represent the MIA. On Saturday evening, 21 January, King learned from reporter Carl Rowan that city officials had announced that they had secured an agreement to end the boycott in return for a promise to designate sections that black bus riders would not have to relinquish to white passengers. King and other MIA leaders quickly announced that reports of a settlement were erroneous and that the boycott would continue.³⁰

King later wrote that during this period white leaders spread false rumors about MIA leaders: “Negro workers were told by their white employers that their leaders were only concerned with making money out of the movement.” According to King, some older black ministers were encouraged by whites to believe that they, rather than their younger counterparts, should be leading the protests. “I almost broke down under the continual battering of this argument,” he recalled.³¹ At the 23 January meeting of the MIA executive board, King responded deftly to the efforts of the white establishment to undermine his leadership, denying allegations that he had personally profited from fund-raising activities on behalf of the MIA. He also strongly condemned ministers who were willing to arrange unauthorized compromises with white officials, though he recommended against retaliation. At the end of the meeting he reminded the board that he had been made president by a unanimous vote, which prompted

27. King, “The Montgomery Story,” 27 June 1956, p. 303 in this volume.

28. “Some Observations on the Boycott,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 December 1955.

29. See King et al. to the Citizens of Montgomery, 27 January 1956, p. 107 in this volume. See also King et al. to the Commissioners of the City of Montgomery, 9 January 1956, pp. 97–98 in this volume.

30. See MIA Press Release: The Bus Protest Is Still On, 22 January 1956, pp. 100–101 in this volume. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 124–126; and L. D. Reddick, “The Bus Boycott in Montgomery,” *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 1–11.

31. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 122–123.

that body's affirmation of confidence in their president. In addition, board members decided that only King could make statements to the press at his discretion; all other press releases would require approval of the MIA executive board.³²

Seeking to undermine the MIA's resolve, city officials embarked on a "get-tough" campaign. After the city commissioners disclosed their membership in the Citizens Council, police increased harassment of drivers in the MIA car pool, issuing tickets and making arrests for alleged traffic violations. On 26 January, King himself was stopped for speeding. Ordinarily such infractions warranted just a citation, but King was arrested. "As we drove off," he later wrote, "a feeling of panic began to come over me." Uncertain whether the officers were taking him to the city jail or to a waiting mob, he found himself "trembling within and without." To his relief, he was delivered to the jail, where he remained for a short while before being released to a crowd of well-wishers that had gathered outside. Returning home to friends and family, King regained his courage: "I knew that I did not stand alone." That night, responding to widespread concern about his arrest, the MIA held seven mass meetings.³³

Even before the city government had embarked on its official campaign of intimidation, King had received numerous threats against himself and his family over the telephone and by mail.³⁴ By mid-January, he found himself "faltering and growing in fear." After "a white friend" informed him of threats against his life, he announced at a mass meeting: "If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence." Late in the evening of 27 January, a day after his trip to the city jail, a particularly threatening call triggered a spiritual crisis. King recalled in *Stride Toward Freedom* that he sat alone in his kitchen, "ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward." He turned to God for support. "The people are looking to me for leadership," he recalled saying in the still room, "and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter." King wrote that his prayers were answered when he

experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Al-

32. See Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 23 January 1956, pp. 101–104 in this volume. In his memoir King recalled that he offered his resignation to the board, telling them that he did not "want to stand in the way of a solution to the problem which plagued our community, and that maybe a more mature person could bring about a speedier conclusion." He recalled that board members quickly urged him "to forget the idea of resignation," then gave him a unanimous vote of confidence (King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 123).

33. See Complaint, *City of Montgomery v. Martin L. King*, 26 January 1956, p. 106 in this volume; "Dr. M. L. King Jr. Arrested, Released on Speeding Charges," *Birmingham World*, 31 January 1956; and King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 128 and 130–131.

34. "Montgomery Negroes Still Refuse to Ride Busses; Leaders Receive Threats," *Birmingham World*, 17 January 1956; and Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, p. 120 in this volume. See also files of "hate" mail in MLKP-MBU.

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most at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.³⁵

Although King would depict this incident in his memoir as a crucial turning point in his spiritual life, he did not mention it publicly until a year later, when he confronted another wave of segregationist violence in Montgomery.³⁶

Increasingly aware of his own importance to the movement, King also appreciated its grass-roots character. One of many individuals responsible for sustaining the bus boycott, he recognized that his influence was important but not always decisive. On 30 January he remarked at an MIA mass meeting, "I want you to know that if M. L. King had never been born this movement would have taken place. I just happened to be here."³⁷ He became the movement's preeminent spokesperson, but he consulted regularly with other local leaders, synthesized conflicting positions, delegated considerable responsibility, and moderated as well as stimulated mass militancy. He admitted to a friend at the end of January that the situation in Montgomery kept him "so busy that I hardly have time to breathe."³⁸ King also insisted that the movement's foot soldiers were determined to persevere, even if some leaders had grown weary. "From my limited contact," he remarked at an executive board meeting on 30 January, "if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized. They wouldn't get back." He added that the threats against him were "a small price to pay if victory can be won."³⁹

Just a few hours later, during a mass meeting at First Baptist Church, King learned that his house had been bombed. After being reassured of the safety of his wife and child, who had been in the parsonage when dynamite exploded on the front porch, King arrived home to find a large crowd of enraged black residents confronting police and city officials. Although Mayor Gayle and Police Commissioner Sellers were there to express their concern, King insisted that the incident was an outgrowth of the city's harassment efforts. In an impromptu address to the angry residents, he said that violence directed at him would not end the movement because he was not indispensable: "If I am stopped our work will not stop." His remarks as quoted in the *Montgomery Advertiser* reaffirmed his commitment to nonviolence and Christian principles: "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating

35. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 133–135.

36. After an unexploded bomb was found on his porch in January 1957, King was quoted as telling his congregation that he had had "a vision" the previous year in which he was told to "stand up for the truth, stand up for the righteousness." He also reportedly insisted: "If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I've been to the mountain top and I've seen the Promised Land and it's going to be here in Montgomery" (quoted in "'Montgomery Dangerous' Negro Warns After Week-End of Violence," *New York Post*, 28 January 1957).

37. Willie Mae Lee, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at First Baptist Church, 30 January 1956, pp. 113–114 in this volume. King later recalled, "The Montgomery story would have taken place if the leaders of the protest had never been born" (*Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 69).

38. King to H. Edward Whitaker, 30 January 1956, p. 113 in this volume.

39. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 30 January 1956, pp. 109–112 in this volume.

violence. We want to love our enemies.”⁴⁰ Hours later Coretta Scott King’s father, Obadiah (Obie) Scott, and King, Sr., along with his daughter Christine and son A. D., arrived to find everyone safe. King, Sr., later reported that after the bombing his wife, Alberta Williams King, “wanted M. L. out of the movement right then,” but that their son was “determined to continue his work.”⁴¹

By now, the MIA leadership was no longer expecting a quick settlement; the boycott movement, they concluded, should directly confront segregated bus seating. This shift in strategy was prompted by the stalemate and encouraged by discussions with NAACP officials, who were eager to provide legal support for the Montgomery movement once local leaders showed themselves willing to attack segregation forthrightly.⁴² At the 30 January executive board meeting, MIA leaders decided to accept the NAACP’s legal help in a federal lawsuit, *Aurelia S. Browder et al. v. William A. Gayle*, in which four Montgomery women challenged the constitutionality of the city and state bus segregation statutes. After debating the issue, board members voted to continue the bus boycott even as they pursued desegregation through litigation.⁴³ At an executive board meeting three days later, King reaffirmed the MIA’s determination to proceed with both the boycott and the legal challenge despite segregationist intimidation. “We’re not going to give up; they can drop bombs in my house every day, I’m firmer now than ever,” he reportedly remarked.⁴⁴



King’s success as a protest leader derived largely from his understanding of the religious culture that pervaded the local movement and his ability to express familiar ideas cogently, utilizing concepts drawn from his theological studies. Although ostensibly a secular organization, the MIA was dominated by ministers. Its mass meetings, held in churches on Mondays and Thursdays, at times resembled evangelical services with the leaders’ oratory enlivened by call-and-response exchanges, congregational singing, scripture reading, and personal testimonials.⁴⁵ King and other ministers, especially Abernathy, shared responsibility for the morale-building “pep talks,” but King’s frequent addresses were exceptional in their merging of inspirational oratory with thoughtful explications of the larger philosophical and historical significance of the boycott movement. King retained some of his ingrained skepticism regarding religious emotionalism, remarking, “If we, as a people, had as much religion in our hearts and souls

40. Quoted in Joe Azbell, “Blast Rocks Residence of Bus Boycott Leader,” 31 January 1956, p. 115 in this volume.

41. Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 169. Coretta Scott King’s memoir mentions that King, Sr., and her father came to Montgomery soon after the bombing in an unsuccessful attempt to convince his son to return with his family to Atlanta (see *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 131–132).

42. See Roy Wilkins to W. C. Patton, 27 December 1955.

43. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 30 January 1956, pp. 109–112 in this volume. See also Wilkins to King, 8 March 1956, pp. 165–167 in this volume.

44. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, pp. 119–122 in this volume.

45. See, for example, Mass Meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, pp. 71–79 in this volume; and King’s description of meetings in *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 85–87.

Introduction as we have in our legs and feet, we could change the world.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he delivered compelling addresses to emotionally responsive and staid congregations alike. (He fondly recalled his father’s expressive congregation, advising a preacher friend that, when compared to Dexter, Ebenezer had “some of the ‘masses’ in it,” adding that “you can get in an occasional amen there.”)⁴⁷ Although King’s doctoral training set him apart from other ministers, his familiarity with African-American preaching traditions enabled him to display erudition without losing the attention of those with less formal education.

King’s effectiveness was enhanced by his “closest associate and most trusted friend,” Ralph Abernathy. The two had met briefly in Atlanta during the early 1950s, and after King’s arrival in Montgomery they dined together almost nightly, engaging in extended conversations that included Coretta and Abernathy’s wife, Juanita. The two men’s personalities and abilities complemented each other. Abernathy later wrote that from the beginning of the friendship, “Martin expounded philosophy, [while] I saw its practical application on the local level.”⁴⁸ King later described his fellow Baptist minister as a “persuasive and dynamic” speaker “with the gift of laughing people into positive action. When things became languid around mass meetings, Ralph Abernathy infused his audiences with new life and ardor.”⁴⁹ King’s and Abernathy’s skills and abilities were complementary. One observer of the mass meetings recalled that King’s discourses on *agape* and other philosophical concepts were sometimes brought down to earth by Abernathy: “Now, let me tell you what that means for tomorrow morning.”⁵⁰ They were constant companions in Montgomery, as well as on speaking trips and family vacations. “It was mighty good to see you and Brother Abernathy yesterday,” one friend wrote King. “To see one is to see the other now. You are sworn buddies in religion and the missionary journey akin to Paul’s of old.”⁵¹ King remembered that they “prayed together and made important decisions together. His ready good humor lightened many tense moments. Whenever I went out of town I always left him in charge of the important business of the association, knowing that it was in safe hands.”⁵²

As in African-American churches, initiative and direction within the MIA came not only from male ministers but also from less visible leaders, especially women. Because they were largely excluded from the ministerial ranks that had traditionally provided leadership in black communities, female leaders stayed out of the spotlight and rarely served as speakers at MIA mass meetings or out-of-town support rallies. Black women played crucial roles, however, in sustaining the MIA’s

46. Quoted in William Peters, “Our Weapon Is Love,” *Redbook*, August 1956, p. 72.

47. King to John Thomas Porter, 30 September 1955. (Although this document predates the volume time period, it is included in the Calendar of Documents because it was among the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church papers discovered after the second volume of this edition was published.)

48. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74. Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 129.

49. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74.

50. Quoted by Bayard Rustin, interview with Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), p. 54.

51. C. W. Kelly to King, 18 July 1956.

52. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74.

ongoing committees and volunteer networks. King later conceded that, “more than any other person,” Jo Ann Robinson “was active on every level of the protest.”⁵³ Besides assuming an influential role as a strategist on the executive board and several committees, Robinson served as a key MIA negotiator because of her extensive experience lobbying white officials. Other women, such as Eurette Adair, Johnnie Carr, Irene West, and King’s secretary Maude L. Ballou, were responsible for most of the daily activities that kept the boycott going, especially the car pool. African-American working women, having once been the primary users of the buses as they commuted to domestic jobs in white homes, were the mainstays of the bus boycott.

Coretta King herself played an active role in the boycott movement, firmly supporting her husband’s decision to accept a leadership position in the MIA and, despite caring for an infant daughter, often joining him at movement events. “All along I have supported my husband in this cause,” she said in March, “and at this point I feel even stronger about the cause, and whatever happens to him [. . .] happens to me.” She became more involved as the boycott progressed, speaking publicly on behalf of the protest and singing at concerts.⁵⁴

Members of the Dexter congregation also gave King vital support as he struggled to handle the physical and psychological demands of his rigorous speaking schedule and the basic operations of the MIA. Coretta King confided to a reporter that her husband “never has a minute to himself. When he isn’t in court, he is attending meetings of the Association. When he is home, he is always on the phone.” She depended on the help of others, particularly the women of Dexter, who “rallied around” her and her husband. “The ladies of the church and ladies of other churches and women in general have been extremely kind to us,” she recalled. “All day long they come to my home. They clean our home, wash the baby, and bring food.”⁵⁵

King regretted that his responsibilities as a leader often took him away from Dexter. “For months,” he later recalled, “my day-to-day contact with my parishioners had almost ceased. I had become no more than a Sunday preacher.”⁵⁶ (Even then, sixteen of his Sundays during 1956 were spent preaching elsewhere.) In his end-of-the-year report, King apologized for his absences and thanked the congregation for its support. “Due to the multiplicity of duties that have come to me as a result of my involvement in the protest, I have often lagged behind in my pastoral duties.” He expressed appreciation to those who had stepped in for him and “given words of encouragement when I needed them most. Even

53. Ibid., p. 78. In a January 1956 interview Rufus A. Lewis commented: “I sense that in addition to Reverend King, there is another leader, tho unknown to the public, of perhaps equal significance. The public recognizes Reverend King as the leader, but I wonder if Mrs. Robinson may be of equal importance” (Lewis, Interview by Donald T. Ferron, 20 January 1956).

54. Reactions to Conviction, 22 March 1956, pp. 198–199 in this volume. See Olivet Baptist Church, Announcement, “Coretta Scott King in Recital,” 19 October 1956; and In Friendship, Program, Montgomery Anniversary Concert, 5 December 1956.

55. “Physical Wear and Tear Gets You, Mrs. King Says,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 March 1956. See also Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 138–139.

56. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141.

Introduction when my life and the life of my family were in personal jeopardy, you were at my side.”⁵⁷

Trusted Dexter members acted as King’s personal bodyguards as threats mounted. Bob Williams, a friend from Morehouse and a professor of music at Alabama State, accompanied him nearly everywhere. He was in the car when King was arrested in January and later helped staff the twenty-four-hour protection that the MIA provided the Dexter parsonage after the bombing. “From the moment the protest started,” King later wrote, Williams was “seldom far from my side or Coretta’s.”⁵⁸ Coretta King remembered that Williams “came to sleep there every night—not that he slept much.” According to her account, Williams had apparently “slipped his shotgun into the house without Martin’s knowledge of it and sat up most of the night with his gun beside him.”⁵⁹ In the tense days following the bombing, King had unsuccessfully sought gun permits for his bodyguards, but he eventually decided to get rid of all guns, including his own, after discussing with his wife and others the inconsistency of leading a nonviolent movement while permitting the use of weapons for protection. “We tried to satisfy our friends by having floodlights mounted around the house, and hiring unarmed watchmen around the clock.”⁶⁰

On 21 February white Alabama officials initiated their most concerted effort to defeat the MIA by indicting eighty-nine boycott leaders for violating a 1921 state law barring conspiracies that interfered with lawful businesses.⁶¹ King was in Nashville when he learned that he, Nixon, Parks, and many others had been charged. On his way home he stopped in Atlanta, where his parents sought to dissuade him from returning to Montgomery. That evening King, Sr., tried to convince his son to leave the Montgomery movement by convening a group of black leaders close to the family, including Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays and Atlanta University president Rufus E. Clement, to discuss the matter. Mays supported King’s view that he should not abandon the movement. “I would rather be in jail ten years than desert my people now,” King recalled telling the group. “I have begun the struggle, and I can’t turn back. I have reached the

57. King, Annual Report, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 31 October 1956, p. 411 in this volume. Anticipating the demands on his time to remain undiminished, King asked the congregation to provide funds for an assistant.

58. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141. Williams was later removed from his Alabama State position because of his involvement in the MIA.

59. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 122. Williams arranged his first choral work, “Lord, I Can’t Turn Back,” when he found himself unable to sleep on the night of King’s arrest for speeding. It was first sung in New York by Coretta Scott King at the Montgomery Anniversary Concert on 5 December 1956.

60. See Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, p. 120 in this volume; King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141. Despite King’s subsequent insistence that he had banned weapons in the parsonage, even in late February a visitor reported that King’s bodyguards possessed “an arsenal” (Glenn E. Smiley to John Swomley and Al Hassler, 29 February 1956). Another visitor in late February remembered nearly sitting on a gun left lying on a chair in the Dexter parsonage (Bayard Rustin, interview by T. H. Baker, 17 June 1969, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas).

61. See Indictment, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr., et al.*, 21 February 1956, p. 133 in this volume.

point of no return.”⁶² Finally forced to acquiesce, King, Sr., drove to Montgomery with his son and accompanied him to the courthouse, where the indicted pastor surrendered to the sheriff on 23 February. He was released on bond after being fingerprinted and photographed.⁶³

Although the indictment of boycott leaders was intended to weaken the resolve of the MIA activists, in fact it only strengthened the movement, securing extensive national press coverage for King’s advocacy of nonviolent resistance to segregation. The indictments attracted numerous expressions of support from sympathizers outside Montgomery.⁶⁴ When King spoke at a mass meeting after his arrest, the *New York Times* provided front-page coverage, quoting King’s comment that the boycott was “not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice.” The reporter highlighted King’s admonition against violence. “We must use the weapon of love,” King was quoted as telling several thousand supporters at First Baptist Church. “We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us.”⁶⁵ Even more than the bombing of King’s home three weeks before, the prosecution transformed King and the MIA into national symbols of civil rights protest. Afterward the volume of supportive correspondence, speaking requests, and contributions increased dramatically.

King’s trial, which began on March 19, became a forum for the bus boycott movement, drawing many prominent spectators, including Detroit congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. The legal strategy of the MIA attorneys asserted two main points: first, that the MIA was conducting a constitutional protest rather than an economic boycott, and second, that MIA leaders had only advised local citizens, encouraging them to decide for themselves whether to stay off the buses. Witnesses supported the latter contention. As MIA recording secretary U. J. Fields insisted before the trial, “The people themselves have made up their own minds, their minds have not been made up for them.”⁶⁶ Mrs. A. W. West similarly commented, “The leaders could do nothing by themselves. They are only the voice of thousands of colored workers.”⁶⁷ (At a February mass meeting, Abernathy had expressed a widely held view when he announced to the audience, “This is your movement; we don’t have any leaders in the movement; you are the leaders.” When the audience shouted their approval, Abernathy added, “We tell Rev. King

62. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 145. See also King, Sr., *Daddy King*, pp. 170–172.

63. This photograph appears in the section following p. 33 in this volume. Once he realized that his son was committed to the struggle despite its dangers, King, Sr., joined in himself with characteristic vigor. Speaking at a mass meeting in Montgomery a week later, he reportedly set the meeting on fire with a short presentation, declaring that “I am no outsider, I have vested interest here . . . and if things get too hot I shall move in” (quoted in J. Harold Jones, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, 1 March 1956). During the year King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King traveled with their son to National Baptist Convention gatherings and attended several of King’s addresses, including speeches in Denver and New York; see, for example, King to Anna C. Frank, 7 May 1956.

64. See, for example, letters from Wilkins and Ralph J. Bunche to King, 22 February 1956, pp. 134–135 in this volume; and A. Philip Randolph to Nixon, 23 February 1956.

65. Quoted in Wayne Phillips, “Negroes Pledge to Keep Boycott,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1956, p. 136 in this volume.

66. Fields, interview by Ferron, 28 January 1956.

67. West, interview by Lee, 23 January 1956.

Introduction what to say and he says what we want him to say.”)⁶⁸ Gladys Moore reflected the same sentiments when she testified at the trial, “Wasn’t no one man started it. We all started it over night.”⁶⁹

Despite such protestations, however, the boycott could not have been sustained without effective leadership. Well before the trial, King’s role as the MIA’s main spokesperson and administrator was evident. Moreover, once Judge Eugene Carter and the prosecutors agreed to a defense request that all defendants be tried separately, with King to be tried first, journalists focused on him. Although the prosecution suggested that the MIA leaders did in fact hold authority in the movement, King temporized on the witness stand, understating the extent to which he had influenced the course of the movement. Rather than using the trial as a public forum to proclaim his willingness to risk jail in order to achieve a worthy goal, King insisted that he had only told MIA members “to let your conscience be your guide, if you want to ride that is all right.” Asked if he had ever advocated violence, King was adamant: “My motivation has been the exact converse of that; I urged nonviolence at all points.”⁷⁰

After King testified, Judge Carter found him guilty of conducting an illegal boycott against Montgomery City Lines and fined him \$500 plus court costs. When he refused to pay, the judge converted the fine into a sentence of 386 days of labor in the Montgomery County Jail. King’s attorneys indicated that they would appeal the conviction to the Alabama Court of Appeals; Carter then suspended the sentence and postponed the remaining boycott cases until King’s appeal was resolved. MIA supporters attending the trial had been quiet and composed for much of it and showed little emotion as the verdict was read. When King emerged from the courthouse, however, the waiting crowd cheered and vowed to continue the boycott until they achieved their goal.⁷¹



King’s signal contribution to the Montgomery movement was to infuse it with a Christian ethos of nonviolence and explicitly Gandhian precepts of nonviolent action. He undoubtedly learned about the Gandhian independence movement while attending Morehouse, where Benjamin Mays occasionally spoke of his travels in India during his Tuesday morning lectures to the student body. King remembered that his first extensive exposure to Gandhian ideas came during his years at Crozer, when, inspired by a lecture at Philadelphia’s Friendship House by Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, he bought “a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.”⁷² J. Pius Barbour, King’s friend and mentor during his Crozer years, recalled King arguing for Gandhian methods during his seminary years. “Mike has always contended that no minority can afford to adopt

68. Abernathy quoted in J. Harold Jones, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 27 February 1956. See also Ferron, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 27 February 1956, p. 144 in this volume.

69. Transcript, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956.

70. King, Testimony, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956, p. 186 in this volume.

71. See Reactions to Conviction, 22 March 1956, pp. 198–199 in this volume.

72. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 96.

a policy of violence,” Barbour wrote. King would explain, “Just a matter of [arithmetic], Dr.”⁷³

In the years before the bus boycott, King had argued that Christians had a duty to bear witness for love and justice and against evil. The redemptive power of love was at the core of his Holt Street address and some of his most powerful early sermons.⁷⁴ Early in February 1956 a parishioner at a Boston church wrote to King recalling “the great sermon” he had given during his graduate school days. In the sermon “Loving Your Enemies”—also given at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church—King had preached from a passage in the Book of Matthew to which he would often return during 1956: “But I say unto You, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”⁷⁵

During the course of the boycott King was able to merge biblical admonitions with Gandhian principles, but his unwavering advocacy of nonviolent tactics derived mainly from his religious convictions. Even as the Montgomery movement attracted the involvement of veteran proponents of Gandhian activism from outside the South, King understood that “it was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action.”⁷⁶ These ideals would remain central to his rhetoric, but as his familiarity with Gandhi increased, so too did his adherence to the philosophical assumptions underlying Gandhian nonviolence. A week after the boycott began a white sympathizer, Juliette Morgan, had made the Gandhian connection explicit when she wrote to the *Montgomery Advertiser* comparing the boycott to the Indian independence campaign.⁷⁷ A week later an Alpha Phi Alpha brother again noted the parallel, adding that the Montgomery movement’s sound basis “in good Christian doctrine . . . makes it all the more difficult for the conscience of the white South to rationalize its opposition to it.”⁷⁸ At about the same time, King reportedly referred to Gandhi’s independence campaign as evidence that “love will win.”⁷⁹

During 1956 King’s understanding of Gandhian ideas expanded following the arrival in Montgomery of Bayard Rustin and Glenn E. Smiley, two veteran pacif-

73. J. Pius Barbour, “Meditations on Rev. M. L. King, Jr., of Montgomery, Ala.,” *National Baptist Voice*, March 1956.

74. In a sermon the previous year King decried ethical relativism and asked Christians to bear witness, to “stand up for right and be opposed to wrong, wherever it is” (King, “Rediscovering Lost Values,” 28 February 1954, in *Papers* 2:252).

75. Milton Britton to King, 5 February 1956, p. 127 in this volume.

76. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 84.

77. Juliette Morgan, “Lesson from Gandhi,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 December 1955. In an interview two months later Morgan reported that she had received mostly encouraging comments about her published letter (Morgan, interview by Anna Holden, 7 February 1956). Not long afterward she lost her job as a city librarian because of her public stands against segregation. King later wrote that although Morgan “did not long survive the rejection and condemnation of the white community, . . . long before she died in the summer of 1957 the name of Mahatma Gandhi was well-known in Montgomery” (*Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 85).

78. Walter C. Carrington to King, 21 December 1955, p. 89 in this volume.

79. Emory O. Jackson, “The Tip-off,” *Birmingham World*, 23 December 1955.

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ists who had pioneered in the application of Gandhian techniques to American race relations. Rustin, who arrived about the time the indictments were issued against MIA leaders, was one of the most experienced proponents of Gandhian-style mass protest, having been a race relations secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) during the 1940s. He had worked closely with A. Philip Randolph in the March on Washington Movement of the early 1940s and participated in Congress of Racial Equality antisegregation protests. He was a controversial figure because of his involvement during the 1930s in the Young Communist League and his 1953 arrest in Pasadena, California, for homosexual activity, which led to his resignation from FOR. Affiliated with the War Resisters League when he came to Montgomery, Rustin quickly recognized the significance of the bus boycott as a demonstration of the potential effectiveness of nonviolent tactics. King, Nixon, and Abernathy welcomed Rustin's expertise in nonviolent theory and practice and invited him to join MIA strategy meetings. Some local black leaders, however, resented him as an outsider whose presence would be harmful to the boycott movement, particularly when a reporter alleged that Rustin had misrepresented himself as a correspondent for *Le Figaro* and the *Manchester Guardian*.⁸⁰ After spending just a week in Montgomery, Rustin departed at the behest of both Montgomery leaders and his colleagues in New York.⁸¹ Shortly after meeting with King in Birmingham on 7 March 1956, Rustin reported that, although King was eager to receive help, he was concerned that white southerners wanted to believe that "New Yorkers, northern agitators, and communists are in reality leading the fight." King decided that any ideas or programs developed by northerners would be directed through himself or Nixon. "Strategically, [the MIA] must give the appearance of developing all of the ideas and strategies used in the struggle."⁸²

Even after returning to New York, Rustin remained in touch with King and continued to assist the boycott movement. He joined with A. J. Muste, James Farmer, and other activists to form the Committee for Nonviolent Integration (CNI), which offered support to the Montgomery struggle and other grass-roots

80. See Rustin to King, 8 March 1956, p. 164 in this volume.

81. On 29 February 1956, after receiving reports of Rustin's Montgomery activities and the controversy they provoked, A. Philip Randolph called a meeting of Rustin's New York associates, including Norman Thomas, James Farmer, and Charles Lawrence. The group identified some "very serious elements of danger to the movement there for Bayard to be present" and asked him to return home, despite having initially encouraged him to make contact with King and the other MIA leaders (Swomley to Smiley, 29 February 1956). Randolph noted at the meeting that "the Montgomery leaders had managed thus far more successfully than 'any of our so-called non-violence experts' a mass resistance campaign and we should learn from them rather than assume that we know it all" (Randolph, quoted in another letter from Swomley to Smiley, also from 29 February 1956). Writing from Montgomery, Smiley disagreed with Randolph's analysis and argued that the movement there had been "petering out" until the indictments and until King began using explicitly Gandhian rhetoric. He argued that FOR had significantly influenced King's apparent turn to principled nonviolence. "For being so new at this, King runs out of ideas quickly and does the old things again & again. He wants help" (Smiley to Swomley, 2 March 1956).

82. Rustin, "Notes of a Conference: How Outsiders Can Strengthen the Montgomery Nonviolent Protest," 7 March 1956.

movements in the South.⁸³ The short-lived organization complemented another New York-based group, In Friendship, founded in January by Ella Baker, the local NAACP branch president, and other activists to “provide economic [assistance] to those suffering economic reprisals in the efforts to secure civil rights.”⁸⁴ Besides giving financial and logistical aid, Rustin and other members of King’s expanding support network helped convey his ideas and beliefs to prospective allies among liberals, labor activists, and the religious left. Rustin also prepared an article on the bus boycott, to be published under King’s name.⁸⁵

Leaders of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, aware of Rustin’s meetings with King, hoped to establish their own direct contact with the MIA. FOR’s national chair, Charles R. Lawrence, wrote in late February to applaud the MIA’s accomplishments and to urge King to become “one of us, for you have talked and acted more like we should like to than many of us could hope to do under similar pressure.” Lawrence, a pioneering black sociologist and, like King, a Morehouse graduate, stated that FOR did not want “to do anything which your group would feel unwise or ill-timed. You are doing too good a job to have it unwittingly harmed by even the best-meaning groups.”⁸⁶ Lawrence informed King of the pending Montgomery visit of FOR’s national field secretary, Rev. Glenn Smiley.

Smiley, who arrived in Montgomery a few days after Rustin, was a white southerner who had served with FOR for about fifteen years, part of which, like Rustin, he spent in prison as a wartime conscientious objector. While committed to racial justice, he was sensitive to southern whites’ concerns about “outsiders.” In contrast to Rustin, who perceived his role as helping to launch a nonviolent rebellion against the Jim Crow system, Smiley saw himself as a troubleshooter seeking non-violent solutions to racial disputes and stressed racial reconciliation.

Hours after first meeting King, Smiley wrote several colleagues that he had “just had one of the most glorious, yet tragic interviews I have ever had.” He described the youthful King as a potential “Negro Gandhi, or he can be made into an unfortunate [demagogue] destined to swing from a lynch mob’s tree.”⁸⁷ Unimpressed by King’s understanding of Gandhi (although King told him that he “had Gandhi in mind when this thing started”), Smiley gave King several books on Gandhian nonviolence, including *The Power of Nonviolence* by Richard Gregg, who soon corresponded with King.⁸⁸ Writing to FOR colleagues soon after arriving in Montgomery, Smiley depicted King as a man who

83. King met with CNI members in March. See Muste to Mays, 13 April 1956.

84. Baker to King, 24 February 1956, p. 139 in this volume.

85. Rustin sent King a draft of “Our Struggle,” which appeared under King’s name in the second issue of *Liberation*, a radical pacifist journal edited in New York by Rustin, David Dellinger, Paul Goodman, and others that would serve as a vital organ for the black movement and the New Left in the 1960s. See Rustin to King, 8 March 1956, p. 164 in this volume; and King, “Our Struggle,” April 1956, pp. 236–241 in this volume.

86. Lawrence to King, 24 February 1956, p. 138 in this volume.

87. Smiley to Muriel Lester, 28 February 1956. Smiley also sent this letter to Howard Thurman and others.

88. See Gregg to King, 2 April 1956; King to Gregg, 1 May 1956; and Gregg to King, 20 May 1956; pp. 211–212, 244–245, and 267–269, respectively, in this volume.

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wants to do it right, but is too young and some of his close help is violent. King accepts, as an example, a body guard, and asked for [a] permit for them to carry guns. This was denied by the police, but nevertheless, the place is an arsenal. King sees the inconsistency, but not enough. He believes and yet he doesn't believe. The whole movement is armed in a sense, and this is what I must convince him to see as the greatest evil. . . . If he can *really* be won to a faith in non-violence there is no end to what he can do.⁸⁹

Rustin and Smiley agreed that King's role as the spokesperson of a major non-violent campaign made him a crucial convert to the Gandhian movement but that his grasp of Gandhian principles was tenuous. Rustin, for example, reported to his associates in the War Resisters League that King and other MIA leaders eschewed violence but that there was "considerable confusion on the question as to whether violence is justified in retaliation to violence directed against the Negro community." Nevertheless, he concluded that King was "developing a decidedly Gandhi-like view and recognizes there is a tremendous educational job to be done within the Negro community."⁹⁰

After his meetings with Rustin and Smiley, King's public statements increasingly reflected the views of the network of Gandhian advocates in the United States. In March the *Baltimore Afro-American* depicted him as "Alabama's Gandhi."⁹¹ During the spring he met or corresponded with a number of leading Gandhians, including Muste, head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation; William Robert Miller, assistant editor of FOR's journal, *Fellowship*; Unitarian minister Homer Jack, editor of the *Gandhi Reader* (1956); Howard University dean William Stuart Nelson; Harris Wofford, who with Clare Wofford wrote *India Afire* (1951); theologian Howard Thurman; CORE activist James Peck; and journalist William Worthy.⁹² Jack, Nelson, Peck, and Worthy had joined Rustin in the 1947 CORE-sponsored "Journey of Reconciliation," in which an integrated group rode buses to test a Supreme Court decision banning segregation in interstate public transportation. Southern white novelist Lillian Smith, who had traveled in India, also urged King to deepen his commitment to Gandhian nonviolence but warned against depending on northerners. "It would break my heart were so-called 'outsiders' to ruin it all," she advised. "The white South is irrational about this business of 'outsiders.'"⁹³

89. Smiley to Swomley and Hassler, 29 February 1956.

90. Rustin, "Report on Montgomery, Alabama," 21 March 1956.

91. Al Sweeny, "'Not Worried' Says Alabama's Gandhi," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 March 1956, p. 9.

92. See Muste, "The Magnolia Curtain?" 14 May 1956; King to Muste, 10 July 1956, p. 316 in this volume; King to William Robert Miller, 8 May 1956, and Miller to King, 18 May 1956, pp. 249 and 262–263 in this volume; Harris Wofford to King et al., 25 April 1956, and King to Wofford, 10 May 1956, pp. 225–226 and 254 in this volume; Howard Thurman to King, 14 March 1956, and King to Thurman, 16 March 1956, pp. 174–175 and 177 in this volume; and James Peck to King, 1 June 1956, pp. 288–289 in this volume. See also J. Martin England to King, 29 April 1956, and Hazel E. Foster to King, 29 April 1956, pp. 232–233 and 233–234 in this volume.

93. Smith to King, 10 March 1956, p. 170 in this volume. In the same letter Smith praised Howard Thurman as "a truly great religious leader" who could be helpful to the Montgomery movement. She recommended Rustin as a "fine man" who might be able to provide the "quiet advice" she thought the MIA could use. Rustin later remembered that it was a telegram from Smith that prompted him to visit Montgomery in February 1956; see Rustin, quoted in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, p. 53.

Absorbing ideas from proponents of nonviolent direct action, King crafted his own synthesis of Gandhian principles and what he termed the “regulating ideal” of Christian love. Although he continued to assert, particularly at MIA mass meetings, that nonviolence stemmed from the African-American social-gospel tradition, after meeting with Rustin and Smiley he became more likely to refer explicitly to Gandhi’s teaching. In late March, when he addressed an interracial audience in Brooklyn, he combined the two sources of his nonviolent strategy in a way that became characteristic: “Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work.” By this time he had become an articulate advocate of Gandhian methods and saw the Montgomery movement as a model for all African Americans. “We in Montgomery have discovered a method that can be used by the Negroes in their fight for political and economical equality,” he told the Brooklyn audience. Gandhi—the “little brown man in India”—had used nonviolence “to break loose from the political and economical domination by the British and brought the British Empire to its knees. Let’s now use this method in the United States.”⁹⁴ At the end of May he told a correspondent that “the [Gandhian] influence has been at the center of our movement.” He added that the “weapon of passive resistance might be just as effective” in fighting against segregation as it had been in the Indian independence movement.⁹⁵

King’s article in the May issue of FOR’s *Fellowship* revealed both his firm commitment to Gandhian nonviolence and the extent to which his vocabulary derived from social-gospel Christianity. He had already begun to see the Montgomery struggle as more than simply an African-American movement for racial advancement; it had become a demonstration of the power of Christian love to overcome injustice and evil. “Love *must* be at the forefront of our movement if it is to be a successful movement,” King insisted.

And when we speak of love, we speak of understanding, good will toward *all* men. We speak of a creative, a redemptive sort of love, so that as we look at the problem, we see that the real tension is not between the Negro citizens and the white citizens of Montgomery, but it is a conflict between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and if there is a victory—and there *will* be a victory—the victory will not be merely for the Negro citizens and a defeat for the white citizens, but it will be a victory for justice and a defeat of injustice. It will be a victory for goodness in its long struggle with the forces of evil.⁹⁶

King would later depict his “pilgrimage to nonviolence” as an intellectual journey that brought together his theological studies with his ingrained social-gospel beliefs, but his acceptance of Gandhian principles was more the result of his involvement in a social movement that demonstrated the power of Gandhian ideas. More than in any subsequent stage of the African-American freedom struggle,

94. Quoted by Stanley Rowland, Jr., in “2,500 Here Hail Boycott Leader,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1956; and “King Speaks at Big Rally in Brooklyn,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 March 1956. See also King, “Quotable Quotes from Rev. King,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 31 March 1956, pp. 209–210 in this volume.

95. King to E. T. Sandberg, 31 May 1956, p. 276 in this volume.

96. King, “Walk for Freedom,” May 1956, p. 278 in this volume.

Introduction these principles attracted support in the Montgomery movement. "Living through the actual experience of the protest," King wrote in *Stride Toward Freedom*, "nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action."⁹⁷



In King's speeches, particularly those given outside Montgomery, he linked the African-American freedom struggle to international struggles against colonialism and imperialism, particularly the Indian independence movement. King made two major addresses in New York on 17 May that set a pattern for many of his later speeches by deftly blending a firsthand account of the boycott, social-gospel idealism, anticolonial sentiment, and fervent admonitions against hate, violence, and complacency. Although King's sermon at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine contrasted with the secular ethos of his dinner address on behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, both allowed him to elaborate on the larger historical significance of the Montgomery movement.

In the NAACP speech, King explained that the Montgomery bus boycott marked a new stage in an ongoing African-American freedom struggle that had left "Old Man Segregation on his death bed." He identified himself with the "maladjusted" who never intended to adapt to "the viciousness of lynch-mobs," "the evils of segregation and discrimination," or "the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes."⁹⁸ King's sermon situated Montgomery in a global context: "The great struggle of the Twentieth Century has been between these exploited masses questing for freedom and the colonial powers seeking to maintain their domination."⁹⁹

King's advocacy of mass protest and his expressions of empathy for anticolonial movements defied the Cold War political climate. Nevertheless, despite having identified himself as an "anticapitalist" during his Crozer years, King played down his unconventional beliefs during the boycott, even as he cautiously expanded the boundaries of mainstream political discourse.¹⁰⁰ His skill at presenting himself as a militant but not subversive religious leader helped him to avoid the political repression suffered by leftist black leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. Fearful that the Montgomery movement might be harmed by suggestions of communist influence, he was circumspect even in his relationship with the now-anticommunist ex-communist Bayard Rustin. King's defensiveness about the possibility of communist influence within the civil rights movement surfaced when he wrote to a white soldier who expressed concern after Rosa Parks was interviewed on a leftist radio program. "One of the things that we have

97. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 101.

98. See the article derived from this speech, King, "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," June 1956, pp. 283 and 286 in this volume.

99. King, "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," 17 May 1956, p. 261 in this volume.

22 100. See King, "Autobiography of Religious Development," 22 November 1950, in *Papers* 1:359.

insisted on throughout the protest is that we steer clear of any communistic infiltration," King assured him.¹⁰¹ King also believed, however, that communism posed a constructive challenge to Christianity, and on a number of occasions he used anticommunism as leverage, as when he warned that "if America doesn't wake up, she will discover that the uncommitted peoples of the world are in the hands of a communist ideology."¹⁰²

Along with the publicity surrounding his trial, King's speeches outside Montgomery were decisive in building national support for the MIA and enhancing his status as the nation's foremost protest leader. Having guided the boycott movement for several months, he had overcome earlier doubts and grown more self-assured regarding his ability and authority. Drawing lessons from his father's leadership of one of Atlanta's most prosperous black churches, King inspired followers and influenced overall policymaking through oratory and example while delegating most day-to-day responsibilities. He also understood that the MIA, like a Baptist church, was a financially self-sustaining institution that could survive only through effective fund-raising. In addition to building enthusiasm for the boycott, therefore, he appealed to northern sympathizers to send contributions. The MIA's fund-raising efforts succeeded in attracting considerably more funds than were needed to cover its expenses, which had risen to more than \$8,000 per week by the summer of 1956.¹⁰³ Clearly pleased with the MIA's success, King noted regretfully that "most organizations of goodwill" faced "a serious problem" because their fund-raising efforts suffered from "lack of proper organization."¹⁰⁴

The management abilities of King and other MIA leaders were severely tested during the spring when reports of a resolution of the boycott proved premature and it became clear that the protest would have to go on indefinitely. After a Supreme Court ruling on 23 April against bus segregation in South Carolina, the Montgomery City Lines announced that it would end segregation but quickly reversed its stand under pressure from city officials.¹⁰⁵ In early June, just as King was preparing to leave for a weeklong preaching mission at a Los Angeles church headed by one of his father's oldest friends, a federal district court panel delivered a ruling in *Browder v. Gayle*, overturning both the Montgomery and the Ala-

101. King to Homer Greene, 10 July 1956, p. 318 in this volume.

102. King, "The Montgomery Story," 27 June 1956, p. 308 in this volume. See also the comments on King's sermon "The Challenge of Communism to Christianity" in Melvin H. Watson to King, 14 August 1952, in *Papers* 2:156-157.

103. Franklyn W. Taylor, Jr., "MIA Audit Report, 1 March to 31 May 1956," 25 June 1956. According to this report, the MIA raised the bulk of its funds during the period immediately after the indictments of the MIA leaders. Beginning with a balance of \$6,444.07 on 1 March, the MIA received contributions of \$220,848.87 by 31 May. Income for these three months greatly exceeded the group's expenses, which were \$104,312.41 for the period. Contributions declined after the end of May, but the MIA's surplus was adequate to cover expenses for the remainder of the boycott. At the end of the boycott, the group retained a balance of \$87,960.54 (see R. J. Glasco, "MIA Financial Report, 1 November through 15 December 1956," 19 December 1956).

104. King to Eugene Walton, 20 December 1956, p. 489 in this volume.

105. See accounts in "Montgomery Lines End Seating Bias," *New York Times*, 24 April 1956; and Steve Leshner, "Negroes Will Continue Boycott of City Lines," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 April 1956.

Introduction bama bus segregation statutes.¹⁰⁶ Realizing that the ruling would be appealed, King applauded the legal victory but also announced that the boycott would continue. By this time he had restructured the MIA in order to improve the efficiency of its decision making and to provide more reliable management of boycott operations. Mass meetings were scaled back from two to one per week, and the association began distributing a newsletter with Jo Ann Robinson as editor.¹⁰⁷

In addition to initiating MIA reorganization efforts, King worked to resolve internal conflicts and to maintain unity within the MIA. The group faced its most serious internal crisis when U. J. Fields resigned on 11 June, announcing, with regard to the handling of MIA finances, that he could “no longer identify . . . with a movement in which the many are exploited by the few.”¹⁰⁸ King heard word of Fields’s resignation while on his California trip, which would include a speech at the NAACP annual convention in San Francisco. Although he saw “no truth in Fields’s charges,” he recognized that they might hurt MIA fund-raising efforts and canceled several engagements to return to Montgomery. Lax financial oversight may have encouraged some MIA representatives to divert contributions or honoraria to private use or allowed car pool drivers to charge the MIA for unauthorized expenses. When pressed for details, however, Fields was unable or unwilling to make more specific allegations. Enduring several days of hostile criticism, he issued a retraction on 18 June, claiming that he had made the original charges in “anger and passion”—perhaps fueled by resentment over having been removed as the executive committee’s recording secretary. He conceded that he had no evidence that MIA funds had been misused: “To my knowledge money sent to the organization has been used only for the purpose of transportation.”¹⁰⁹ Fields then apologized at a mass meeting, admitting that his initial charge “was not a statement of truth.” King asked the crowd to forgive Fields, saying, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”¹¹⁰ Confronting the potentially damaging episode with firmness and magnanimity, King emerged from the controversy with his reputation enhanced. “Things are going very well here in

106. In the 5 June ruling, Judges Frank M. Johnson, Jr., and Richard Rives determined that, by overturning the *Plessy* doctrine of “separate but equal,” the *Brown* decision applied not only to public schools but to other forms of legalized racial segregation. In his dissent Judge Seybourn Lynne argued that it did not.

107. King, “Recommendations to MIA Executive Board,” 24 May 1956, pp. 271–273 in this volume.

108. Al McConagha, “MIA Secretary Quits: Boycott Official Hits Funds Use,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 June 1956. Fields later elaborated on the reasons for his resignation: “Subsequently, as time moved on, exploitation and misuse of money became so great that I could no longer hold my peace. I had, prior to my public statement, asserted my disapproval of the manner in which the organization was operated. Some of my colleagues admonished me to overlook what was going on. Others said, ‘Do the same thing yourself’; and still others said that it is to be expected in this kind of situation” (Fields, *The Montgomery Story: The Unhappy Effects of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* [New York: Exposition Press, 1959], pp. 39–40). See also *National Baptist Voice*, July 1956.

109. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 154; U. J. Fields, Press Release, “Reverend Fields’s Retraction,” 18 June 1956.

110. Paul Thompson, “Negro Cleric Retracts Charges of Bus Boycott Fund Misuse,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 June 1956.

Montgomery now," he wrote a friend in July. "Rev. Fields seems to be in line, and the internal structure of our organization is as strong as ever."¹¹¹

As the MIA's preeminent spokesperson, King formed generally cordial relationships with established civil rights leaders, who saw the Montgomery boycott as a significant advance for their cause. Even so, the interactions between King and older leaders of his father's generation, such as A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, also contained elements of tension. In his contacts with Randolph, King acted respectfully but not always deferentially toward the labor leader, who had been engaged in the struggle for racial advancement since well before King's birth. He valued Randolph's support, which was secured with the help of E. D. Nixon, because it opened the door to backing by several national labor unions.¹¹² Despite Randolph's repeated appeals, however, King did not find time in his hectic schedule to participate in Randolph's 24 April State of the Race Conference in Washington, D.C., in which seventy-five African-American leaders responded to segregationist attacks and charted future civil rights strategy. In May King again cited pressing obligations in Montgomery in declining to address a major civil rights rally organized with Randolph's help at New York's Madison Square Garden.¹¹³

King's relations with Wilkins were even more complex, given Wilkins's increasing concern that NAACP supporters would contribute directly to the MIA instead of helping the NAACP cover the protest's legal costs. As a board member of the Montgomery NAACP and as the son and grandson of Atlanta NAACP leaders, King consistently supported the nation's oldest civil rights organization. Nonetheless, the overwhelming support among African Americans for the MIA-led boycott undermined the NAACP's dominance in the civil rights arena. In addition, the successful efforts of Alabama authorities to suppress the NAACP encouraged King and other state civil rights leaders to act autonomously. In a 3 March letter to Wilkins, King asked if NAACP fund-raising in the name of the bus boycott would be used to "support us in our local struggle." This brought a quick response from Wilkins, who assured King that the NAACP would continue to handle the MIA's legal expenses and those associated with the *Browder v. Gayle* lawsuit but warned that "it would be fatal for there to develop any hint of disagreement as to the raising and allocating of funds." While insisting that the NAACP had a right to claim a portion of the funds raised on behalf of the Montgomery struggle, he assured King that in cases where "local ministers or local

111. King to J. Raymond Henderson, 10 July 1956, p. 319 in this volume. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 156–157.

112. Randolph told Nixon that he had "followed with great pride and inspiration the great fight for respect and human dignity you and your fellow citizens are waging. . . . The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and all the negro and white people who love justice and human liberty will never forsake you" (Randolph to Nixon, 23 February 1956).

113. King to Benjamin F. McLaurin, 6 May 1956, and Randolph to King, 7 May 1956, pp. 246–247 and 247–248 in this volume.

Introduction committees . . . feel strongly that every dollar should go to Montgomery," his group would comply.¹¹⁴ This agreement did not end tensions between the two men, however, for Wilkins remained unconvinced that mass protest should be emphasized over litigation. Even following King's address at the NAACP's annual meeting in June, the organization refrained from explicitly endorsing the Montgomery boycott.¹¹⁵

King used his NAACP address to continue portraying himself as an activist who was more militant than the established leaders of national civil rights organizations. He deftly appealed for the support of the NAACP membership, while being careful not to offend its more cautious officials. King noted that "the problem of obtaining full citizenship is a problem for which the Negro himself must assume the primary responsibility. Integration will not be some lavish dish that will be passed out by the white man on a silver platter, while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite." He suggested that passive resistance involved a willingness to go to jail or even risk death: "But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free our children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more honorable." He criticized those who advised "that we must slow up," explaining that although "wise restraint and calm reasonableness" can be virtues, "if moderation means slowing up in the move for freedom and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of a deadening status-quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all people of good will must condemn."¹¹⁶

Even as King sought to maintain cordial relations with Wilkins and Randolph, he used his considerable church and fraternal contacts outside Montgomery to develop a fund-raising network independent of existing civil rights organizations. His fellow Alpha Phi Alpha brothers sent encouraging notes and financial contributions during the early months of the bus boycott, and they were joined by other black fraternities as the campaign lengthened.¹¹⁷ African-American churches and their congregations throughout the country offered substantial donations to the MIA. In many instances, the pastors were men with ties to King or his family, including Thomas Kilgore, O. Clay Maxwell, and Gardner Taylor in New York;

114. Wilkins to King, 8 March 1956, p. 166 in this volume. See also King to Wilkins, 3 March 1956 and King to Wilkins, 1 May 1956, pp. 151–152 and 243–244 in this volume.

115. Responding to a veteran pacifist's complaint that the NAACP had failed to support the Montgomery protest, Wilkins explained: "The resolution of the San Francisco convention did not condemn or criticize the Montgomery type of protest. It simply stated that at this time it was not ready to recommend this type of protest as a national project" (Wilkins to James Peck, 19 July 1956; see also Paul Peck to Wilkins, 22 February 1956). Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP firmly rejected King's suggestion, delivered at a press conference shortly before his NAACP speech, that school boycotts similar to the Montgomery protest might be used to achieve school desegregation. Marshall remarked, "I don't approve of using children to do men's work" ("King Proposal Would Boycott Dixie Schools," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 June 1956).

116. King, "The Montgomery Story," 27 June 1956, pp. 307 and 308 in this volume.

117. See, for example, Carrington to King, 21 December 1955, and Frank L. Stanley to King, 2 February 1956, pp. 88–89 and 118–119 in this volume. King also received numerous awards from both local and national fraternal groups, including his own.

Jesse Jai McNeil and A. A. Banks in Detroit; and J. Raymond Henderson in Los Angeles.¹¹⁸

Introduction

King's ability to garner substantial support from black churches was strengthened by his roots not only in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church but also in the nation's largest black organization, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., with its thousands of preachers, several million lay members, and its profusion of national, state, and citywide bodies, missions, services, training programs, and seminaries. His leadership of the bus boycott accelerated his rise to prominence in this vast, unwieldy organization in which both his father and grandfather had played prominent roles. Before the boycott began he had been active in the convention's Alabama state conference and its Montgomery affiliate. As a spokesman for the MIA he soon expanded his influence within the Baptist ministerial network, speaking before congregations in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and other cities. His many speaking invitations and other correspondence during 1956 reveal his emergence as a symbol of social-gospel activism and a figure who stimulated clergy and laypersons to push for civil rights in their own communities. King was in touch with fellow Baptist minister C. K. Steele, who began boycotting the Tallahassee bus system in May using tactics similar to those of the MIA, including a car pool and weekly mass meetings.¹¹⁹ In June, after Alabama officials outlawed NAACP operations in that state, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and other Birmingham ministers formed the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which espoused nonviolent resistance.

The national impact of the upsurge in southern civil rights activism was apparent when the ten thousand delegates to the National Baptist Convention's 1956 annual assembly in September heard speeches not only from King but also from Steele, Jemison, and Kilgore.¹²⁰ Before his speech King thanked convention president J. H. Jackson for his support of the MIA, which totaled \$2,000 in donations from the convention and from Jackson's own church.¹²¹

King stirred the convention assembly with his sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," an imaginary epistle from the apostle Paul denouncing the excesses of capitalism, materialism, and sectarianism in twentieth-century America. He urged listeners "to get rid of every aspect of segregation," insisting that "the underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed" to segregation.

118. See McNeil to King, 29 February 1956; Kilgore to King, 7 March 1956; and King to Henderson, 1 June 1956; pp. 149–150, 160–162, and 289–290 in this volume. See also A. A. Banks to King, 15 May 1956, and O. Clay Maxwell to King, 7 June 1956.

119. During the October protest Steele had scheduled King to speak at one of their mass meetings, but an emergency in Montgomery prevented King's visit; see Steele to King, 23 October 1956, p. 404 in this volume.

120. These three participated in a panel discussion titled "National Baptists Facing Integration: Shall Gradualism be Applied?"; see National Baptist Convention, Program of the 76th Annual Session, 4–9 September 1956.

121. Jackson's relations with King stayed cordial during this period, despite the fact that at least two ministers had begun promoting King as a candidate to unseat Jackson, who faced open but unsuccessful opposition at the Denver meeting from ministers who wished to place limits on the president's tenure. See also Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), pp. 98–100.

Introduction Without explicitly referring to Gandhian nonviolence, he advised those struggling against oppression to use “Christian methods and Christian weapons,” especially the weapon of love. King found solace in Paul’s exemplary optimism in the face of persecution, identifying his own tribulations with those of the apostle:

Don’t worry about persecution America; you are going to have that if you stand up for a great principle. I can say this with some authority, because my life was a continual round of persecutions. After my conversion I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem. Later I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem. I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens. And yet I am still going.¹²²

His “calm dispassionate” delivery, one friend told him, created an “everlasting” impression. “You will never be forgotten.”¹²³ J. Pius Barbour expressed pride that the young Crozer student he had known in the late 1940s had “grown TWENTY YEARS in about five.” He proclaimed King as “the greatest orator on the American platform,” effusing that King was “the first Ph.D. I have heard that can make uneducated people throw their hats in the air over philosophy.”¹²⁴

As he grew in stature, King sought to bring his militant message to the national debate about the slow pace at which the integration decisions of the Supreme Court were being implemented. In an August appearance partly arranged by Randolph, King testified before the platform committee of the Democratic National Convention to urge a strong civil rights plank.¹²⁵ Despite his testimony, however, white southern Democrats kept the party from endorsing the 1954 *Brown* decision. In late August, in their first effort to contact President Eisenhower since the bus boycott began, King and other Montgomery civic leaders decried intimidation by city officials and the bombings of MIA leaders’ homes, including that of executive board member Robert Graetz, a white Lutheran pastor of a black congregation who had been harassed since the early months of the protest. King and his colleagues called for Eisenhower to order a “proper investigation” of events that “have tended to deprive Negroes of their civil rights and

122. King, “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” 4 November 1956 (when King delivered the same sermon at Dexter), pp. 418 and 419 in this volume. For Paul’s own account of his tribulations, see 2 Corinthians 11:22–29. King would adopt the apostle Paul’s persona in later sermons and speeches as well.

123. C. W. Kelly to King, 8 September 1956, p. 366 in this volume.

124. J. Pius Barbour, “Sermons and Addresses at the Convention,” *National Baptist Voice*, September 1956. According to a later account, King’s father “strode with pride at the back of the auditorium” while listening to the sermon; “his pride in his son would not allow him to sit down” (Charles H. King, “The Untold Story of the Power Struggle Between King and Jackson,” *Negro Digest*, May 1967, pp. 6–10, 71–79). Henry H. Mitchell, who was sitting in the balcony with Gardner Taylor that day, later remembered being moved to tears. King’s reading “started slowly and never gained speed or volume, but it gripped and held this audience of ten thousand or more. . . . We hung over the balcony rail and wept unashamedly. When he quietly announced the pro forma, ‘I must close now,’ the sea of black Baptists arose as one and protested” (Mitchell, “The Awesome Meek,” *Pulpit Digest*, January–February 1991, pp. 23–26).

125. King, Testimony to the Democratic National Convention, Committee on Platform and Resolutions, 11 August 1956, p. 335–338 in this volume.

have left them without protection of the law.”¹²⁶ Two Department of Justice representatives responded that such harassment “does not appear to indicate violations of federal criminal statutes”; they did express willingness, however, to look into potential violations of voter registration laws.¹²⁷ Finding neither party responsive to his entreaties, King chose not to take a partisan stance in the 1956 election, explaining that “the Negro has been betrayed by both the Democratic and Republican Party.”¹²⁸

Montgomery authorities grew increasingly intransigent toward the MIA during the fall, suggesting even that the protesters had bombed Graetz’s home as “a publicity stunt.”¹²⁹ At about the same time, city and state officials asked the Supreme Court to reverse the 5 June federal district court ruling in *Browder v. Gayle*. On 1 November, after Florida officials successfully shut down the car pool operated by Tallahassee bus protesters, the Montgomery city commission sought an injunction in the circuit court suspending the MIA’s own car pool operations. Judge Carter granted the circuit court injunction on 13 November, but news arrived during the hearing that the Supreme Court had unanimously affirmed *Browder v. Gayle*, declaring unconstitutional both the Montgomery and the Alabama bus segregation statutes. The following evening, King shared the joy of victory with several thousand supporters at two concurrent mass meetings: “Our feet have often been tired . . . , but we have kept going with the faith that in our struggle we have cosmic companionship, and that, at bottom, the universe is on the side of justice.” Yet even though the boycott was nearing its end, MIA leaders agreed to continue the protest until the Supreme Court decision was actually implemented.¹³⁰ Delayed by appeals, the court order did not arrive in Montgomery until 20 December. After spirited mass meetings that evening, at which King called on supporters to remain nonviolent and Christian in victory, African Americans returned to the buses.¹³¹ Early in the morning of 21 December 1956, King, joined by Abernathy, Nixon, and Smiley, boarded Montgomery’s first integrated bus.

Even as he celebrated the end of the bus boycott movement, King saw it as the beginning of a larger movement. Just days after achieving victory, he and the MIA began to expand the organization’s perspective beyond the circumscribed issue of segregated bus seating. King’s previous speeches had provided hints of his readiness to focus on broader civil rights concerns. At Dexter he had consistently called on members of the congregation to register to vote, and by May he was urging that the MIA’s committee on voting, as well as its committee to establish a

126. King et al. to Eisenhower, 27 August 1956, p. 357 in this volume.

127. See Warren Olney III to King, 7 September 1956, and Maxwell M. Rabb to King, 25 October 1956, pp. 365 and 405 in this volume.

128. King to Earl Kennedy, 30 October 1956, p. 409 in this volume.

129. Gayle, quoted in “Mayor Sees ‘Publicity Stunt’; Graetz Denies Bomb Hoax,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 August 1956.

130. See King, Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 14 November 1956, p. 425 in this volume. King incorrectly predicted that the Supreme Court mandate would come to Montgomery “in a matter of just a few days.”

131. King, Statement on Ending the Bus Boycott, 20 December 1956, pp. 485–487 in this volume.

Introduction credit union, be given more time at mass meetings “for purposes of getting the idea over to people.”¹³² In June he had asked those attending an MIA mass meeting to patronize African-American businesses. “Until we as a race learn to develop our power, we will get nowhere. We’ve got to get political power and economic power for our race.”¹³³ In December, determined to direct the energies of MIA members toward new objectives, he identified voter registration and desegregation of educational and recreational facilities as future projects. “We must work within our race to raise economic, health and intellectual standings. . . . We cannot rest in Montgomery until every public school is integrated,” he asserted at a mass meeting.¹³⁴

By late December King began to consider the possibility of creating a new regional organization that would offer tactical and strategic assistance to such grassroots protest movements in the South. Plans for such a coordinating organization had been discussed by a number of activists in the months following King’s trial. In May King had met with eighteen leaders, including his father and Abernathy, at a conference on the Morehouse campus organized by Glenn Smiley and FOR to discuss the future of nonviolence in the South. The conference, which A. J. Muste deemed “one of the most moving . . . and important” he had attended in his fifty years of Christian ministry, led to two training workshops on nonviolence in July, bringing together other leaders from around the South.¹³⁵ These meetings and workshops prompted King and the other participants to recognize the need for a “South-wide strategy” to develop nonviolent resistance to segregation.¹³⁶ Although Smiley and FOR played an important role in promoting such a strategy, those involved understood that a regional movement had to be led by black southerners. Randolph, for his part, had given approval to a plan for a “national passive resistance conference,” with the proviso that it would be “called by Reverend King or Reverend Abernathy.”¹³⁷

King and other southern black leaders took the first step toward building on the Montgomery movement when, in early December, the MIA hosted an Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change, which brought together African-American religious leaders and veteran nonviolent activists for a week of lectures and workshops. The institute served not only as a fund-raising event marking the MIA’s first anniversary but also as an opportunity, in King’s words, “to rededicate the community and the nation to the principle of non-violence in the struggle for freedom and justice.”¹³⁸ African-American Baptist ministers such as Jemison, Steele, and Shuttlesworth shared the stage with white ministers Smiley and Homer A. Jack.¹³⁹

132. King, “Recommendations to MIA Executive Board,” 24 May 1956, p. 272 in this volume.

133. Quoted in Ted Poston, “The Negroes of Montgomery,” *New York Post*, 15 June 1956.

134. Quoted in “New Fields Await Negroes, King Tells Mass Meeting,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 December 1956, p. 495 in this volume.

135. Muste, “The Magnolia Curtain?” 14 May 1956. See also Smiley, “Report from the South, II,” 15 August 1956.

136. Smiley, Minutes, Atlanta Conference, 12 May 1956.

137. Randolph to George D. Cannon, 21 June 1956.

138. King and Abernathy to Supporter, 27 November 1956, p. 442 in this volume.

139. Program, MIA Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change, 3–9 December 1956.

In his own address King reflected on the achievements of the previous year and set forth an ambitious agenda for future action. When the Montgomery bus boycott had begun a year earlier, King noted, participants could not have predicted its impact. "Little did we know on that night that we were starting a movement that would rise to international proportions." King depicted the Montgomery movement "as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America." African Americans throughout the nation had learned from the Montgomery protest that racial unity was possible, that "leaders do not have to sell out," that violence could not "intimidate those who are sufficiently aroused and non-violent," and that the "church [was] becoming militant." Convinced that "a new social order [was] being born" in the United States and among the nonwhite colonized peoples of the world, King called on his listeners to continue in nonviolent struggle and thereby participate in "the creation of the beloved community." Returning to a theme of his earlier speeches, King argued that the "new age" required "intelligent, courageous and dedicated" leadership. . . . In this period of transition and growing social change, there is a dire need for leaders who are calm and yet positive; leaders who avoid the extremes of 'hot-head[ed]ness' and 'Uncle Tomism.'"¹⁴⁰

Not long after King outlined his vision for the future, civil rights protests took place in several southern cities. On 24 December, three days after the Montgomery buses were desegregated, Steele and other Tallahassee activists attempted to ride the city buses on a desegregated basis and were arrested. A few days later, Birmingham protesters, led by Shuttlesworth, were also arrested for a similar action. On the day of the Birmingham arrests—one day after Fred Shuttlesworth's home was bombed—King telegraphed the protesters asking that they continue their nonviolent protest and, "if necessary, fill up the jails of Birmingham" before accepting segregation.¹⁴¹

As it became evident that the nonviolent methods of the Montgomery movement were applicable to the broader struggle for racial justice in the South, King worked closely during December with several northern activists to develop concrete plans for a new regional protest group. Rustin in particular stressed that King should build on the success in Montgomery. On 23 December he sent King a proposal outlining a "Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation" that would bring together regional leaders to "develop forms of local organization leading to an alliance of groups capable of creating a Congress of organizations." Assessing the historical importance of the bus boycott, Rustin's memorandum identified features, such as the involvement of "all social strata," that set the Montgomery protest apart from earlier integration efforts. "The achievement of unity, the intelligence in planning, the creation of a competent, complex system of transportation, the high level of moral and ethical motivation, all combined to give the closed mind of the white southerner an airing it has never before had," Rustin wrote. The new protest group, he predicted, would bring together

140. King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 3 December 1956, pp. 452, 453, 458, and 461 in this volume. Cf. similar remarks on the meaning of the Montgomery struggle in "Our Struggle," April 1956, pp. 236–241 in this volume.

141. King to Shuttlesworth, 26 December 1956, p. 496 in this volume.

Introduction leaders “able to guide spontaneous manifestations into organized channels. They will be able to analyze where concentration of effort will be fruitful and . . . be mobile enough to throw reserves and support to areas where a breakthrough is achievable.”¹⁴² A few weeks later King, joined by Shuttlesworth and Steele, issued a call for an Atlanta conference that would lead to the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.¹⁴³

At the end of 1956 King looked confidently toward the future, but he questioned his ability to meet the enormous responsibilities that had been thrust upon him. Still rejecting the notion that he was essential to the bus boycott movement, he occasionally expressed a longing to leave his MIA leadership position. When Stanley Levison, an MIA supporter in New York, met with King in person for the first time at the end of December, he recalled that King presented himself as a reluctant protest leader and that he appeared to be shy rather than “charismatic”—not “the type to be a mass leader.”¹⁴⁴ Whatever his preferences, King could not ignore the fact that he had acquired a devoted and demanding following as the movement’s preeminent leader. Already some followers and journalists had begun to see him as a prophetic figure—a “Moses” of the African-American freedom struggle. After learning of the bombing of his home, one churchgoer had told him that “for years, we Negro Mothers of the Southland have prayed that God would send us a leader such as you are.” She thanked God that “the Almighty has regarded our lowly estate and has raised *you* up among us.”¹⁴⁵

Numerous prominent black leaders acknowledged King as a religious and political leader of national importance. When the *Baltimore Afro-American* polled, among others, NAACP board chairman Channing Tobias, educator Nannie H. Burroughs, and college presidents Benjamin Mays and Horace Mann Bond, the respondents were nearly unanimous in nominating King as the outstanding American of the year and the bus boycott as the outstanding event. Mays extolled King for doing “something for America which had not been done before,” while Bond considered the boycott movement “the grandest, most significant thing ever to happen in these United States.”¹⁴⁶ William Holmes Borders, an Atlanta minister who had known King since childhood, also predicted an “unlimited” future for King: “There is no position in any church, religious body, University and etc. which you could not fill.”¹⁴⁷ Responding to such admiration, King routinely noted, as he did in a letter to someone who had voted for him for president of the United States, that such support gave him “a deep feeling of humility and a new dedication to the cause of freedom.”¹⁴⁸

As he began a new year, King reflected on the rapid transformation of his life

142. Rustin to King, 23 December 1956, pp. 492–493 in this volume.

143. See Press Release, “Bus Protesters Call Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration,” 7 January 1957, BRP-DLC.

144. Levison, interview with James Mosby, 13 February 1970, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

145. Pinkie S. Franklin to King, 31 January 1956, p. 116 in this volume. See also King, Address to Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 22 March 1956, p. 199 in this volume.

146. “Rev. King Picked ‘56 Top American,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 January 1957.

147. Borders to King, 19 December 1956, p. 485 in this volume.

148. King to Albert S. Bigelow, 24 November 1956, p. 438 in this volume.

since the start of the bus boycott. Although he was uncertain about the precise nature of his future role, he was determined to build on the Montgomery triumph. During the fall he had told acquaintances that he intended to write a book about the Montgomery movement, but discussions with New York publishers were unresolved. Other opportunities piled up on his desk. Scores of churches and organizations inquired about his availability to speak or serve on advisory boards. He received appeals from National Baptist Convention members to challenge J. H. Jackson for the group's presidency. His dissertation advisor, L. Harold DeWolf, asked if he would consider a faculty appointment. King turned down such offers, pleading unfinished business in Montgomery. To DeWolf he wrote, "I have had a great deal of satisfaction in the pastorate, and have almost come to the point of feeling that I can best render my service in this area."¹⁴⁹ He felt obligated to remain in Montgomery. "I feel that the confidence that the people have in me and their readiness to follow my leadership have thrust upon me a responsibility that I must follow through with," he explained to a fellow minister.¹⁵⁰

When King spoke to *New York Post* writer Ted Poston shortly after the boycott ended, he reaffirmed his decision to remain a pastor while engaging in the struggle for racial justice. "I do have a great desire to serve humanity," he told Poston, "but at this particular point, the pulpit gives me an opportunity and a freedom that I wouldn't have in any other sphere of activity." Recalling a conversation with J. Pius Barbour the previous April when his mentor teased him about his national fame, King expressed concern about the expectations he would encounter in the future. "Frankly, I'm worried to death," he recalled telling Barbour. "A man who hits the peak at 27 has a tough job ahead. People will be expecting me to pull rabbits out of the hat for the rest of my life."¹⁵¹

149. See King to DeWolf, 4 January 1957, MLKP-MBU: Box 15; and DeWolf to King, 10 December 1956, p. 468 in this volume.

150. King to W. H. Jernagin, 1 August 1956, p. 331 in this volume. Jernagin had asked King to consider becoming executive secretary of the National Fraternal Council of Churches (Jernagin to King, 21 July 1956). See also Gil Lloyd to King, 28 November 1956, pp. 443-444 in this volume; and King to Lloyd, 7 January 1957, MLKP-MBU: Box 61A. King repeated to Lloyd what he had written Jernagin about his responsibilities in Montgomery.

151. King, quoted in Ted Poston, "Martin Luther King: Where Does He Go from Here?" *New York Post*, 14 April 1957.