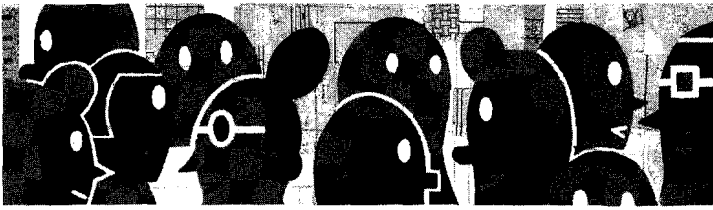


# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## THE MISSION

*Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final chapter.*

BY DAVID LEVERING LEWIS

In one of his more bizarre Oval Office confidences, Lyndon Johnson said that he didn't want to "follow Hitler" but that Hitler had the right idea: "Just take a simple thing and repeat it often enough, even if it wasn't true, why, people accept it." Johnson was speaking by telephone to Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama, about how to convince Southern whites that Southern blacks deserved the franchise. The curious political-science tutorial came on the afternoon of January 15, 1965, King's thirty-sixth birthday. Whatever he may have thought of Johnson's inaccurate analogy, King had already begun repeating, on television, in the press, and from church pulpits, the moral necessity of a guaranteed vote for every American, regardless of color. Two weeks earlier, King had publicly announced that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the alliance of Baptist preachers he led, would launch voter-registration protests in Selma, where fourteen thousand four hundred whites had, by legal ruse and naked force, limited fifteen thousand blacks to one per cent of the registration rolls.

Johnson, as recorded by the secret Oval Office taping system, both commended and cautioned King on his Selma strategy. He was, he said, committed to getting federal voting legislation enacted, but he implied that King's timing and his tactics were dangerously precipitate. Johnson's Great Society pro-

grams for Medicare, Medicaid, education, and poverty were pending, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had already depleted congressional good will. King was by then expert at telling Johnson what Johnson wanted to hear, and managed to interrupt the Presidential monologue long enough to tell Johnson what he felt Johnson needed to know. He pointed out that, in the five Southern states that Johnson lost to Goldwater in 1964, fewer than forty per cent of eligible African-Americans were registered to vote. A voting-rights act would produce a coalition of blacks and white moderates, changing the electoral map of the South. Johnson liked that. It could be his greatest achievement, he said—"It will do things that even that '64 Act couldn't do."

"At Canaan's Edge" (Simon & Schuster, \$35), the third and final volume of Taylor Branch's monumental chronicle, "America in the King Years," covers the period from 1965 to 1968, and charts civil-rights history as the parallel biographies of two tragic titans—Martin Luther King, Jr., the modern Moses, and Lyndon Baines Johnson, the would-be Lincoln. The tape of Johnson's phone call to King has inspired speculation about their collusion in the design and execution of the Selma-Montgomery campaign; one student of the period recently called it the Johnson-King voting-rights "pas de deux." Branch doesn't go

this far, but he briskly relates how Johnson moved from annoyed doubt about Selma to outright collaboration within a matter of weeks. He urged King to expose the worst of voting conditions in Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana, but he could hardly have had in mind the brutal reaction of Selma's sheriff, Jim Clark. For King's purposes, however, Clark and his deputies were ideal—studio-cast thugs guaranteed to provoke national outrage and instigate federal intervention.

The march from Selma to Montgomery is one of America's grandest sagas, a racial, regional, and constitutional crisis whose flash points illuminate the country's path to social democracy. In his earlier volumes, Branch followed King's first steps along that path. "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63" went from the Montgomery bus boycott to the March on Washington. After Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger aboard the bus, King's friend and fellow Baptist minister Ralph David Abernathy proposed the boycott, and King assumed leadership of what soon became the Montgomery Improvement Association. King and Abernathy moved to pastorates in Atlanta and founded the S.C.L.C., in order to capitalize on the gathering civil-rights momentum. After King made a visit to Gandhi's disciples in India, he developed a philosophy of nonviolent passive resistance out of what had been, back in Montgomery, a commonsense tactic. But it was the March on Washington, on August 28, 1963, that projected King indelibly into the national consciousness.

"Parting the Waters" ended with King at the head of a civil-rights movement that had long been dominated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, and faced with a pending civil-rights bill that Congress seemed unlikely to pass. But John F. Kennedy's assassination assured its passage, and it became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Branch's second volume, "Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65," followed the civil-rights path through an arena of white-supremacist violence in Birmingham, Alabama, and

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*The wary alliance between Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King may have been the high point of each man's career.*

in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer, and culminated in King's receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. On January 18, 1965, he registered as a guest at the Hotel Albert, in Selma, the first black man ever to enter the front door of this antebellum replica of the Doge's Palace, in Venice. The civil-rights bill behind him, Martin Luther King had gone to Selma to launch a voter-registration drive. It escalated into a virtual replay of Reconstruction.

In the engrossing narration of Branch's final volume, events seem to unfold almost in real time. On a late January morning, in two proud waves, more than a hundred teachers, the backbone of Selma's black middle class, shook off more than two generations of diffidence and gathered at the county courthouse, demanding to be registered, while Jim Clark barked orders to disperse them. Two weeks later, he arrested King and Abernathy as they led a demonstration of more than seven hundred local citizens. National newspapers carried pictures of scores of black youngsters being pursued by police cars and pickup trucks with electric cattle prods dangling from the windows.

On March 1st, King preached at the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, in Selma, and proclaimed, "We are going to bring a voting bill into being in the streets of Selma." These challenging words raised the stakes for a procrastinating Administration, as did the events at the Edmund Pettus Bridge the following Sunday. Branch's description of Bloody Sunday, one of this book's many effective set pieces, vividly captures the exact hour when the political order of the Deep South finally invalidated itself in the eyes of mainstream America. The carnage inflicted by municipal and state police at the bridge and along the marchers' route of retreat accomplished for voting rights what song, prayer, and marching had not. That evening, ABC was broadcasting the television premiere of "Judgment at Nuremberg." Suddenly, forty-eight million Americans who had been watching an elderly German couple protesting their innocence of the Holocaust were confronted with scenes of people choking on tear gas, snarling dogs tearing at flesh, baton-wielding troopers on horseback, and bruised and traumatized men, women, and children. The activist Hosea Williams, a war veteran, bellowed that

not even the Nazis had been more savage. Branch says, "The Nuremberg interruption struck with the force of instant historical icon."

King and Abernathy were not at the Pettus Bridge on March 7th; they were preaching to their respective congregations in Atlanta, something that Branch is more prepared to excuse than other commentators have been. Two days later, King led a second attempt to march across the bridge, but with dangerously equivocal results. Governor George Wallace, segregation's last best hope, ordered Alabama officials to hold the line at all costs while he and King sought injunctions against each other. Forbidden to conduct a second march toward Montgomery, King faced an unprecedented dilemma: defy a federal court order and jeopardize Presidential good will, or cancel the march across Pettus Bridge, demoralize thousands of ordinary men and women, and risk vindicating the deep mistrust of the movement's more radical factions, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Branch calls this chapter "Devil's Choice." King, having promised the Brown Chapel audience that he would "rather die on the highways of Alabama than make a butchery of my conscience," ended up doing the latter in the eyes of young militants. He ordered a retreat from the bridge just as the blocking phalanx of Alabama troopers stepped aside.

Still, it was probably the right choice for history. Eight days after Pettus Bridge, Lyndon Johnson delivered his "We Shall Overcome" speech to Congress, an example of Presidential oratory arguably unsurpassed in idealism and emotional impact. The reworked phrases of the speechwriter Richard Goodwin fell upon a hushed chamber. Speaking that night "for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy," the President pledged the Administration to secure "the full blessings of American

life" for the country's Negroes. "Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we—shall—overcome." Liberal whites were electrified; whites in the Deep South were stupefied. Johnson was indeed on the verge of altering the South's political landscape, but not in the way that he and King had discussed on the phone. The withdrawal of Southern whites' allegiance from the Democrats—the Great White Switch, as it has been called—gathered speed soon after Johnson's speech. On the other side—for instance, in the SNCC leader James Forman's sneering comment "That cracker was talkin' shit"—was the voice of rising black nationalism.

Branch's panoptic approach exposes telling juxtapositions: we see Johnson approving the reluctant recommendation of Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach for a public declaration on voting rights, and then ordering his ever-sanguine Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, to "go ahead tonight" and commence bombing Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson's tragedy, as Branch painstakingly (and perhaps too sympathetically) documents, is that his visionary domestic agenda was destroyed by the bombing of Vietnam.

Within a week of Johnson's stunning performance came the Selma-Montgomery march—a parade of citizens, film and other entertainment celebrities, national organizations, and religious delegations that rivalled the March on Washington, if not in numbers then at least in symbolism and spirit. George Wallace, having been alternately mauled and massaged into acquiescence during a three-hour Oval Office session, surrendered Alabama to Martin Luther King for five extraordinary days and nights. Three miles outside Montgomery—on a black Catholic academy's athletic field, where every famous name in America, from Belafonte and Bernstein to Odetta and Shelley Winters, seemed to be singing, playing, and speaking—twelve thousand pilgrims were exhilarated by King's preaching. His sermon was a stem-winder, beginning with an encapsulation of Reconstruction history and ending in a riff of magnificent call and response. "How long will justice be crucified and truth buried?" he asked,



and went on to provide the answer: "Not long!" Branch writes, "Already shouts echoed and anticipated his refrain at a driving pace, above cries of encouragement and a low roar of anticipation." King continued, "How long? *Not long!* Because the arc of the moral universe is *long*, but it bends toward justice. How long? *Not long!* Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The voting-rights bill became law on the sixth day of August, 1965, with Rosa Parks and King and the other principal civil-rights leaders present for the signing ceremony, at the Capitol. Almost from that moment, in Branch's telling, the reader has the sensation of watching history escape the control of the book's two main characters. The principal story lines (better balanced between the two men than in the second volume) are Johnson's sinking fast into the Vietnam quagmire, and King's increasing isolation as his mission expands to challenge America's fundamental social inequalities. The effect is like watching two bio-pics simultaneously. And, thanks to F.B.I. wiretaps and Oval Office tapes, the reader is at all times aware of each man's calculations about the other.

Before the end of 1965, Johnson had approved General William Westmoreland's request for more than a hundred thousand troops to supplement those already engaged in propping up the Saigon regime. In the course of Branch's book, the agonizing in the Oval Office, as the President alternately rails at and pleads with his advisers about the unwinnable Vietnam dilemma, starts to seem more farcical than tragic. "The North Vietnamese just said, 'fuck you,'" he tells a sympathetic U.S. senator. "They're winning—why would they want to talk?" George Ball, the Under-Secretary of State, tells the President in a secret memo that "humiliation would be more likely" than achieving U.S. objectives on the battlefield, while the historian and Presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., publicly warns of the terrible consequences of "either enlargement or withdrawal." Bewildered and bellicose, Johnson dreaded being seen as a President too indecisive to win a war. He put a determined face on the State of the Union address in January, 1966, and vowed to

continue the Great Society "while we fight in Vietnam." Still, he confided to one of his generals that he felt "a good deal of ice cracking" under his feet.

All these developments stoked the growing radicalism in SNCC, which was soon beyond the reach even of King's persuasive powers. He could only grimace when James Forman or Stokely Carmichael provided the media with inflammatory sound bites. "We're going to tear this county up," Carmichael told one gathering. King and the S.C.L.C. had hardly begun to plan the next chapter in nonviolent racial progress when the nation was confronted by the spectacle of the Watts riots, which began just five days after the Voting Rights Act was signed. Ten days after the signing, King risked his first public criticism of the Vietnam War. "Reporters bolted for telephones," Branch notes, after King, in an address to the S.C.L.C.'s annual convention in Birmingham, announced his intention to write personal appeals for peace negotiations to world leaders, including Ho Chi Minh. A month later, at the President's insistence, King and Arthur Goldberg, the Ambassador to the United Nations, engaged in a frank seventy-minute give-and-take on the issue of Vietnam. Speaking afterward to the U.N. press corps, King outlined his "unthinkable" proposals—a halt to bombing, negotiations with the Vietcong, and U.N. recognition of Communist China. The fury of the Administration at this and the disdain of the media nearly matched the negative reaction of the African-American leadership class. F.B.I. agents, listening in on a conference call between King and his advisers, heard a beleaguered King say, with a sigh, that he had to find a way to "gracefully pull out."

Both Vietnam and civil rights began to play poorly with much of the electorate as the midterm congressional elections approached. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Strom Thurmond, and other Republicans blamed Johnson for not conducting the war vigorously enough. At the polls, liberals signalled their lack of support for the war, and the congressional Democrats lost badly. In early March of 1967, Robert F. Kennedy suggested that the heavy bombing of Vietnam be suspended. Within twenty-four hours, headlines carried news of Kenne-

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dy's involvement in a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro. Branch sets out the facts, and the reader is left to connect the dots running from an avenging Oval Office to an obliging F.B.I. headquarters.

J. Edgar Hoover looms unforgettably in these pages. No reader who has digested the Church Committee reports will be surprised by Branch's evidence of F.B.I. transgressions against King and anyone else Hoover deemed un-American. Referring to King as "the burr head," Hoover provided Johnson with spurious reports of Communists at the center of the S.C.L.C. and with copious evidence of King's prolific extramarital calisthenics. Worse, he kept intelligence of assassination plots from King and barred F.B.I. agents from providing covert protection.

No longer primarily a Southern pastor fighting regional racism, Martin Luther King, as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, had acquired an emboldened sense of mission. The Voting Rights Act addressed political disenfranchisement; it was now time to address economic disenfranchisement, or so he had told an increasingly wary and distracted Johnson. King believed that, just as marching in Alabama had caused Johnson to embrace an accelerated voting-rights timetable, so marches exposing slums, unemployment, and inferior public schools in particular Northern cities would force the Administration and Congress to pass remedial legislation. However, he seriously underestimated the difference between targeting parochial Southern hierarchies and espousing a truly redistributive program that called into question the way of life of most middle-class white Americans.

King also found it bitterly hard to gain any credence for his evolving social prescriptions either from the stodgy N.A.A.C.P. and Urban League leadership or from the emergent inner-city activists of SNCC. SNCC officers, with the notable exception of John Lewis, dismissed him as too cautious. But a clear majority of the S.C.L.C. board felt that King was becoming too outspoken. For them, his antiwar pronouncements undermined the core mission of ongoing registration in the South.

Late in January, 1966, King surprised America by taking up residency in a ten-

ement apartment in Chicago—a city that was home to the world's largest public-housing complex and to two of the poorest census tracts in the country. After six months of bruising marches through ethnic neighborhoods, fruitless exchanges with Chicago's real-estate and education boards, and much shadow-boxing with the nimble mayor, Richard Daley, King was ill and starting to realize that the political terrain here was rougher than in the South. Then, Branch writes, he heard that "his latest staff prodigy," the young Jesse Jackson, "had committed him impulsively to a suicidal march." Jackson had shouted, "I'm going to Cicero!" The prospect of Jackson attempting to desegregate Cicero, one of the city's most entrenched white working-class suburbs, was terrible enough to bring King, Daley, Archbishop John Cody, the veteran community leader Al Raby, and seventy-five contending parties swiftly to the negotiating table.

At times, Branch serves up more content than interpretation, assuming that facts speak for themselves. The Chicago Summit Agreement on open-housing and employment objectives, we read, glossed over details, in fine language intended to "minimize potential ridicule" resulting from the fact that little had been accomplished. One wishes that Branch had attempted to assess more closely the damage that the Chicago campaign did to King's national standing and to the prospects of Johnson's Great Society. Three weeks after the Summit Agreement, the Civil Rights Act of 1966, containing open-housing provisions that Illinois's Senator Everett Dirksen called "a package of mischief for the country," failed to pass in the Senate. After the congressional Democrats' midterm disaster that fall, a brooding Johnson insisted that he hadn't "lost that election"; rather, "the Negroes lost it."

King had no illusions about what happened in Chicago, but, in his view, a worse failure—a failure of judgment—was his participation in the Meredith march across Mississippi: a "terrible mistake." Consulting no one, James Meredith had started a two-hundred-and-twenty-mile walk from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi, to establish the right of black men to walk in the Deep South unmolested. When, one day into his walk, he was shot by a sniper at the

Mississippi state line, King lent his name to an improvised, hyperbolic manifesto, then walked with three hundred and fifty student radicals to the Greenwood courthouse, where Stokely Carmichael shouted "Black power!" for the first time. This provocative slogan established Carmichael as a media phenomenon, and one who made Martin Luther King appear ineffective and dated. In January, 1967, a year after launching the Chicago campaign, King was no longer among the Gallup Poll's ten most admired personalities in America. "Whites have ceased to believe in him, or really care," a lengthy dismissal in *The New York Review of Books* alleged. "The blacks hardly listen."

King had begun to perceive that society tends to confine its indignation to injustices that can be attenuated without imperilling fundamental economic relationships. He was working in an era when the controversial Moynihan Report, which blamed black matriarchs and absent fathers for black poverty, rather than absent jobs, was widely accepted, whereas the prophetic Kerner Commission, indicting white society as "deeply implicated in the ghetto," was ignored. Near the end of Branch's fourteen-year saga of a nation alternately affirming and denying the centrality of race, there is a telling moment: Late one evening, while his advisers and lieutenants debated the S.C.L.C.'s next move after the disappointing 1966 Chicago campaign, King momentarily gave way to pressure. Branch writes:

King literally howled against the paralyzed debate. "I don't want to do this any more!" he shouted alone. "I want to go back to my little church!" He banged around and yelled, which summoned anxious friends outside his room until Young and Abernathy gently removed his whiskey and talked him to bed.

In the determination to omit nothing irrelevant, "At Canaan's Edge" seems to keep the entire era in view at all times—immigration reform, media coverage of civil rights, education, the work of NASA, the Six-Day War, campus unrest, and much else. Such perspective yields fine insights. While narrating the passage of the Voting Rights Act, Branch weaves in an extended discussion of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Then he vaults forward to remind us that, although neither politicians nor the press

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## BRIEFLY NOTED

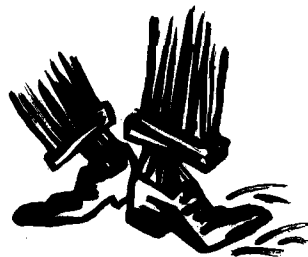
The Immigration Act's significance, at the time, it "rightfully joined the civil-rights laws as a third element of the freedom movement." Years later, he mentions, the author J. E. B. Stuart, a suburban high school named after a Revolutionary War cavalry general, came from the South.

Johnson and King met at the White House for the last time, in January 1966, their civil-rights passage was over. At Johnson's behest, King had unleashed Hoover to investigate politically compromising information about King. (To some, the King-L.H.K. relationship may have been the death of Henry II and Thomas Becket.) By the following spring, both men were set on irreversible and opposite courses. King's splendid anti-war speech in Manhattan's Riverside Church, on April 2, 1967, in which he called his government the "great purveyor of violence in the world today," placed him in the vanguard of the peace movement. For Johnson, there was the public-opinion disaster of the Tet Offensive, which began in January, 1968, followed by Democratic primary challenges from Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy. For King, there was the public-opinion disaster of the riots surrounding the Memphis garbage strike, which occurred in the midst of another controversy, concerning the Poor People's Campaign. And, on April 4, 1968, there was the fatal rifle shot on the Lorraine Motel balcony, fired by an assassin about whom this book says little more.

Martin Luther King, Jr., survived for a time the machinations of an unscrupulous national police force. He rose above the particularism of his own people in an almost quixotic and ultimately tragic attempt to deliver the entire country from racism, war, and greed. Taylor Branch, with his concluding volume, walks with the prophet and the President toward the promised land at the head of an interracial throng pledged to a new American covenant of social and economic justice. He leaves us there, pensive and remorseful, at Canaan's edge—King, his people, and all of us who were once inspired and then deceived by a great dream of a nation rising up to "live out the true meaning of its creed." ♦

*Dog Days*, by Ana Marie Cox (*Riverhead*; \$23.95). This first novel, by a former writer of the political blog *Wonkette*, aims at being a satire of Washington mores but comes off as Beltway chick lit. Melanie Thorton, a campaign worker for a Democratic Presidential candidate, is bored with her job, her life, and her affair with a married journalist. She launches a fictitious Internet diary intended to expose the seamier side of Washington life. When the career of the fake blogger, Capitolette, takes off, the deception comes to light. The situation is rooted, slightly, in real life: as *Wonkette*, Cox created a scandal when she linked to the blog of a Senate staffer who dished about her sexual escapades. But there's something self-defeating about a roman à clef that deals with people who were pseudonymous in the first place. And the plot's many twists just add more bones to the skeleton rather than fleshing it out.

*The Accidental*, by Ali Smith (*Pantheon*; \$22.95). Smith's book, which has just won Britain's Whitbread Novel Award, concerns an attractive stranger who shows up on the doorstep of an unhappy family and is unquestioningly taken in. The visitor, armed with a perfect combination of candor, free-spiritedness, and rough love, proceeds to manipulate each of her hosts. Just as abruptly, and, perhaps, predictably, she disappears. We never learn much about her—her only purpose, it seems, was to jolt the family members out of their respective messes—and her righteous self-assurance can get tiresome. But the novel is saved by its skillful and touching rendering of the mental state of each family member. Smith's well-honed, even obsessive prose gives a feeling of eavesdropping on her characters' innermost thoughts.



*State of War*, by James Risen (*Free Press*; \$26). Last month, the author, a *Times* reporter, broke, with his colleague Eric Lichtblau, the story of President Bush's authorization of warrantless domestic wiretapping by the N.S.A., in apparent defiance of Congress and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. This account doesn't go much beyond what has been in the *Times*—indeed, follow-ups have overtaken it—but Risen offers a useful perspective on what the C.I.A. has been doing since September 11th, and some devastating summary judgments. In the Bush years, Risen writes, "no other institution failed in its mission as completely." George Tenet, the director, pandered to Bush and to Donald Rumsfeld; the agency passed on weapons intelligence that many knew was bad; the abuse of prisoners became accepted. But the main leadership failure Risen sees is that of the President, who, he writes, got from the C.I.A. no more than what he asked for.

*Building Jerusalem*, by Tristram Hunt (*Metropolitan*; \$32.50). This fun, if meandering, intellectual history of city-building in Victorian Britain traces the evolution of grim industrialized towns, with their "rat-haunted slums" and "vomiting chimneys," through their heyday as wealthy cultural centers, and beyond. Hunt relates how a newly prosperous middle class, eager to legitimize its economic power and distance itself from accusations of philistinism, began "manufacturing a new cultural identity," in which architecture and government reflected social and moral values. Using various models—from the buccaneering "municipal gospel" of Joseph Chamberlain to the example of Renaissance Florence, with its traditions of self-government and public design—the Victorians created the Age of Great Cities. No model was wholly successful in combatting the miserable living conditions of the poor, and an "anti-civic" solution—the suburbs—signalled the end of "urbs triumphant." Yet, Hunt argues, aspects of the Victorian framework hold valuable lessons for revivifying contemporary cities.