

America, You Must Be Born Again
by Stewart Burns

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Martin Luther King Jr. made his first public statements against the Vietnam War in the summer of 1965. But harsh attacks from the White House and the press, coupled with lack of support from most of the civil rights community, initially led King to downplay his anti-war stance. After nearly two years of wrestling with the issue, however, King could no longer stay quiet, and he plunged deep into the difficult and controversial work of drawing out the connections between war, racism, and poverty. This excerpt from the forthcoming book *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sacred Mission to Save America*, gives a glimpse of King's transformative journey.

The stormy spring of 1967 marked a turning point not only for Martin King, the anti-war movement, and Lyndon Johnson, but for the nation and the world. Vietnam was the axis around which the whole planet seemed to be seeking new directions, new ways out of darkness. The coming 12 months would draw a dividing line in world history as critical as any in the 20th century.

Amid the vertigo of events, King may not have known whether he wanted one movement or two, or what their relationship ought to be. His double consciousness allowed him to see the peace and justice movements as both separate and combined; it depended partly on the audience he was speaking to. For several weeks in April and May he felt called to lead both movements. The dramatic entrance of the most prominent American to oppose the war had energized the movement like nothing else. Many thousands marched in New York because King was there.

Yet though he was used to the quarrelsome civil rights movement, he was not prepared for the chaotic new movement whose divisions made the civil rights community look harmonious. Unlike the latter, anti-war leaders desired King's symbolic might as much as they spurned his calling the shots. The peace train did not hanker for a new Gandhi.

But during the weeks that he stood front and center, he focused on charting a viable strategy to end the war. Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organizer James Bevel and key white activists had threatened mass civil disobedience in Washington, D.C., as the next step. King insisted that he was not ready to support civil disobedience. Nor at the other extreme would he heed pressure to run for president in 1968 as a peace candidate. He considered meeting with North Vietnamese leaders in Paris, but decided it would not be prudent. He gave guarded support to the "Dump Johnson" effort while promoting grassroots pressure for "negotiations now." He proposed a march on Washington, like the one in 1963, that would link the war with poverty-program cuts. That sounded too tame for

most anti-war leaders, who wanted to escalate their tactics – but were not sure how.

He joined with famed baby doctor Benjamin Spock in launching Vietnam Summer, an effort to mobilize thousands of students to go door-to-door and educate their communities about the war, to build the mainstream opposition that he felt essential to stopping the war. And he took a further step toward advocating outright resistance to the draft.

In February 1964, when young Cassius Clay won the world heavyweight boxing title, he announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam (he had secretly joined in 1961) and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Three years later, now a Black Muslim minister and a captain of Elijah Muhammad's elite guard, he professed to be a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. His white draft board denied his conscientious objector claim and ordered him into the army. After his lawyers exhausted all appeals up to the Supreme Court, he refused induction on April 28, 1967, in Houston.

"I'll never wear the uniform of the United States military forces," he told the press in Chicago. "I am not going 10,000 miles from here to help murder and kill and burn another poor people simply to help continue the domination of white slave masters over the darker people the world over." At the induction center, the champion asserted, "I will meet them head-on, and I'll be looking right into their pale blue eyes." The government swiftly indicted him for induction refusal. He was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. The boxing associations stripped him of his title. Whatever their opinion of Black Muslims, African Americans felt the assault on their hero as an assault on them all.

In a major sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church spelling out his Vietnam stand – Stokely Carmichael tapping his feet in the front pew – King congratulated Ali for his moral courage. "Here is a young man willing to give up fame, if necessary, willing to give up millions of dollars in order to stand up for what conscience tells him is right. It seems that I can hear the voice crying out through all the eternities saying to him this morning, 'Blessed are ye when men shall persecute you and shall call you all manner of evil for righteousness' sake."

As for himself, he declared, "I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophesy?" He called for Americans to repent. "The kingdom of God is at hand." He heard God saying to America, you are too arrogant. "If you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power." Ali was showing the way. Americans must take up the cross. "Before the crown we wear there is the cross that we must bear."

Ten days later, at an open-housing protest in Louisville, Kentucky, King was hit in the head by a rock after trying to reason with white teenagers menacing his car. "We've got to learn to live together as brothers," he had told them. That night he gripped the rock in his hand as he spoke at a rally. Soon after, he and Coretta picketed the White House with other activists in their first joint anti-war action. She had been protesting the war for years, quietly urging her

husband along. Finally he was following her example. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was used to talking with presidents face-to-face was now joining ordinary citizens who had to shout their peace chants through the wrought-iron White House gates.

At the end of May 1967, the SCLC held a staff retreat at a Quaker center on St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina. The center was originally one of the first schools for freed slaves. For three centuries black people slaving in the rice plantations had held tight to African customs on the Sea Islands, a cultural way station between West Africa and mainland America. The balmy seaside setting hardly distracted participants from the crisis they faced.

SCLC staff, mostly men with large egos, had always fought each other for King's favor. He encouraged among his subordinates the verbal sparring he was unable to engage in himself. Much of the internal conflict was healthy and productive. But since the stymied Chicago campaign, infighting had swung out of control.

King was a harried chief wearing three heavy hats—Ebenezer pastor, prophetic voice, and SCLC executive. Yet he had been unable to bring in a strong manager to handle the chaos, unwilling to give up the illusion of control. Morale had plummeted with confusion over SCLC's mission and funding cuts that resulted partly from King's Vietnam stand. The staff had to downsize. Except in Grenada, Mississippi, SCLC's fieldwork in the South had virtually dissolved. Was the civil rights movement over? Did SCLC have a future?

He answered yes to both questions at the retreat in a lengthy talk, "To Chart Our Course for the Future." King had often turned to oratory as an arbiter of or an escape from conflict, as if the power of his words could transcend the sticky wickets of human impasse, lifting himself and others to their higher selves, if only long enough to change the subject.

"It is necessary for us to realize," he explained, "that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights. When you deal with human rights you are not dealing with something clearly defined in the Constitution. They are rights that are clearly defined by the mandates of a humanitarian concern."

During the previous two years, when it became evident that the historic civil rights laws would not sweep away racism or poverty, he had come to see the inadequacy of individual rights. He grasped that "civil rights" carried too much baggage of the dominant tradition of American individualism and not enough counterweight from a tradition of communitarian impulses, collective striving, and common good. This subterranean tradition had been kept alive by peoples of color, especially blacks and American Indians. The polar strains of individualism and collectivism needed to be reconciled, as he strove to reconcile other opposites. His conception of rights shifted to a richer, comprehensive meaning that reflected his underlying biblical values.

By 1967 King seemed to be following the example of Malcolm X, who near the end of his life stressed the need to "expand the civil-rights struggle to a higher level – to the level of human rights." If the two leaders had been able to compare notes during Malcolm's last year, they would have discovered that each was drawing similar conclusions about the necessity to go beyond constitutional rights.

Both Martin and Malcolm were reconstructing the legacy of their forebears, such as Gabriel Prosser, Frederick Douglass, John Mercer Langston, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. Du Bois. From the end of the 18th century, African-American leaders had grounded their interpretation of rights in black spirituality and in what they saw as the divinely authorized Declaration of Independence, with its "amazing universalism," in King's words. Many African Americans had perceived their human rights, no matter how poorly fulfilled, as a covenant with their personal God intervening in history on the side of justice. "Blacks always believed in rights in some larger, mythologic sense – as a pantheon of possibility," legal scholar Patricia Williams noted.

According to this deeper view that King took on, rights were more than private possessions. They were a moral imperative that transcended individual needs. He was rehabilitating the old pre-industrial meaning of right: something that was right or just (righteous), that one therefore had a "right" to. Rights rightly understood were not whatever a person claimed as his or her due, with no boundaries; but what was required for all people, and thus for each, by the higher laws of justice and love. They were those entitlements that constituted the moral foundation of the beloved community.

Proper rights were limited by the same moral laws. Rights and responsibility were not a dichotomy but interwoven. Individuals had a moral responsibility to secure just rights for themselves and others. That was why, rooted in biblical faith, many African Americans experienced rights as shared resources. And why many have felt a duty to realize them not just on an individual basis, but for their people as a community or nation. This perspective diverged sharply from the classic liberal ideology of unbounded rights, owned by isolated, unencumbered selves devoid of community ties. King came to have hardly more affinity for such individualistic rights than he had for unbounded freedom or democracy, coins of the same realm.

"The great glory of American democracy," King said many times, "is the right to protest for right." The right to protest was authorized by the rightness or justice of the moral aim, not simply as a constitutional right justified in and of itself. "It is morally right," he wrote in his last book, "to insist that every person have a decent house, an adequate education, and enough money to provide basic necessities for one's family." Rights could no longer be traded off or compartmentalized. They were a body, indivisible, as illustrated by the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, which Malcolm had tied his kite to.

On the sunny sea island, he was calling for a full-blown human rights movement, a "human rights revolution" that would place economic justice at the center. The aim of the human rights movement would be to achieve genuine integration – meaning shared power – and genuine equality, requiring a "radical redistribution of economic and political power."

"For the last 12 years we have been in a reform movement." But "after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. We must see the great distinction between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement. We are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society." The rules must be changed. There must be a revolution of values. Only by reallocating and redefining power would it be possible to wipe out the triple interlocking evils of racism, exploitation, and militarism.

"You really can't get rid of one without getting rid of the others," he said. "Jesus confronted this problem of the interrelatedness of evil one day." In the gospel of John a rich man named Nicodemus came to Jesus and asked, What must I do to be saved?

"Jesus didn't get bogged down in a specific evil. He didn't say, now Nicodemus you must not drink liquor. He didn't say, Nicodemus you must not commit adultery. He didn't say, Nicodemus you must not lie. He didn't say, Nicodemus you must not steal. He said, Nicodemus you must be born again. Nicodemus, the whole structure of your life must be changed.

"What America must be told today is that she must be born again. The whole structure of American life must be changed."

When he finished his talk the gathering sang a rousing "Ain't Gonna Study War No More," King's lovely baritone clear as a bell.

Stewart Burns is the author of *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sacred Mission to Save America*, which will be published by Harper San Francisco in January 2004, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of King's birth. He was an editor of the King papers at Stanford University and currently teaches at the College of the Redwoods in northern California.

'An Escalation of Humanity'

Author Stewart Burns talks with Sojourners' Julie Polter on King's relevance for America today.

Sojourners: What about Martin Luther King has America tried to forget?

Stewart Burns: Many like to honor King only as he stood at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, frozen in time, talking about his dream of justice. But King lived for five more years,

during which he deepened his understanding of American society, especially what was needed in terms of solutions.

King had to come to grips with urban rebellions in cities across the United States that resulted from desperate poverty and dashed expectations. People in the ghettos were saying, Well, if we're supposed to have freedom now, where is it? We don't have jobs, we're massively unemployed, rats are attacking our babies. King, who had grown up middle class, really didn't understand poverty until the Watts revolt of 1965, when he went and talked to people there. He then took leadership in focusing the civil rights movement on economic justice and on a broad range of human rights. And he came to oppose the Vietnam War very strongly and bravely.

All of this had terrific repercussions on his credibility as a civil rights leader. He had been a genius at what I call radical moderation, but it got to the point where his radicalism won out and he could no longer be a moderate leader. He became a nonviolent revolutionary in the sense of deep adherence to the American creed of freedom, equality, and democracy and dedication to making it real for all.

Sojourners: Why do we need another book on King?

Burns: This nation is in the kind of desperate condition, the soul sickness, that King prophesied about in the late 1960s. When he prophesied that America would be doomed unless we solved these interwoven problems of racism, exploitation, and militarism, it was as if he was really talking about the 21st century.

There have been a number of excellent books about King, but they tend to present certain dimensions of his life and leadership without showing the integrated whole. I attempt to tie together King's civil rights and human rights leadership with his fundamental spiritual journey.

Sojourners: What could today's activists learn from King?

Burns: He clearly escalated his militancy in the last year of his life – he talked about the need to do massive civil disobedience that would dislocate the functioning of American cities. But as he became increasingly militant in his tactics, he also escalated his humanity. He became more and more fiercely dedicated to nonviolent tactics.

It's rather phenomenal to see how he could be so passionately committed to eliminating poverty, his final great crusade, yet at the same time be almost a fanatic about the need to adhere to nonviolence principles. Many activists today are doing magnificent things in terms of the global justice movement, very creative nonviolent actions. But they're not escalating their human concern for their adversary. They're escalating their commitment to justice, but

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not their compassion. King was a remarkable example of doing both at once.

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