

PARTING

THE WATERS

AMERICA IN THE
KING YEARS
1954-63



TAYLOR BRANCH



Simon and Schuster
Simon & Schuster Building
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10020

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Designed by Mary Beth Kilkelly/Levavi & Levavi
Picture research: Natalie Goldstein
Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Branch, Taylor.

Parting the waters: America in the King years, 1954-63 / Taylor Branch.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-671-46097-8 (v. 1)

1. Afro-Americans—Civil rights. 2. Civil rights movements—
United States—History—20th century. 3. King, Martin Luther, Jr.,
1929-1968. 4. United States—History—1953-1961. I. Title.

E185.61.B7914 1988

88-24033

973'0496073—dc19

CIP

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185.61
B7914
1988

For the Choir of
All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.

And in memory of
Septima Poinsette Clark

those others left off. . . . If you can do anything to turn them around, I'd appreciate it." When Seigenthaler responded groggily, Marshall said, "Diane Nash is at this number."

Seigenthaler roused himself to call the Nashville church where the crisis meeting was approaching its second consecutive dawn. The line was busy. Then, as newspaper presses rolled with morning headlines announcing the end of the Freedom Ride, and early-bird newscasters talked of President Kennedy's departure that morning on a two-day state visit to Canada, Seigenthaler began waking up people he knew in Nashville who might conceivably bring pressure on Nash, telling them about the grim realities of Birmingham. "I came through there," he said. "All hell is going to break loose. She's going to get those people killed."

In Nashville, maddening details consumed all of Tuesday, May 16. The smallest questions of logistics—should they ride segregated from Nashville to Birmingham, or should they stick to their principles at the risk of being stopped even before they could begin to take up the Freedom Ride?—opened large questions of philosophy and personal belief, and just when one issue seemed to be settled someone would confess an old doubt or a new fear. Phone calls from Seigenthaler, and from sobbing or angry parents who had just seen gruesome news footage of Jim Peck disembarking from the plane in New Orleans, destabilized the emotions beneath a wobbly consensus. That evening, with the divided Nashville adults agreeing to donate \$900 from the sit-in treasury without explicitly endorsing the student plan, Diane Nash pushed ahead with a call of final notice to Shuttlesworth. "The students," she told him, "have decided that we can't let violence overcome. We are going to come into Birmingham to continue the Freedom Ride."

"Young lady," Shuttlesworth replied in his most authoritative voice, "do you know that the Freedom Riders were almost killed here?"

"Yes," Nash said tersely. Her patience was almost spent. "That's exactly why the ride must not be stopped. If they stop us with violence, the movement is dead. We're coming. We just want to know if you can meet us."

She returned to the student group for the final and most difficult decision: which of the volunteers would be chosen to make the ride. It was treated as a life-or-death matter. There was money to buy ten bus tickets and retain a marginal reserve, they decided, and they left it to their chairman, James Bevel, to select the ten. Bevel first chose John Lewis, for leadership and for continuity with the original Freedom Ride. He said that he would not appoint Diane Nash, because she was too valuable as

the focal person in Nashville. In all, Bevel chose six Negro male students and two Negro females, plus a white student of each sex—all proven veterans of what Bevel called a "nonviolent standing army." He did not appoint himself, he explained, because he had made a commitment to drive to New York to pick up furniture to help a friend set up house after his upcoming wedding. This was precisely the kind of bourgeois attachment of which Nash and others were so scornful, but their disapproval did not reach to Bevel's other choices.

Nash relayed the details to Shuttlesworth, who began to speak in a crudely improvised security code—of different "chickens," some speckled and others Rhode Island Red, to be delivered to Birmingham at a specified time. FBI agents had informed him that the police were tapping his telephone. It was ten o'clock when the Nashville students finally dispersed. The selected riders received emotional farewells from the others. Some of them wrote out their wills. Some notified relatives, friends, teachers, and college deans. All of them went home exhausted to pack and try to sleep.

Selyn McCollum missed the Greyhound bus at dawn, and the lone white female overtook the group by car more than fifty miles down Highway 31, in Pulaski, Tennessee. There were no further disturbances—other than a whispered running argument over the insistence of Jim Zwerg, white, and Paul Brooks, Negro, on sitting together in violation of the generally accepted plan—until Birmingham police flagged down the bus at the city limit, nearly two hundred miles south of Nashville. Officers summarily arrested Zwerg and Brooks for their obvious violation of Alabama segregation law. Then some officers remained sternly at attention on board while others drove patrol cars in escort formation toward the terminal. More officers jumped inside on arrival. They guarded the front door, taped newspapers over all the windows, and then examined the ticket of each passenger wishing to leave. All those whose tickets originated in Nashville and called for travel to New Orleans by way of Montgomery and Jackson, Mississippi, were identified as Freedom Riders and told to stay on the bus. Those who insisted on their right to leave were treated roughly, pushed back into seats by billy clubs in the stomach. Selyn McCollum, seeing that the Freedom Riders were being isolated within the darkened bus, took advantage of the fact that her ticket read Pulaski instead of Nashville. "I'm not with this group," she said, holding out her ticket, and when she was permitted to exit, she ran through the gathering mob to call Diane Nash back in Nashville. Nash then called Burke Marshall's office at the Justice Department, asking why the Freedom Riders were being held against their will at the terminal.

they showed strength, then outside support would grow more than proportionately. Once started, however, they could not fall back without suffering letdown and depression, which in Birmingham risked a fatal outbreak of Negro violence. In no case, said Walker, could the Birmingham campaign be smaller than Albany. That meant they must be prepared to put upwards of a thousand people in jail at one time, maybe more. They had to keep the average jailgoer inside at least five or six days at a time before bailing out. Walker projected various bail costs to the SCLC against jail costs to the city. Given the estimated value of the weekly Negro shopping power, he calculated the dollar and percentage losses to the downtown merchants from the boycott at various degrees of success. To work, the plan required extensive preparation, perfect timing, and loads of money.

Walker had a flair for the dramatic. He called his entire blueprint Project C—for Confrontation. Assuming that Bull Connor would tap the phones, he assigned to the major leaders protective code names that reflected his aching respect for white authority. King would be "JFK," said Walker. Abernathy would be "Dean Rusk" (which was not much to Abernathy's liking). Walker himself would be "RFK." John Drew, the Birmingham insurance man in whose home King would be staying, would be "Pope John." Shuttlesworth, the movement's war chief, would be "Mac," after Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Walker's presentation was at once breathtaking and quixotic. It envisioned a precisely organized march into history by an organization that had taken four years to find a mimeograph machine.

Still, it was Walker's finest hour at the SCLC. Not a comma of the blueprint was altered when he finished. Instead, the conclave spent nearly two days talking and praying that it would work. Among their advantages was the relative vacuum of competition in Birmingham. The NAACP, still outlawed in Alabama, was not a factor, and SNCC had no projects in Birmingham. Shuttlesworth was the unquestioned master of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), which had not missed a Monday mass meeting in nearly seven years. So long as King and Shuttlesworth got along, there would be no paralyzing schisms. Another potential advantage was Birmingham's economic structure. It remained largely a Carpetbagger city, answerable to steel interests and other corporate power in the North. Walker and O'Dell had been making lists of the companies, so that SCLC supporters could exert leverage on their home bases.

On the other side, the ACMHR could provide only a fraction of the manpower they would need, and they acknowledged that their support was spotty at best among the bulk of Birmingham's Negro leaders. A. G.

Gaston might well oppose them. The pastor of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had been badgering the SCLC to pay for the cost of burning the church lights for two nights during the previous September convention—hardly a sign of wholehearted support. Andrew Young said his canvass of the Birmingham preachers had not been encouraging, and Walker admitted that the conservative Negro Ministerial Association might actively oppose them. They ran through the preachers, name by name, until Shuttlesworth interrupted them. "Don't worry, Martin," he said. "I can handle the preachers."

King managed a smile. "You better be right," he replied.

Bull Connor loomed over the discussion. He had made Birmingham into his private fiefdom of segregation, with bareknuckled police tactics that had done nothing to discourage a tradition of vigilante violence. Negro Birmingham was dotted with bomb sites to prove it. The prospect of violence posed no ethical problems for King. "If it comes, we will surface it for the world to see," he said. The issue was whether Project C could withstand systematic repression. Most of the eleven said they needed to move quickly, while the Birmingham reform movement had the whites divided and Connor on the defensive.

Toward the end of the second day, King turned solemnly to O'Dell. "Jack, tell me about the money," he said. "If we run dry again in the next few months, the press will say we went into Birmingham just to get out of debt."

O'Dell was ready with his projections. The SCLC had earned a net profit of \$25,000 in the last quarter of 1962, he said, not counting the \$12,000 realized from the Sammy Davis fund-raiser, and mass appeals from the New York office promised to double or triple the 1962 revenues. "We are mailing now in lots of 200,000," he reported, to lists of proven return rates. Based on the mailings already out from the New York office and those in the works, O'Dell predicted confidently that direct-mail income would more than pay for the SCLC's regular expenses through the first six months of the year.

On O'Dell's word, King stopped talking about postponing Birmingham for a grand fund-raising tour. Instead, he went around the table asking his colleagues for closing thoughts. Some gave chipper speeches; others passed. Stanley Levison reminded them of Bull Connor's formative political experiences in the 1930s, when he had broken Birmingham's labor movement as a steel company employee. Relatively speaking, he said, the labor movement of the thirties was more powerful than the civil rights movement of the present. Therefore, they could make no mistakes now. They were in for a rough fight.

King closed the meeting somberly. "There are eleven people here as-