

**A  
Dramaturgical  
Casebook**

**THE  
MOUNTAIN TOP**  
**BY KATORI HALL**

**Dramaturg: Liv Fassanella**

**Director: Jamil A.C. Mangan**

**March 4 - 22, 2026**

**PLAYHOUSE  
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# About the Playwright

From [katorihall.com](http://katorihall.com)

Katori Hall is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright hailing from Memphis, Tennessee. She is currently the showrunner and executive producer of the hit Starz drama, *P-Valley*, adapted from her play *Pussy Valley*. The critically acclaimed, record-breaking, and Emmy-nominated series has received countless honors, including the NAACP Image Award for Best Drama Series.



*Katori Hall*

Katori's most recent work for the stage, *The Hot Wing King*, won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. She also wrote and produced the smash Broadway musical, *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, receiving two Tony Award nominations for her work as both playwright and producer. For the musical's acclaimed West End production, she also received an Olivier nomination for 'Best New Musical.'

Her play *The Mountaintop*, which vividly reimagines the final night of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, premiered at Theatre503 in London in 2009, then transferred to the West End, where she won the Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2010. In October 2011, an acclaimed production of the play opened on Broadway, starring

Katori's other work for the stage includes the award-winning *Hurt Village*, *Hoodoo Love*, *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning*, *WHADDABLOODCLOT!!!*, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (its Olivier-nominated production named one of the best plays of the 21st century by *The Guardian*), *Children of Killers*, *Purple is the Colour of Mourning* and *The Blood Quilt*.

She is a 2025 American Academy of Arts & Sciences inductee and the recipient of many awards, including the Columbia University Medal of Excellence, the American Academy of Arts & Letters Award in Literature, Black Women Film Network StorytellHER Award, AUDELCO Award for Best Playwright, the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, the Lark Play Development Center Playwrights of New York (PONY) Fellowship, two Lecompte du Nouy Prizes from Lincoln Center, the Fellowship of Southern Writers Bryan Family Award in Drama, the Columbia University John Jay Award for Distinguished Professional Achievement, the National Black Theatre's August Wilson Playwriting Award and the Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award.

Katori is a graduate of Columbia University, the American Repertory Theater Institute at Harvard University, and The Juilliard School. She is an alumna of the Sundance Episodic Lab's inaugural class, as well as the Sundance Screenwriting Lab. Katori also participated in Ryan Murphy's Half Initiative Directing Program and directed the award-winning short, *Arkabutla*.

She is a proud Ron Brown Scholar, Coca-Cola Scholar and National Theatre U.S. Art Council member.

# Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

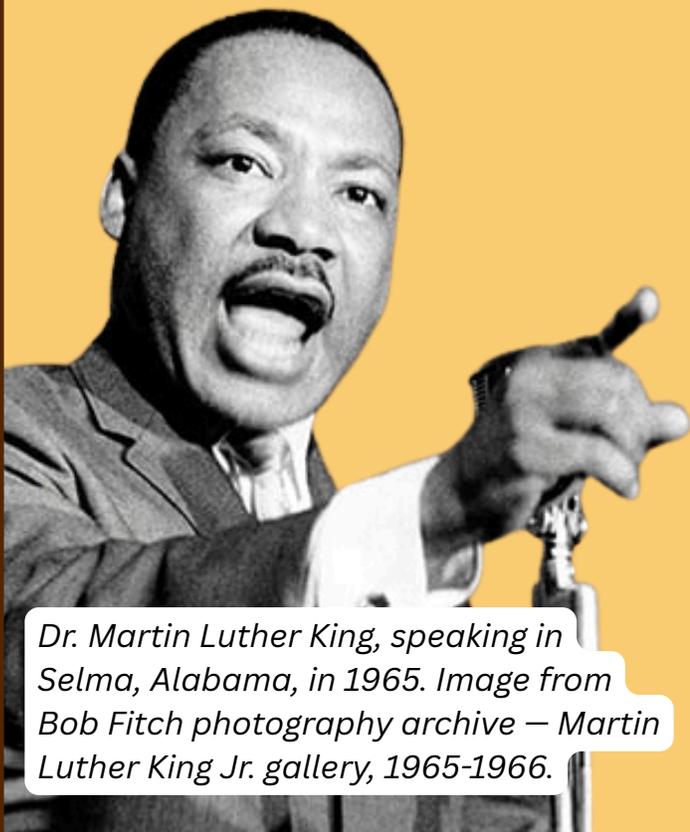
## From NAACP.org

No figure is more closely identified with the mid-20th century struggle for civil rights than Martin Luther King, Jr. His adoption of nonviolent resistance to achieve equal rights for Black Americans earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King is remembered for his masterful oratorical skills, most memorably in his "I Have a Dream" speech.

### Early Life and Education

Born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, King was heavily influenced by his father, a church pastor, who King saw stand up to segregation in his daily life. In 1936, King's father also led a march of several hundred African Americans to Atlanta's city hall to protest voting rights discrimination.

As a member of his high school debate team, King developed a reputation for his powerful public speaking skills, enhanced by his deep baritone voice and extensive vocabulary. King left high school at the age of 15 to enter Atlanta's Morehouse College, an all-male historically Black university attended by both his father and maternal grandfather.



*Dr. Martin Luther King, speaking in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. Image from Bob Fitch photography archive – Martin Luther King Jr. gallery, 1965-1966.*

After graduating in 1948 with a bachelor's degree in sociology, King decided to follow in his father's footsteps and enrolled in a seminary in Pennsylvania before pursuing a doctorate in theology at Boston University. While studying, King served as an assistant minister at Boston's Twelfth Baptist Church, which was renowned for its abolitionist origins. In Boston, he met and married Coretta Scott, a student at the New England Conservatory of Music.

### **Joining the Civil Rights Movement**

After finishing his doctorate, King returned to the South at the age of 25, becoming pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Shortly after King took up residence in the town, Rosa Parks made history when she refused to give up her seat for a white passenger on a Montgomery bus.

Starting in 1955, Montgomery's Black community staged an extremely successful bus boycott that lasted for over a year. King, played a pivotal leadership role in organizing the protest. His arrest and imprisonment as the boycott's leader propelled King onto the national stage as a lead figure in the civil rights movement.

With other Black church leaders in the South, King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to mount nonviolent protests against racist Jim Crow laws. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's model of nonviolent resistance, King believed that peaceful protest for civil rights would lead to sympathetic media coverage and public opinion. His instincts proved correct when civil rights activists were subjected to violent attacks by white officials in widely televised episodes that drew nationwide outrage. With King at its helm, the civil rights movement ultimately achieved

victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

### **Nonviolent protest gains traction**

In 1959, King returned to Atlanta to serve as co-pastor with his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. His involvement in a sit-in at a department 1960 presidential election between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Pressure from Kennedy led to King's release.

Working closely with NAACP, King and the SCLC turned their sights on Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, organizing sit-ins in public spaces. Again, the protests drew nationwide attention when televised footage showed Birmingham police deploying pressurized water jets and police dogs against peaceful demonstrators. The campaign was ultimately successful, forcing the infamous Birmingham police chief Bull Connor to resign and the city to desegregate public spaces.

During the campaign, King was once again sent to prison, where he composed his legendary "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in response to a call from white sympathizers to address civil rights through legal means rather than protest. King passionately disagreed, saying the unjust situation necessitated urgent action. He wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

### **History-making marches**

In 1963, King and the SCLC worked with NAACP and other civil rights groups to organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which attracted 250,000 people to rally for the civil and

economic rights of Black Americans in the nation's capital. There, King delivered his majestic 17-minute "I Have a Dream" speech.



Along with other civil rights activists, King participated in the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965. The brutal attacks on activists by the police during the march were televised into the homes of Americans across the country. When the march concluded in Montgomery, King gave his "How Long, Not Long" speech, in which he predicted that equal rights for African Americans would be imminently granted. His legendary words are widely quoted today: "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Less than six months later, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act banning disenfranchisement of Black Americans.

### **Death and legacy**

Over the next few years, King broadened his focus and began speaking out against the Vietnam War and economic issues, calling for a bill of rights for all Americans.

In the spring of 1968, King visited Memphis, Tennessee, to support Black sanitary workers who were on strike. On April 4, King was assassinated by James Earl Ray in his Memphis hotel. President

Johnson called for a national day of mourning on April 7. In 1983, Congress cemented King's legacy as an American icon by declaring the third Monday of every January Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

King was honored with dozens of awards and honorary degrees for his achievement throughout his life and posthumously. In addition to receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, King was awarded the NAACP Medal in 1957 and the American Liberties Medallion by the American Jewish Committee in 1965. After his death, King was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and received the Congressional Gold Medal in 1994 with his wife, Coretta.

King's legacy has inspired activists fighting injustice anywhere in the world. NAACP has carried on King's work on behalf of Black Americans and strives to keep his dream alive for future generations. We take inspiration from his closing remarks at the NAACP Emancipation Day Rally in 1957: "I close by saying there is nothing greater in all the world than freedom. It's worth going to jail for. It's worth losing a job for. It's worth dying for. My friends, go out this evening determined to achieve this freedom which God wants for all of His children."



*Photo by Julien Wasser*

**"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."  
— Martin Luther King, Jr.**

# Coretta Scott King and Black Femme Invisible Labor

by Zarina Crockett and Daniela “Dani” Capistrano

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is an opportunity to both honor MLK’s legacy and the extraordinary woman who helped make that legacy possible: Coretta Scott King.

Like many Black women and femmes throughout history, Coretta’s role in the civil rights movement has at times been diminished and outright ignored. Today and every day, join us in honoring Coretta’s enduring influence that reverberates beyond her time and beckons us to carry on the march toward justice

## Upholding a Dream, Paving New Paths

From her early days in Marion, Alabama, Coretta Scott King was a symphony of strength and intellect. A talented singer and a scholar, Coretta’s life took a pivotal turn when she met MLK in Boston in the early 1950s. Coretta was more than moral support; she was a campaign manager, strategist, and integral to fundraising and addressing the public—often with her children in tow.



Coretta Scott King

Coretta's journey did not end with MLK's death; it simply took on a new dimension. She was instrumental in the establishment of The King Center and played a critical role in making Martin Luther King Jr. Day a reality.

### **Honoring the Invisible Labor of Black Femmes**

The narrative of Coretta's life is one of invisible labor, a theme that resonates deeply with the experiences of Black femmes in the civil rights movement.

Invisible work—a term coined by sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels to describe work that goes unpaid, unacknowledged, and thus, unregulated—is compounded by anti-Blackness and misogynoir.

Additionally, Coretta was a visionary who saw life at the intersections, therefore supporting LGBTQ+ rights, because she recognized the value of Black queer and trans people and allies. Among many acts of solidarity, in 1998 Mrs. King gave the keynote at an event marking Lambda Legal's 25th anniversary.

As Imara Jones powerfully states, “Coretta Scott King reminds us that this day is for everyone who has been left out & left behind... She & Dr. Martin Luther King believed in the equality of us all.”

Coretta herself fought to address the erasure of Black femmes' roles, ensuring their contributions would be recognized.

### **Not Just Dr. King's Wife**

In celebration of Coretta Scott King, we honor her grace and activism that continues to inspire generations of people worldwide in the fight for justice and equality.

As Imara Jones reminds us, “the Dr. King we know so much

about would not have been possible without [Coretta] and others like her.”

Most importantly, Rev. Bernice King, daughter of Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr., wants the world to know her mother was not a prop. The couple’s youngest daughter recently shared a photo of her mother on X after Jonathan Majors compared his girlfriend, actress Meagan Good, to the civil rights leader in his first interview since being found guilty of assault and harassment.

“My mother wasn’t a prop,” King, who leads The King Center in Atlanta, wrote in the social media post. “She was a peace advocate before she met my father and was instrumental in him speaking out against the Vietnam War. Please understand...my mama was a force.”

Coretta’s legacy is the enduring power of her voice and influence, along with the importance of recognizing the unseen efforts of those who stand, not behind, but alongside the greats in our collective history.



*Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King on June 8, 1964 in New York. (AP)*

# Memphis Sanitation Strike (1968)

by Samuel Momodu

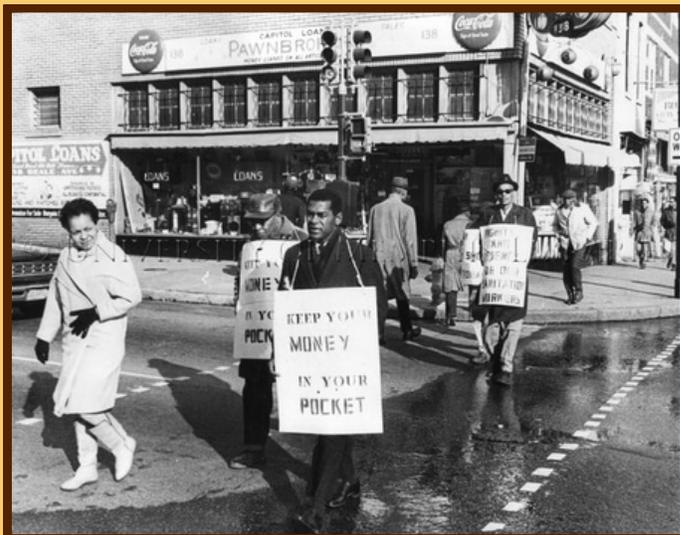
The Memphis Sanitation Strike occurred between February 12 and April 16, 1968. The sanitation strike was called in response to the deaths of sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker and in response to the racial discrimination that Black sanitation workers experienced. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, who was organizing the Poor People's Campaign at the time, came to Memphis to support the sanitation workers. His presence led to his assassination on April 4, 1968.



*National Guard and striking sanitation strikers. Source: Joshua Rashaad McFadden.*

February 1, 1968, two Memphis garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning garbage compactor truck where they were taking shelter from the rain. On February 12, 1968, around 1,300 Black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike. T.O. Jones, a garbage collector turned union organizer, led the Sanitation Workers. They were supported by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The main goal of the strike was to demand recognition of the union, better safety standards, and a decent wage.

On February 22, 1968, the Memphis City Council voted to recognize the union and recommended a wage increase. Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb, however, rejected the vote, insisting that only he had the authority to recognize the union. He refused to do so. On February 24, 1968, Rev. James Lawson led a meeting at Clayborn Temple Church, which created a local civil rights organization, Community on the Move for Equality (COME), to support the sanitation workers.



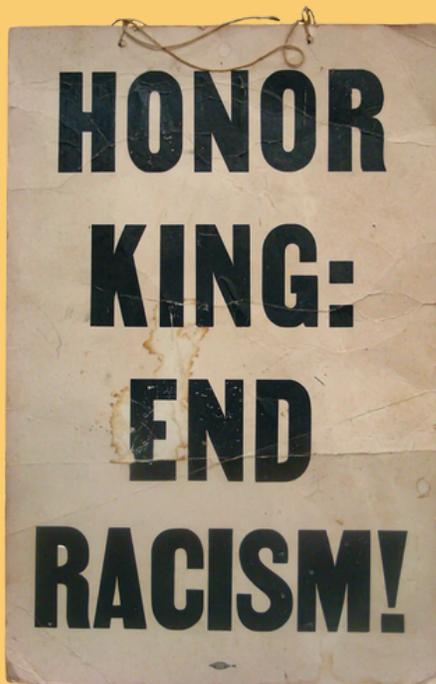
*Memphis sanitation workers march on Beale Street,*

In March, Lawson invited Dr. King to come to Memphis to speak to sanitation workers. Other civil rights leaders, including Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin, came to Memphis to support the sanitation workers. On March 18, 1968, King arrived and

spoke to 25,000 people at Mason Temple, a prominent Memphis Church. King encouraged the crowd to support the sanitation strike by enacting a citywide work stoppage. He also promised to return to Memphis on March 22 to lead a protest through the city.

The following day, King left Memphis, but SCLC members James Bevel and Ralph Abernathy remained in the town to help organize the protest and work stoppage. On March 22, a massive snowstorm hit Memphis, causing King to cancel his return to the city and local organizers to reschedule the march for March 28. On that day, King and Lawson planned to lead the sanitation strikers and marchers through downtown Memphis. City officials estimated that 22,000 students skipped school to participate in the march. King arrived late and found the crowd on the brink of chaos. He quickly called off the demonstration as violence began to erupt, and he was taken to a nearby hotel for his own safety. During the violence, police officer Leslie Dean Jones shot and killed 16-year-old Larry Payne. In response, Mayor Loeb declared martial law and brought in 4,000 National Guard troops to calm the violence.

On April 2, 1968, around 600 people attended Payne's funeral at Clayborn Temple. The following day, King returned to Memphis a third time to visit Payne's mother. The next day, King gave what would be his final speech at the Mason Temple, I've Been to the Mountain Top. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel. Following King's assassination, the city of Memphis recognized the AFSCME, and wages were increased for the sanitation workers.



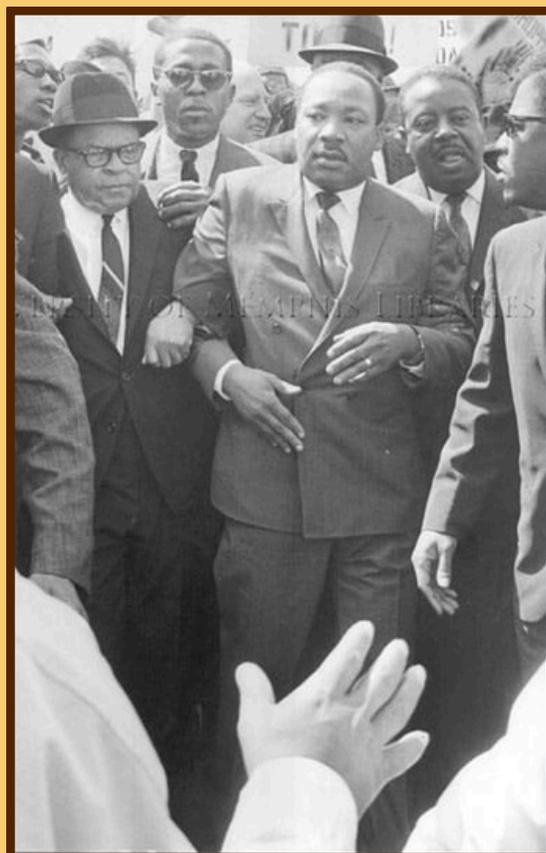
*Protest sign*



*Officer, Leslie Dean Jones assaulting young protestors. The boy in the white shirt behind the officer is Larry Payne.*



*Marchers and guardsmen, Memphis, 1968.*



*Dr. Martin Luther King*



*Lorraine Hotel*

# Larry Payne

From PBS.org

*Age 16*

*One of hundreds of students who skipped school amid a historic event*

*Memphis, Tennessee  
March 28, 1968*



In February 1968, a garbage truck in Memphis, Tennessee, malfunctioned and crushed two garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker. Their deaths led to a weeks-long strike by 1,300 Black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works, punctuated by protests against the city's treatment of Black workers. News of the strike reached Martin Luther King Jr., who traveled to Memphis for a march on March 28, 1968 – days before his assassination.

Hundreds of students skipped school to join the historic event, including Larry Payne. Police responded with violence and, amid the unrest, Payne reportedly joined a group of young men who were looting a local Sears store. A white police officer, Leslie Dean Jones, chased Payne, who was Black, to a boiler room of the housing complex where Payne lived. According to a 2011 Department of Justice memo about the case, Jones said he yelled for Payne to come out, and that when Payne cracked open the boiler room door, his right hand was lowered and holding a knife. Jones said that on seeing the knife, he shot Payne in the abdomen.

## **Initial Investigation**

The Memphis Police Department investigated the shooting locally, while the FBI opened a federal investigation. Evidence included a police photo of a butcher knife – local police said they found the knife near the boiler room door – as well as multiple witness statements. Numerous people from the housing complex said they saw the shooting. The details of their accounts varied, although none had observed a knife in Payne’s hand, according to the 2011 DOJ memo about Payne’s case.

The FBI submitted the local and federal investigation reports to the Department of Justice. The DOJ closed its investigation in 1971 due to problems with “the credibility of the witnesses and because we cannot explain how a knife was found near the victim’s body,” according to the 2011 memo.

A Shelby County grand jury declined to bring criminal charges against Jones. Payne’s parents then filed a federal civil suit alleging wrongful death, negligence, personal injury and deprivation of civil rights. Jones said he acted in self-defense, and a jury ruled in his favor.

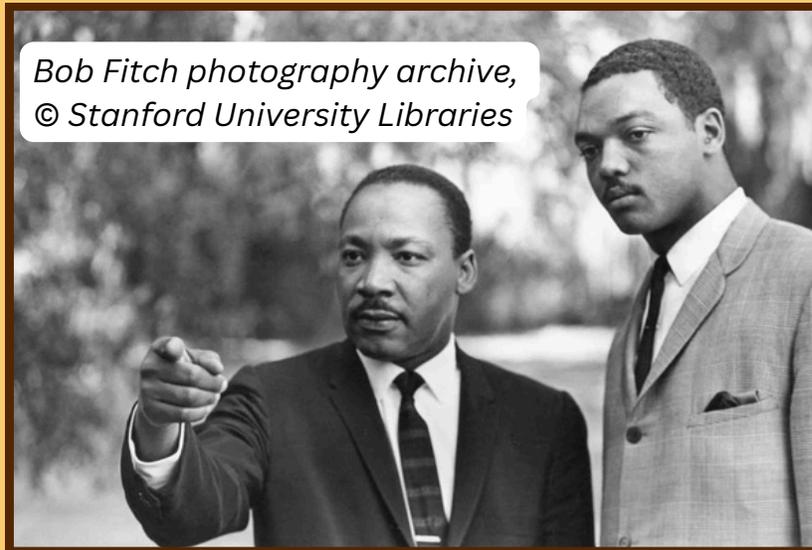
## **Till Act Status**

The FBI opened a review of Payne’s case in 2007, during which it interviewed three witnesses and obtained old newspaper articles, as well as police and court records.

According to the 2011 DOJ memo, the review “focused solely on whether there is sufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the subject willfully used excessive force when he fired his weapon at the victim.” The department concluded that there was not and therefore closed the case in 2011. Jones died in 2019.

# Jesse Louis Jackson

From [kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu)



In 1966, Jesse Jackson began to lead Operation Breadbasket, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) program in Chicago. Often seen as Martin

Luther King's protégé, Jackson quickly earned a place among King's inner circle. Although King found Jackson's ambition troubling at times, SCLC executive vice president Andrew Young called Jackson "a natural-born leader" (Frontline, "Interview with Andrew Young").

Jackson was born in Greenville, South Carolina, on 8 October 1941 to an unmarried, teenage mother. Jackson was both an honor student and class president in high school, and he received an athletic scholarship to the University of Illinois in 1959. He moved back to South Carolina after one year, however, transferring to Greensboro's North Carolina A & T College. In Greensboro, he became active in the civil rights movement, joining the local Congress of Racial Equality chapter and participating in sit-ins and demonstrations. Aware of SCLC's work at the time, a precocious Jackson wrote King: "Dear Sir, I don't think you'll ever bring God to Albany, Georgia. For He's wise enough to wait till  $E=MC^2$  brings change there. Best of luck, though" (Jackson, 7 August 1962).

In 1964, Jackson graduated from college and moved to Chicago on a Rockefeller grant to study at Chicago Theological Seminary. In March 1965, he organized a group of fellow students to drive down to Selma, Alabama, answering King's call for supporters of the local voting rights campaign. Before returning to Chicago, Jackson asked Ralph Abernathy for a staff position with SCLC in order to lay the groundwork for a Chicago Campaign. Although King hardly knew Jackson, he took a chance and hired him.

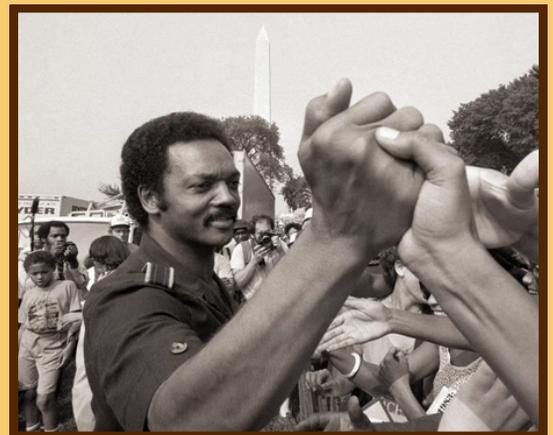
In January 1966, King moved to Chicago to launch SCLC's northern movement. Jackson soon dropped out of seminary to help King full time, becoming the Chicago coordinator of SCLC's economic development and empowerment program, Operation Breadbasket. King was impressed by Jackson's ability to lead Breadbasket, saying, "We knew he was going to do a good job, but he's done better than a good job." Jackson was soon promoted to national leader of Operation Breadbasket. King told a Chicago audience that no one could be "more effective" than Jackson (King, 6 January 1968).

Despite King's praises of Jackson's work, a few days before King's assassination he criticized Jackson for following his own agenda rather than supporting the group. Jackson, hurt by his mentor's disapproval, told him, "Everything's going to be all right" (Frady, 225). King angrily replied that everything was not going to be alright and that he needed Jackson and all of the SCLC staff to work toward a common vision for America. King and Jackson reconciled in Memphis, Tennessee, after King called Jackson in Chicago and asked him to join him. Jackson was talking with King from below the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when King was killed.

After King's death in April 1968, Jackson continued to run Operation Breadbasket. Following in King's footsteps, he was ordained a Baptist minister. Newspaper articles after King's death called him "King's successor," and wrote of him as "the most persuasive black leader on the national scene" ("Emerging Rights Leader"). Despite tensions among the SCLC leadership, Jackson stayed with SCLC until 1971, when he formed his own organization, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH). In 1984, Jackson founded the National Rainbow Coalition, a social justice organization, and sought the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, winning 3.5 million votes and helping to register a million new voters. In his second bid for the nomination in 1988, Jackson won several primaries before being defeated by Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. In 1996, the National Rainbow Coalition merged with PUSH to form the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. Jackson's latest organization, the Wall Street Project, continues Operation Breadbasket's mission to create economic opportunity for minorities.



*Martin Luther King stands with Jesse Jackson on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, a day before he was assassinated at approximately the same place. Photograph: Associated Press*



*Jesse Jackson*

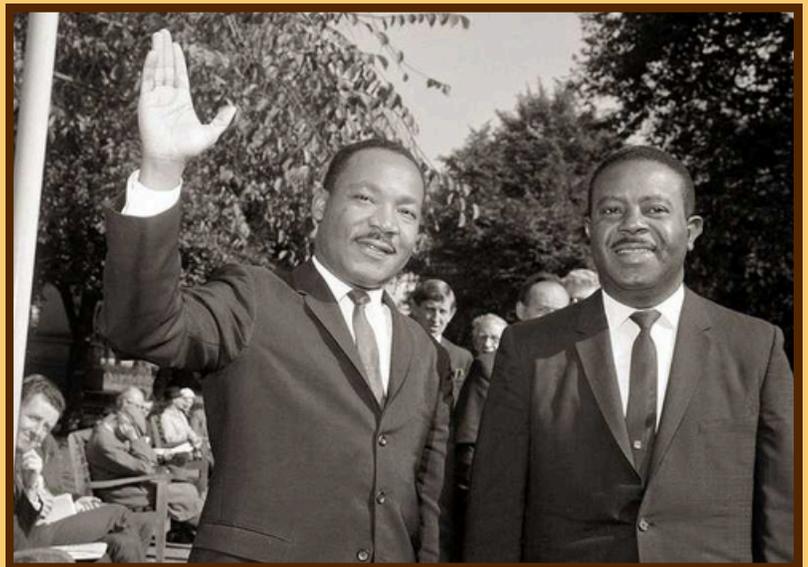
# Ralph D. Abernathy

by Samantha Nicholas Kealoha

Ralph David Abernathy was born on March 11, 1926 in Linden, Alabama. His boyhood was spent on his father's Alabama farm but he joined the U.S. Army and served in World War II from 1941 to 1945. After his service Abernathy returned to his home state where he attended Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama, receiving a degree in Mathematics in 1950.

During his years at Alabama State College, he became involved in protest activities. He led demonstrations protesting the lack of heat and hot water in his dormitory and the inferior food served by the college cafeteria. Abernathy also became a Baptist minister in 1948 while still in college. Abernathy attended Atlanta

University, where he earned his M.A. degree in 1951. That same year he became pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the largest African American church in the city. It was this pastoral post that eventually propelled him into the civil rights movement.



American Baptist minister and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr after arriving in London. He is pictured with Ralph Abernathy at the Embankment. September 1964. (Photo by Zola/Daily Mirror/Mirrorpix via Getty Images)

Rosa Parks's refusal to sit at the back of a segregated city bus on December 1, 1955 sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rev. Ralph Abernathy soon joined Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, in the protest. Both men became leaders of the effort and founders of the Montgomery Improvement Association which was the coordinating arm of the boycott. In 1957 King, Abernathy and other Southern black ministers created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Atlanta to continue the civil rights activism that began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King was selected as SCLC's first president and Abernathy became secretary treasurer of the organization.

In 1961 Rev. Ralph Abernathy became the pastor of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. From this new pastoral post he led the Albany Movement with Dr. Martin Luther King that year. For nearly a decade Rev. Abernathy was involved in every civil rights campaign launched by Dr. King. After the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, Rev. Abernathy immediately became President of SCLC and continued to lead the protests in that city in support of striking sanitation workers. He also vowed to continue Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign and led the campaign's demonstrations in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1968 and the Charleston Sanitation Workers Strike in 1969. The Poor People's Campaign failed partly because Abernathy lacked the charisma of his friend, Martin Luther King, and partly because the nation's mood was much more conservative on civil rights issues.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy continued to lead SCLC until growing tensions over the direction of the organization forced to his

resignation in 1977. Later that year he ran unsuccessfully for Congress. Three years later Abernathy became the most prominent civil rights leader to endorse Ronald Reagan for President.

After 1977 Rev. Abernathy returned to his pastoral duties at West Hunter Avenue Baptist Church in Atlanta, a post he held until his death. In 1989 he published his autobiography, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*. Rev. Ralph David Abernathy died of cardiac arrest on April 17, 1990 in Atlanta, Georgia.

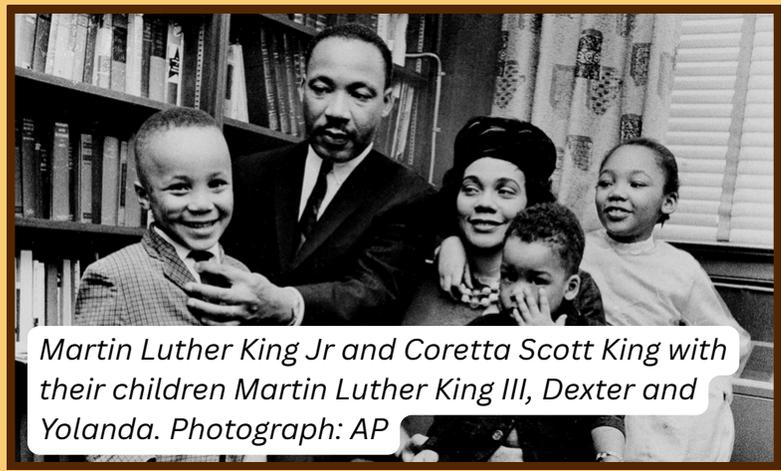


*Chief Deputy U.S. Marshal H. Stanley Fountain, left, reads court order to Dr. Martin Luther King, right, and Ralph Abernathy, center, as they arrive at court house in Selma, Alabama on Jan. 25, 1965, to urge African Americans to register to vote. Credit Horace Cort / Associated Press*

# 50 years after MLK's death, his children are still grieving

by Associated Press

On April 4, 1968, a movement lost its patriarch when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed on a hotel balcony in Memphis. Yolanda, Martin, Dexter and Bernice King lost



The loss has not gotten easier in 50 years, but his three surviving children each bear it on their own terms.

“That period, for me, is like yesterday,” said Dexter King, now 57. “People say it’s been 50 years, but I’m living in step time. Forget what he did in terms of his service and commitment and contribution to humankind ... I miss my dad.”

His children cling to the few memories they have left of him. For years, they have had to publicly mourn a man who was among the most hated in America at the time of his death — a task they have been reluctant and, at times, angry to carry out.

Now that King is among the most beloved figures in the world, his heirs are forced to share him with the multitudes who have laid claim to his legacy. For more than a decade, they have had to do

this without two of the family's cornerstones: their mother, Coretta Scott King, who died in 2006, and eldest child, Yolanda, who died in 2007.

As adults, the siblings have earned a reputation over their infighting, which has spilled into rancorous lawsuits over heirlooms including their father's Bible and Nobel Peace Prize. Today, the three say they are in a "good place" and have managed to compartmentalize their differences and come together as a family in times of difficulty.

Their recollections are a reminder that at the center of this tragedy was a young family, robbed of a loving husband and father, who was just 39. All are older now than King was. The tributes to their dad – from the buildings and streets that bear his name, to statues in his home state and in the nation's capital – are points of pride, but also constant reminders of the void he left.

Martin Luther King III's eyes crinkle into a smile as he recalls the happier times: in the pews at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta helping his dad greet new members, tossing a football or baseball on the lawn of the family home, swimming lessons at the YMCA.

When he came home from the front lines in the fight against racism, King's somber expression would give way to smiles and a playful mood. For them, he was not an icon, but a buddy.

King III and his brother also traveled with King. Months before he was killed, they accompanied King as he mobilized people in South Georgia to attend his upcoming Poor People's Campaign in Washington.

“That was our time for camaraderie,” recalled King III, now 60.

King III said he can still get emotional around his father’s death. If he listens too closely to King’s “Drum Major Instinct” speech, in which the preacher muses about wanting to live a long life, he still gets moved to tears.

For years afterward, King III tensed whenever he saw a news bulletin like the ones that told him his father was killed, or that his uncle, A.D. King, had been found dead in his swimming pool, or that his grandmother had been killed by a madman while playing the organ at Sunday service at Ebenezer — all while he was still a child. “I was afraid, because I was like, ‘Is this going to be something else that happens to our family?’” he said.



*(From left) Martin Luther King III, Dexter King, Yolanda King and Bernice King stand next to a crypt dedicated to their parents in Atlanta on Nov. 20, 2006. Wilfred Harewood—AP*

Bernice King, the youngest, was once envious of her siblings, who had many more memories of King. Shared stories from her mother, sisters and brother, as well as home movies, helped

humanize her father.

Nicknamed “Bunny,” Bernice King said she cherishes the scant moments she remembers sharing between father and daughter, like the “kissing game” they would play.

“That stayed with me so vividly,” said Bernice, now 55. “I’m glad I had that, because everything else, other than a few memories of

being at the dinner table, I don't recall. I wish I knew him more." She admitted to struggling with having to share her parents with strangers over the years.

"It bothered me," she said. "It's hard to have the private moments ... It's like everybody else has a part of him, and that's always hard to deal with. But I won't let it get in the way of what they have done and what they mean to the world."

That night and the days that followed the killing remain frozen in Dexter King's memory. He remembers his mother telling them something had happened to their father as she prepared to head to the airport. After Coretta Scott King left, their caregiver answered the kitchen telephone, started screaming and fell backward. Dexter, then 7, knew the worst had happened.

When King's body returned to Atlanta, Dexter remembered running up and down the aisle of the airplane, and seeing his father's coffin on the floor.

"I asked my mom, 'What's that?'" he said. "She explained, 'Your dad is going to be sleeping when you see him and he won't be able to speak with you. He's gone home to be with God!'"

Dexter King spoke of his father's warmth and playfulness, a departure from the serious approach he took to his work. Seeing him in his roles as pastor and civil rights leader, Dexter King said he and his siblings were aware that their father's work was important.

"You saw the interaction and the energy, just the way people reacted to him," he said.

He was again struck by the people's reaction at his father's funeral, as a seemingly endless sea of mourners formed a funeral procession through Atlanta.

“There’s Dad, and there’s the leader the world owns,” Dexter continued. “Generally, I accept that. But he had a family. As kids, we did not choose this life. And I don’t know that my dad chose it. It really chose him. We’re human, and in some ways, we’re still grieving.”



*Martin Luther King Jr. poses for a family portrait with his daughter Yolanda Denise King, son Dexter Scott King, his wife Coretta Scott King and son Martin Luther King III at their home in Atlanta in July 1962.  
TPLP/Archive Photos/Getty Images*

# Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Speech

by Daina Ramey Berry

It was a stormy night and the weather was bad, but the turnout was not. People had gathered to hear Martin Luther King Jr., who was back in Memphis to offer inspiration for an ongoing struggle that had celebrated recent victories. King knew that storms pass and that joy comes in the morning, for he had witnessed the pain of water cannons and police dogs; he remembered the Birmingham bombing and the bombing of his own home; but he also saw legislative gains and political successes. He came on the evening of April 3rd, 1968 to share his wisdom, encouragement and support, even though a huge storm was threatening to prevent him from speaking that night.

It wasn't just the storm threatening. The city was on edge, and racial tensions and unrest were growing. Using the slogan "I AM A MAN," 1,300 African-American male employees of the Memphis Department of Public Works had gone on strike to demand better working conditions, higher wages and recognition of their union. King knew firsthand that economic injustice was equally as damaging as racial injustice, which was the impetus behind his Poor People's Campaign. Following the death of two workers, he had already visited Memphis twice in the last month, the first time to give a speech to between 15,000 and 25,000 people. Robert Walker and Echol Cole had been crushed to death by the garbage truck

they worked on when they took shelter inside the compactor to escape severe weather. The city had rules on where workers could go to protect themselves and the compactor barrel was the only place they were allowed to take cover. Tragically, it was also the place that compressed them to their death.

Memphis was a community in mourning, but it was also a city weary of authority and fed up with elected officials. There was palpable disappointment among the workers and their allies when storms had forced King to postpone a scheduled march on his first visit. But he was back again on the 28th to lead it. With the support of the workers, religious clergy and students of all ages, activists took to the streets. Their peaceful march ended early due to violence and the presence of thousands of National Guard troops. King's team took him to Atlanta for protection. However, his commitment to the sanitation workers did not falter. He returned a third time a few days later and despite the storm, he gave his "Mountaintop Speech" to the crowd. The next day he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel.

More than 4,000 people around the world have scaled Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world. Climbers have to train and take their bodies to extreme limits in order to see a view from a mountaintop that sits 29,029 feet above sea level. Their single goal is to make it to the top of the mountain. Inevitably, they understand that with this journey comes struggle, pain, sacrifice and sometimes death. They are not alone in their desire to reach the highest point on earth. Some made it and many others died along the way. For those fortunate to make it, the last mile of the hike is the most brutal. The air is so thin that oxygen tanks are

required. Fighting fatigue, potential disorientation, frostbite and altitude sickness, climbers continue to climb. They do it year after year with the aid of Tibetan Sherpa guides.

King, too, had a spiritual guide who took him to the mountaintop. In his speech, he reflected on history and used the powerful metaphor of a mountaintop to give people hope. From his perspective, his people and the workers he came to address, were climbing a mountain.

Although his guide did not take him to Mt. Everest, King saw the mountaintop as a place to witness the greatness of human capacity. He had been through valleys and storms, but his guide led him along the way. God was with him and from the mountaintop showed him the Promised Land. He witnessed victories like the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He saw the desegregation of schools and the realities of his dream starting to materialize.

Reflecting on his life that stormy night in Memphis, King considered a panoramic view of the past. If God asked him what period in history he would like to live in, King thought about visiting Egypt and witnessing his people cross the Red Sea. He imagined going to Greece and visiting Mt. Olympus where he could see the great philosophers such as “Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon.”

But, he said, he would not stop there. He would also visit the Roman Empire, the Renaissance period and seek out Martin Luther as he “tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church of Wittenberg.” Again, King would not stop there, he would move on to the United States in the year 1863 when Abraham Lincoln signed

the Emancipation Proclamation. Finally, he asked God to allow him to see some of the second half of the 20th century. It was to be his final sermon. The next day, he was shot dead.

In King's lifetime, he saw his people, the descendants of the enslaved, fight to exercise their citizenship during an important historical era. African Americans spent nearly 300 years in chains working for a country that did not recognize their personhood. They labored in fields, factories, homes, universities, cities and just about every place you can imagine. They did so without wages and were considered chattel, a movable form of property used to benefit the growth and development of a young nation. But when freedom came in 1865, and the monetary value placed upon their bodies did not transfer into wages, 4 million African Americans continued their fight for justice and equality. In my research, I have found that African Americans always valued themselves clinging to the strength of their souls, hoping for a better tomorrow. Echoes of their "soul values" are present today in movements like Black lives, yet the struggle continues. Yes, we have witnessed the first African-American family in the White House and we celebrated the accomplishment of the Obama election, but we still have more work to do. Just as King and his peers fought to end discrimination and disenfranchisement in the 20th century, we are still trying to create a more perfect society in the 21st century. We are still a divided nation.

# The FBI Claims to Have Learned From Its Surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr.—But It Keeps Doing the Same Things

by Lerone A. Martin and Jeanne Theoharis / Made by History

Sixty years after the FBI marked Martin Luther King Jr. as America’s “most dangerous Negro,” the FBI incorporates the preacher in its new agent training, pledging to honor King by upholding the civil rights of all citizens. While this appears to signal a critical shift in the institution’s culture, nothing could be further from the truth. The same practices—treating communities of color as suspicious and potentially un-American, surveilling anti-racist movements while standing aside during escalating white supremacist violence—have continued.

While the FBI had been surveilling King and the civil rights movement for years, the official sign-off for electronic surveillance on King began on Oct. 10, 1963. Attorney General Robert Kennedy granted FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his bureau such legal permission on the premise that King was a communist threat. But, the FBI knew that wasn’t true because it had just conducted a thorough investigation of communist influence in the civil rights movement, finding none.

Rather, it was the March on Washington that alarmed the Kennedy Administration—they had installed a kill switch in the microphone and 150 FBI agents were on hand that day. And the reach and power of King’s address worried the Bureau and the Kennedy administration. King had stressed how the U.S. had given

Black people a “bad check,” decried the “unspeakable horrors of police brutality,” and made clear that “America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.” The FBI concluded that King was “demagogic” and leading America into a “racial revolution.” They marked him “the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation...from the standpoint...of national security.”

The FBI decided King needed to be stopped, and did not allow the lack of evidence concerning a communist conspiracy to get in the way. “Facts by themselves are not too meaningful,” the FBI’s Domestic Intelligence Division noted. “They are somewhat like stones tossed in a heap as contrasted to the same stones put in the form of a sound edifice.”

And so, the FBI constructed its own heap of stones installing wiretaps and microphones on King’s home and wherever the non-violent preacher went, including hotel rooms, the Atlanta and New York offices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the homes of friends with whom he occasionally resided. The FBI then distributed its “counter-intelligence” to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Nearly weekly for the four and half years between the beginning surveillance and King's assassination in 1968, Hoover directly apprised President Lyndon B. Johnson of the information gleaned. In more than 250 memos, Hoover sent the president political intel, accounts of King and his advisors criticizing Johnson, and even personal information.

The FBI had plenty of partners outside of the White House as well. Congressmen, leading journalists, and ministers were illegally supplied with data obtained from the Bureau’s technical

surveillance on King. It contained private information, not evidence of criminal activity. Congressmen and ministers used the counter-intelligence in their speeches, sermons, and publications to discredit King, smearing him as un-American and an "extremist." Journalists refused to publish the salacious material, but never exposed the Bureau's extraordinary monitoring of the civil rights leader.

In contrast to the way the FBI surveilled and targeted the Black freedom movement despite no evidence of any wrongdoing, the Bureau regularly cast white racist violence as outside of its jurisdiction—even when agents had prior knowledge from KKK informants. In 1961, through its Klan informants, the Bureau had advance warning that Freedom Riders were going to be attacked when their bus reached Birmingham; they did nothing and many of the Freedom Riders had to be hospitalized because of the brutal attack they endured. In 1963, the FBI withheld evidence gathered by informants and surveillance identifying the perpetrators of the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church. In 1965, Gary Thomas Rowe, a paid informant was in the car whose occupants killed white Detroiters Viola Liuzzo following King's Selma to Montgomery March but the FBI scuttled the investigation, trying to smear Liuzzo instead to protect Rowe.

In April 1964, King publicly called attention to the FBI's unwillingness to investigate white supremacist violence, telling a news reporter, "You can't explain to a Negro how it is that a plane can be bombed, and its pieces scattered for miles and the crime can be solved," King noted, "but [the FBI] can't find out who bombed a church." Hoover was furious, calling King a "notorious

liar.” And the FBI’s campaign against King expanded even further. In recent years, the FBI has claimed to acknowledge this “shameful history.” Former FBI director James Comey displayed the 1963 memo on his desk as a reminder of FBI overreach and had new agents visit the King Memorial on the National Mall, study King’s quotes, and write essays “about the intersections” of King’s philosophy and the values of the FBI. And an MLK quote—“The time is always right to do what is right”—is etched in stone at the FBI’s main training facility in Quantico, VA.

And yet, this kind of commemoration of King conveniently misses the point. The modern FBI has 15,000 paid informants, and in the 21st century an immense number have been focused within the Muslim community, surveilling mosques, Muslim student groups, chat rooms, and charity fundraisers. This is a dramatic increase from 1974 when investigations by the Senate Church Committee into COINTELPRO revealed the FBI had 1,500 paid informants.

At the same time, the FBI still has yet to make a serious commitment to stopping violent white supremacy, even though white supremacist violence has been deemed the nation’s top national security threat. The FBI had an “unusual number of informants” in the Proud Boys. They had been warned of the potential for violence on January 6th, 2021, but didn’t move to stop it.

The answer to the white-supremacist threat is not to give the FBI more power, something that the Federal Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2023, a bill with Democratic backing, would do.

An already powerful FBI and DOJ do not need more authority and resources to investigate and prevent white supremacist violence. They just need to make it a priority. During the Cold War, the “red scare” of communism enabled the FBI to gain power, which resulted in violations of the civil rights of King and many, many others in the civil rights movement. And after 9/11, faced with a new national security threat, the FBI convinced the country to give it more power, and used it to maintain almost constant surveillance of American Muslims.

KING,

In view of your low grade, abnormal personal behavior I will not dignify your name with either a Mr. or a Reverend or a Dr. And, your last name calls to mind only the type of King such as King Henry the VIII and his countless acts of adultery and immoral conduct lower than that of a beast.

King, look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to all of us Negroes. White people in this country have enough frauds of their own but I am sure they don't have one at this time that is any where near your equal. You are no clergyman and you know it. I repeat you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in God and act as you do. Clearly you don't believe in any personal moral principles.

King, like all frauds your end is approaching. You could have been our greatest leader. You, even at an early age have turned out to be not a leader but a dissolute, abnormal moral imbecile. We will now have to depend on our older leaders like Wilkins a man of character and thank God we have others like him. But you are done. Your "honorary" degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce) and other awards will not save you. King, I repeat you are done.

No person can overcome facts, not even a fraud like yourself. Lend your sexually psychotic ear to the enclosure. You will find yourself and in all your dirt, filth, evil and moronic talk exposed on the record for all time. I repeat - no person can argue successfully against facts. You are finished. You will find on the record for all time your filthy, dirty, evil companions, male and female giving expression with you to your hideous abnormalities. And some of them to pretend to be ministers of the Gospel. Satan could not do more. What incredible evilness. It is all there on the record, your sexual orgies. Listen to yourself you filthy, abnormal animal. You are on the record. You have been on the record - all your adulterous acts, your sexual orgies extending far into the past. This one is but a tiny sample. You will understand this. Yes, from your various evil playmates on the east coast to and others on the west coast and outside the country you are on the record. King you are done.

The American public, the church organizations that have been helping - Protestant, Catholic and Jews will know you for what you are - an evil, abnormal beast. So will others who have backed you. You are done.

King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days in which to do (this exact number has been selected for a specific reason, it has definite practical significance. You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.

*‘You Are Done’: The letter sent to King by the F.B.I. (One person’s name has been obscured because The Times could not verify or disprove the claims about her.) Credit...National Archives, College Park, Maryland*

# Book and Movie List

## Books:

- *Why We Can't Wait* by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- *Nonviolent* by Reverend James Lawson Jr. and Emily Yellin
- *March Series* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, Illustrated by Nate Powell
- *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver
- *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *King: A Life* by Jonathan Eig
- *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X* by Les Payne, Tamara Payne
- *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968* by Alice Faye Duncan, Illustrations by R. Gregory Christie

## Movies:

- *Selma* (2014)
- *All the Way* (2016)
- *Betty and Coretta* (2013)
- *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017)
- *Boycott* (2001)
- *Ali* (2001)
- *The Butler* (2013)
- *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021)
- *Rustin* (2024)
- *MLK/FBI* (2020)