

REVIEW

Get to know the civil rights leader on a deeper, more radical level

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Going Down Jericho Road

The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign

By Michael K. Honey

NORTON; 640 PAGES; \$35



Is there a compelling reason for another book on Martin Luther King Jr., just after the release of the final volume of Taylor Branch's majestic trilogy, 20 years in the making? After all, Branch's "At Canaan's Edge" incorporates just about every twist and turn in King's life, along with a broader story of the '60s, from 1965 until his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

The short answer is yes, especially if we gain an important new perspective, another lens. Michael K. Honey, professor of labor and ethnic studies at the University of Washington, tells a story that is in many ways deeper and more profoundly disturbing in "Going Down Jericho Road" -- centering on the convergence of the working class and racial justice struggles in Memphis.

Both authors attempt to disrupt the easy stereotype, the iconic and safe King, memorialized in street names, commercials and comforting children's books. But King, and the revolution he helped to lead, was more radical and critical than this national myth -- and he was much more than an icon for nonviolence.

Ask a student who said the following: "Something is wrong with capitalism as it now stands in the United States. We are not interested in being integrated into this value structure. ... [A] radical redistribution of power must take place." Most likely the answer would be Malcolm X. But it was in fact King, and we are reminded here of the fundamental challenge to American inequities that was on the movement's agenda in 1968.

"Going Down Jericho Road" focuses on the story of the powerful sanitation workers' strike in Memphis that drew King to the city in the first place. Honey draws in clear detail all the complexities of working-class organizing: the legacy of slavery and the sharecropping system, the white unions that kept out African Americans, the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, local politicians and police. The Memphis strike in February 1968 came just as King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, riding a fragmented and contentious movement, were trying to launch the Poor People's March to converge on Washington, D.C., later that summer.

In the Memphis of "Jericho Road," we encounter people such as James Lawson, the principled nonviolent

preacher with deep roots in social movements; T.O. Jones, the garbage man turned organizer who was a target for assaults by the press and the police; and Charles Cabbage of the black power movement among youth. While none of them is nationally known, each represents the backbone of the movement.

In 1968, the old base of the civil rights movement leadership, the black middle class, represented by preachers and professionals, had its own particular agenda. But progressively the call for justice in the United States was broadening, to members of the black working class who were defining their own goals and interests -- through the youth call for black power, through the resistance of black GIs to the Vietnam War and through the demands of black labor. Many have sought to simplify this dichotomy as the debate between Malcolm X, who favored violence (and who was already three years dead), and King, who favored calm discussion and nonviolence. But nothing could be further from the truth. King was a fighter, struggling for a broad transformation, for social justice, and he was not satisfied with a few symbolic concessions.

"We are tired of our men not being able to be men," he said, "because they can't find work. Negroes are poor in Mississippi for one basic reason, and that is that white people have exploited us, they have trampled over us with their iron feet of oppression, and they have denied us opportunity."

King was convinced that America needed fundamental change, not just a chance for the "talented tenth," the black middle class, to get into the system and to get a good salary. He criticized white preachers who were timid (remaining "silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows") and he confronted black ministers who sought to limit the movement. The real King, were he alive today, would not be satisfied to say, as too many school lessons do, that there was once a movement for civil rights and that was won and now we all get along.

And while the simplistic histories have him railing against black power, Honey shows us that King was a militant and a courageous revolutionary, willing to confront power and challenge comfortable assumptions. King and Stokely Carmichael, long after the alleged split over black power, worked closely together in the Mississippi March Against Fear, taking on the greatest risks and staying with black families who kept shotguns ready against night riders. And it was King who determined that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference must go to Memphis to support the sanitation workers' strike.

Honey details the horrific complicity of the local and national police in attacks against King and the movement. Most striking is King's hounding by the FBI, which sent out regular false press reports to slander King, whom they feared would be the "black messiah" to unite all elements of the black freedom movement, and which never warned him of assassination threats they had learned of. Honey captures all of this and more: the daily struggles of the black community of Memphis; the challenge of Southern labor organizing; King's prophetic and heartbreaking final speech of the night before his murder; and the final victory of the strike, two weeks after this giant of the movement was cut down.

In painting the period's landscape through the case of one local struggle that took on international significance, Honey makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of our past -- and helps us understand the racial and class landscape of America today.

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