

## INTRODUCTION

*I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
*Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958)

During the days after Montgomery police arrested Rosa Parks for refusing to give her bus seat to a white man, Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as the acknowledged leader of a major mass protest. King's formative experiences had prepared him well for this unexpected calling, but his abilities would be tested repeatedly as he offered guidance to a movement he had not initiated and could not control. Although the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery was not the first collective protest against the southern Jim Crow system, it attained unique historical significance by demonstrating that an African-American community could remain united and resolute in its determination to overcome segregation. The Montgomery struggle marked the beginning of a new era in African-American history; it also enabled King to begin a new phase of his ministry.

When Parks's solitary protest occurred on 1 December 1955, King was a twenty-six-year-old minister, serving in only his second year as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Nevertheless, he already embodied an African-American social-gospel tradition to which his father and maternal grandfather had contributed. King's prophetic vision, politically engaged preaching, and expansive pastoral leadership derived from his experiences at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where admiration for his father's "noble example" had moved him to "serve humanity" as a minister himself. Martin Luther King, Sr.'s, decades of successful church management served as a model for the younger King as he asserted control over the Dexter congregation. His first annual report had insisted that the pastor's "authority is not merely humanly conferred, but divinely sanctioned." King reminded church members that this implied an "unconditional willingness of the people to accept the pastor's leadership. This means that leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but it invariably descends from the pulpit to the pew."

Even as he advocated pastoral authority, however, King was also aware that effective leadership required enthusiastic lay participation. He urged members of the congregation to participate in various church committees in order to "assume an equal responsibility" for implementing his plans. Among King's first

actions after ascending to Dexter's pulpit was to establish a Social and Political Action Committee that would remind the congregation of the need to "unite with" the NAACP and the "necessity of being registered voters."<sup>1</sup> By the time of Parks's arrest, King had confidently set forth ambitious expectations for the congregation: "Let each of us go out at this moment with grim and bold determination to extend the horizons of Dexter to new boundaries, and lift the spire of her influence to new heights, so that we will be able to inject new spiritual blood into the veins of this community."<sup>2</sup>

King could not have anticipated the unprecedented unity and militancy of Montgomery's black residents as they protested Parks's arrest; nevertheless, he brought singular assets to his new role as a movement leader. During the boycott he received support and advice from an extensive network of relatives, family friends, former classmates, and fellow ministers. Although the extant correspondence from this period understates the significance in King's life of those close to him—Coretta Scott King and Ralph David Abernathy, for example—the letters he wrote and received illuminate the extent to which King relied on established relationships. In addition, even as he acquired a more sophisticated understanding of Gandhian principles, King's public statements continued to reiterate the Christian and democratic values he had affirmed in high school oratory, academic writings, and earlier sermons. He drew upon African-American preaching traditions, transforming familiar Christian principles into rationales for collective protest against injustice. The contemporaneous documents relating to King's involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott reveal the evolution of his religious leadership in the context of a sustained protest movement. These primary sources reveal history as it unfolded, correcting and supplementing the numerous memoirs and recorded recollections of participants and the published accounts of biographers and historians.<sup>3</sup>

Before he learned of Parks's arrest, King had already established connections with Montgomery's network of civil rights activists. Earlier in the year he had

---

1. Quotations from King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," 22 November 1950, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1: *Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 363; King, "Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954–1955," 5 September 1954, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 2: *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 287, 290.

2. King, "Annual Report, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," 31 October 1955, in *Papers* 2: 580.

3. Memoirs of participants include: King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969); Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987). Among the secondary accounts of the bus boycott movement, the following recent studies have been the most useful in the preparation of this volume: Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). Also of value are the primary and secondary sources assembled in David J. Garrow, ed., *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955–1956* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1989).

given a well-received talk to the Montgomery branch of the NAACP. That talk impressed former branch president E. D. Nixon, the most active and outspoken of Montgomery black progressives, who in the late 1930s founded the Montgomery division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and then promoted voting rights as head of the Montgomery chapter of the Alabama Progressive Democratic Association. King's talk led to an invitation—signed by Parks in her role as branch secretary—to join the executive committee of the local NAACP.<sup>4</sup> King also became involved in the interracial Alabama Council on Human Relations, where he interacted with the few white liberals in the state willing to oppose segregation's worst excesses.<sup>5</sup> Clifford Durr, for example, provided legal advice as well as friendly encouragement to Montgomery's progressive black leadership. His wife, Virginia Foster Durr, had arranged for her friend Parks to attend a school desegregation workshop in August 1955 at interracial Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, an experience that helped inspire her subsequent challenge to Montgomery's bus segregation.<sup>6</sup>

The morning after Nixon, with the Durrs' assistance, gained Parks's release from jail and secured her approval to use her arrest as a test case to challenge bus seating policies, he called King and other black leaders to inform them of the effort, already under way, to boycott Montgomery's buses. By this time Jo Ann Robinson, a leader of Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC) and of Dexter's Social and Political Action Committee, had already drafted, mimeographed, and begun circulating thousands of leaflets urging a one-day bus boycott.<sup>7</sup> With the WPC actively mobilizing support for a boycott, Nixon, King, and Ralph Abernathy, pastor of Montgomery's First Baptist Church and a close friend of King's since his arrival in the city, invited black leaders to discuss the situation at a Friday evening meeting in Dexter's basement.

Although King hosted the initial planning meeting, the several dozen ministers and community leaders who gathered at Dexter did not see him as the obvious choice to direct the boycott effort. King recalled that Nixon would have presided at the Friday evening meeting if he had not had to leave town because of his work as a Pullman porter. In Nixon's absence, Rev. L. Roy Bennett, president of

---

4. Parks to King, 26 August 1955, in *Papers* 2:572.

5. Introduction to *Papers* 2:34.

6. See Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, ed. Hollinger F. Barnard (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 279.

7. See Robinson, Leaflet, "Another Negro Woman Has Been Arrested," 2 December 1955. (For the complete citation, including archival location, of this and other primary documents, see the Calendar of Documents. King and Abernathy's revision of her leaflet is published on p. 67 in this volume.) After herself being ordered to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Robinson had taken over leadership of the WPC in 1950, replacing Mary Fair Burks, the chair of Alabama State's English department, who had founded the political activist group in 1949. During the two years before Rosa Parks's arrest, Robinson, along with other black leaders, had contacted white officials on several occasions to convey complaints about bus company practices. During the spring of 1954 she informed Mayor W. A. Gayle that a protest boycott of buses was being considered (see Robinson to Gayle, 21 May 1954). The WPC again briefly considered calling for a boycott after the arrest on 2 March 1955 of high school student Claudette Colvin for refusing to relinquish her seat to a white person. See Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

Montgomery's Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, chaired the discussions. Agreeing "that no one should be identified as *the* leader," ministers attending the meeting generally supported a one-day protest but were uncertain whether the boycott should be extended or whether a protest group should be established.<sup>8</sup> King and Abernathy stayed at Dexter afterward to revise Robinson's leaflet, adding a call to attend a mass meeting Monday evening at Holt Street Baptist Church. Along with other black ministers, they announced the proposed action from their pulpits on Sunday morning. The planned protest also received unexpected publicity from a front-page article in Sunday's *Montgomery Advertiser* and from radio and television reports.<sup>9</sup>

African Americans in Montgomery gave overwhelming support to the one-day boycott on Monday morning, 5 December. Montgomery City Lines manager J. H. Bagley estimated that 90 percent of the city's blacks refused to ride the buses, and King later recalled seeing "no more than eight Negro passengers" on the morning buses and insisted that black support for the protest "reached almost 100 percent." Despite inflammatory statements by Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers about "Negro 'goon squads,'" the first day of the boycott was peaceful, with only one arrest.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Judge John B. Scott convicted Rosa Parks of violating a state law requiring segregation on city buses and fined her ten dollars plus four dollars in court costs. Parks's lawyer, Fred D. Gray, announced that he would appeal the verdict to the Circuit Court of Montgomery.

That afternoon, eighteen black leaders met to plan the evening's mass meeting; to further their effort they decided to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a name suggested by Abernathy.<sup>11</sup> After approving an agenda for the later meeting, they unanimously elected King to head the new group. Although King did not seek the position, his selection reflected the reputation he had swiftly built as a congenial and articulate civil rights proponent. The motion to elect King came from Rufus Lewis, a businessman, Dexter stalwart, and voter registration activist, who served as president of the Montgomery Citizens Steering Committee. The minutes of the meeting give little sense of the discussions, but the later recollections of participants offered a variety of reasons for King's selection, with several participants, including Lewis, Nixon, and Abernathy, taking credit for pushing King forward as the best candidate to head the MIA.<sup>12</sup> King recalled that events "happened so quickly that I did not even have

---

8. A. W. Wilson, interview by Donald T. Ferron, 27 January 1956.

9. Joe Azbell, "Negro Groups Ready Boycott of City Lines," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 December 1955.

10. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 54; Joe Azbell, "Extra Police Set for Patrol Work in Trolley Boycott," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 5 December 1955.

11. Abernathy, interview by Donald T. Ferron, 3 February 1956.

12. See U. J. Fields, Minutes of Montgomery Improvement Association Founding Meeting, 5 December 1955, pp. 68–70 in this volume. At the meeting Nixon reportedly chastised the group for considering operating the new organization in secrecy: "Am I to tell our people that you are cowards?" he later remembered saying. King "raised his hand to signify that he was not. Before you know it, he was nominated, seconded and became president" (Nixon, 28 March 1956 speech, reported in *WRL News* 78 [May–June 1956]: 1). Abernathy recalled that he expected Lewis and Nixon to be nominated and was surprised when Lewis nominated King: "Opposed to Nixon, [Lewis] wasn't sure whether or not he himself had the votes, so he proposed a compromise candidate" (Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 148).

time to think it through”; he also suggested that he “would have declined the nomination” if he had considered its implications.<sup>13</sup>

That evening King delivered his first address as a protest leader to an audience of several thousand people that spilled out of Holt Street Baptist Church into the street. With only twenty minutes to prepare his remarks, he later recalled praying for divine guidance to resolve a “sobering dilemma”: “How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?”<sup>14</sup> King’s dilemma reflected his characteristic desire to find a middle course between conflicting alternatives;<sup>15</sup> though tactically restrained, his speech was nonetheless a stirring call to action. King depicted the bus boycott as resulting from an accumulation of racial injustices—the “many occasions” when African Americans were “intimidated and humiliated and . . . oppressed, because of the sheer fact that they were Negroes.”<sup>16</sup>

King referred only obliquely to prior indignities, but his audience was familiar with them. In particular, a protest had been considered the previous March in response to the arrest of a black teenager, Claudette Colvin, who had refused to give up her seat to a white passenger.<sup>17</sup> Although the Colvin case did not prompt a legal challenge to segregation policies, the failure of the bus company and city officials to make even minor concessions had contributed to festering feelings of resentment among the black residents of Montgomery. As King saw matters, the buildup of such grievances had finally driven the black community to resist: “There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.” King concluded his speech with an admonition, drawing a phrase from his Dexter annual report, to transform resentment into resistance rooted in Christian principles:

As we stand and sit here this evening, and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with a grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together. We are going to work together. Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, “There lived a race

---

13. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 56.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

15. For example, while addressing the Birmingham NAACP branch earlier in 1955, King had rejected both extreme optimism and extreme pessimism, recommending instead a “realistic approach” that acknowledged that African Americans had “come a long long way but we have a long, long way to go” (quoted in “Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King,” 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330).

16. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, p. 72 in this volume. In certain instances King’s quotations from this recorded speech are somewhat different from the version found in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

17. The Colvin arrest led black leaders, including King, to meet with white officials of the city and the bus company, who rejected requests for even modest changes in seating policies. On 18 March 1955 Colvin was placed on probation after being convicted of violating the state segregation law and of assaulting a policeman who was removing her from the bus. The conviction was appealed to the circuit court, which on 6 May affirmed the assault conviction while dismissing the segregation code violation. Thus Colvin’s lawyers were unable to use her conviction as a test case to challenge the state segregation law.

of people, a *black* people, 'fleecy locks and black complexion,' a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization."<sup>18</sup>

King's address responded to immediate events, but it also set forth the main themes of his subsequent public ministry: social-gospel Christianity and democratic idealism, combined with resolute advocacy of nonviolent protest. His interpretation of the Christian mission recalled his father's insistence that clergymen should become "part of every movement for the betterment of our people," as well as his own admonition to an NAACP audience in Birmingham that black Americans "must do more than pray and read the Bible" in order to secure civil rights.<sup>19</sup> Now, speaking in a church to an audience that largely shared his religious reference points, King merged New Testament notions of transformative love with Old Testament prophetic imagery—"until justice runs down like water." While identifying nonviolent tactics with the teachings of Jesus, King also reminded his audience that "it is not enough for us to talk about love." He explained: "There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love." In order to achieve justice, King argued, black residents must be prepared to use not only "the tools of persuasion" but also those of "coercion."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to identifying the boycott as an expression of Christian principles, King identified it with older American traditions of dissent and protest. Perhaps sensing that some members of his audience feared the consequences of opposing political authorities, King reminded them that "there is never a time in our American democracy that we must ever think we're wrong when we protest. We reserve that right." He cited the example of workers who saw themselves "trampled over by capitalistic power" and recognized that there "was nothing wrong with . . . getting together and organizing and protesting for [their] rights." Speaking during the Cold War era, when leftist dissent was generally suppressed, he justified his call for militancy by insisting that protest was consistent with American political traditions: "If we were dropped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime we couldn't do this," King explained. "But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right." The boycott, he argued, reflected the nation's fundamental ideals. "If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was

---

18. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, p. 74 in this volume.

19. King, Sr., Moderator's Annual Address, Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association, 17 October 1940 (quoted in *Papers* 1:34); King, quoted in "Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King," 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330.

20. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December, pp. 73–74 in this volume. King used similar language to describe both Reinhold Niebuhr's and Paul Tillich's conceptions of love and justice. King noted in his dissertation that, for Tillich, "justice is dependent on love. Justice," he continued, "is really an act of love protesting against that which violates love" (King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 15 April 1955, in *Papers* 2:442). See also King, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," 9 May 1952, in *Papers* 2:145.

merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie.”<sup>21</sup>

Inspired by King’s address, the several thousand residents attending the mass meeting voted unanimously to continue boycotting the city’s buses. During subsequent days and weeks, support for the bus boycott remained strong. Car owners volunteered to pick up riders, and black taxi drivers charged passengers the same ten-cent fare as Montgomery’s buses, rather than the required minimum charge of forty-five cents. On 8 December, King and other black leaders met with city and bus company officials and proposed that patrons be seated on a “first-come, first-served basis,” with black passengers seated from the rear and whites from the front. King also delivered two other conditions for ending the boycott: more courteous treatment of black passengers and the hiring of black drivers on “predominantly Negro” routes.<sup>22</sup> The meeting, however, ended in an impasse. Although Montgomery’s municipal code required segregated seating while leaving implementation largely in the hands of bus drivers, local white leaders were unwilling to modify segregation practices.<sup>23</sup> Most believed that the boycott would be short-lived. “The Mayor’s attitude,” King wrote, “was made clear when he said, ‘Comes the first rainy day and the Negroes will be back on the busses.’”<sup>24</sup> Seeking ideas for extending the boycott, King contacted T. J. Jemison, who had organized an efficient car pool during a 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge. By 13 December Rufus Lewis, chairman of the MIA transportation committee, and R. J. Glasco, chairman of the financial committee, had coordinated drivers for forty-eight “dispatch” and forty-two “pick-up” stations.<sup>25</sup>

Encouraged by the boycott’s effectiveness, King and other black leaders began to reconsider their goal: was better treatment for black bus riders sufficient, or might an end to bus segregation be called for? King’s personal opposition to segregation had been evident early in the year when he told the Birmingham NAACP branch that segregation was “wrong” and even constituted “a form of slavery.”<sup>26</sup> He later claimed that boycott participants knew from the start “that the ultimate solution was total integration,” but they were at first willing to accept “a temporary alleviation of the problem” while desegregation litigation pro-

21. King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, pp. 73 in this volume.

22. The demands were also presented to officials at the bus company’s headquarters in Chicago (see King to the National City Lines, Inc., 8 December 1955, p. 81 in this volume). For King’s account of this meeting, see Interview by Ferron, 4 February 1956, p. 123 in this volume.

23. Chapter 6 of the 1952 edition of the code read: “Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and Negroes on his buses by requiring the employees in charge thereof to assign passenger seats on the vehicles under the charge in such a manner as to separate the white people from the Negroes.” The code allowed “Negro nurses having charge of white children [or a] sick or infirm person” to be seated with whites.

24. King, “Our Struggle,” April 1956, p. 240 in this volume.

25. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 75–77.

26. Quoted in “Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King,” 25 January 1955, in *Papers* 2:330. During the boycott King was quoted by Tom Johnson, in “The Rev. King Is Boycott Boss,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 January 1956, as supporting “immediate integration,” although he later claimed that his statement referred to the policy of the NAACP (see Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 23 January 1956, p. 104 in this volume).

ceeded.<sup>27</sup> During the initial weeks of the protest, however, he and other MIA leaders continued to claim publicly that their goal was merely better treatment. A newspaper account during the first week of the boycott noted that King spoke “with no little authority” as he assured reporters that black residents were simply seeking fairness, not desegregation: “We don’t like the idea of Negroes having to stand where there are vacant seats. We are demanding justice on that point.”<sup>28</sup> After a committee appointed by Mayor Gayle failed to arrive at a settlement during December, and white leaders continued to insist that they could not compromise under existing law, the stances of the two sides stiffened. At a crowded public meeting in late January, the city commissioners revealed that they had joined the local Citizens Council, part of a southwide organization to defend segregation.

Recognizing that an acceptable compromise settlement was unlikely, King and other black leaders moved gradually toward a public acknowledgment that their goal was ending segregation, although, as late as 27 January, the MIA’s public stance was to seek only “a calm and fair consideration of the situation which has developed as a result of dissatisfaction over Bus policies.”<sup>29</sup> MIA leaders were forced to clarify their objectives after city commissioners tried to settle the dispute by arranging a meeting with three black ministers who did not represent the MIA. On Saturday evening, 21 January, King learned from reporter Carl Rowan that city officials had announced that they had secured an agreement to end the boycott in return for a promise to designate sections that black bus riders would not have to relinquish to white passengers. King and other MIA leaders quickly announced that reports of a settlement were erroneous and that the boycott would continue.<sup>30</sup>

King later wrote that during this period white leaders spread false rumors about MIA leaders: “Negro workers were told by their white employers that their leaders were only concerned with making money out of the movement.” According to King, some older black ministers were encouraged by whites to believe that they, rather than their younger counterparts, should be leading the protests. “I almost broke down under the continual battering of this argument,” he recalled.<sup>31</sup> At the 23 January meeting of the MIA executive board, King responded deftly to the efforts of the white establishment to undermine his leadership, denying allegations that he had personally profited from fund-raising activities on behalf of the MIA. He also strongly condemned ministers who were willing to arrange unauthorized compromises with white officials, though he recommended against retaliation. At the end of the meeting he reminded the board that he had been made president by a unanimous vote, which prompted

27. King, “The Montgomery Story,” 27 June 1956, p. 303 in this volume.

28. “Some Observations on the Boycott,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 December 1955.

29. See King et al. to the Citizens of Montgomery, 27 January 1956, p. 107 in this volume. See also King et al. to the Commissioners of the City of Montgomery, 9 January 1956, pp. 97–98 in this volume.

30. See MIA Press Release: The Bus Protest Is Still On, 22 January 1956, pp. 100–101 in this volume. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 124–126; and L. D. Reddick, “The Bus Boycott in Montgomery,” *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 1–11.

31. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 122–123.



that body's affirmation of confidence in their president. In addition, board members decided that only King could make statements to the press at his discretion; all other press releases would require approval of the MIA executive board.<sup>32</sup>

Seeking to undermine the MIA's resolve, city officials embarked on a "get-tough" campaign. After the city commissioners disclosed their membership in the Citizens Council, police increased harassment of drivers in the MIA car pool, issuing tickets and making arrests for alleged traffic violations. On 26 January, King himself was stopped for speeding. Ordinarily such infractions warranted just a citation, but King was arrested. "As we drove off," he later wrote, "a feeling of panic began to come over me." Uncertain whether the officers were taking him to the city jail or to a waiting mob, he found himself "trembling within and without." To his relief, he was delivered to the jail, where he remained for a short while before being released to a crowd of well-wishers that had gathered outside. Returning home to friends and family, King regained his courage: "I knew that I did not stand alone." That night, responding to widespread concern about his arrest, the MIA held seven mass meetings.<sup>33</sup>

Even before the city government had embarked on its official campaign of intimidation, King had received numerous threats against himself and his family over the telephone and by mail.<sup>34</sup> By mid-January, he found himself "faltering and growing in fear." After "a white friend" informed him of threats against his life, he announced at a mass meeting: "If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence." Late in the evening of 27 January, a day after his trip to the city jail, a particularly threatening call triggered a spiritual crisis. King recalled in *Stride Toward Freedom* that he sat alone in his kitchen, "ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward." He turned to God for support. "The people are looking to me for leadership," he recalled saying in the still room, "and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter." King wrote that his prayers were answered when he

experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Al-

---

32. See Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 23 January 1956, pp. 101–104 in this volume. In his memoir King recalled that he offered his resignation to the board, telling them that he did not "want to stand in the way of a solution to the problem which plagued our community, and that maybe a more mature person could bring about a speedier conclusion." He recalled that board members quickly urged him "to forget the idea of resignation," then gave him a unanimous vote of confidence (King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 123).

33. See Complaint, *City of Montgomery v. Martin L. King*, 26 January 1956, p. 106 in this volume; "Dr. M. L. King Jr. Arrested, Released on Speeding Charges," *Birmingham World*, 31 January 1956; and King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 128 and 130–131.

34. "Montgomery Negroes Still Refuse to Ride Busses; Leaders Receive Threats," *Birmingham World*, 17 January 1956; and Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, p. 120 in this volume. See also files of "hate" mail in MLKP-MBU.

most at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.<sup>35</sup>

Although King would depict this incident in his memoir as a crucial turning point in his spiritual life, he did not mention it publicly until a year later, when he confronted another wave of segregationist violence in Montgomery.<sup>36</sup>

Increasingly aware of his own importance to the movement, King also appreciated its grass-roots character. One of many individuals responsible for sustaining the bus boycott, he recognized that his influence was important but not always decisive. On 30 January he remarked at an MIA mass meeting, “I want you to know that if M. L. King had never been born this movement would have taken place. I just happened to be here.”<sup>37</sup> He became the movement’s preeminent spokesperson, but he consulted regularly with other local leaders, synthesized conflicting positions, delegated considerable responsibility, and moderated as well as stimulated mass militancy. He admitted to a friend at the end of January that the situation in Montgomery kept him “so busy that I hardly have time to breathe.”<sup>38</sup> King also insisted that the movement’s foot soldiers were determined to persevere, even if some leaders had grown weary. “From my limited contact,” he remarked at an executive board meeting on 30 January, “if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized. They wouldn’t get back.” He added that the threats against him were “a small price to pay if victory can be won.”<sup>39</sup>

Just a few hours later, during a mass meeting at First Baptist Church, King learned that his house had been bombed. After being reassured of the safety of his wife and child, who had been in the parsonage when dynamite exploded on the front porch, King arrived home to find a large crowd of enraged black residents confronting police and city officials. Although Mayor Gayle and Police Commissioner Sellers were there to express their concern, King insisted that the incident was an outgrowth of the city’s harassment efforts. In an impromptu address to the angry residents, he said that violence directed at him would not end the movement because he was not indispensable: “If I am stopped our work will not stop.” His remarks as quoted in the *Montgomery Advertiser* reaffirmed his commitment to nonviolence and Christian principles: “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating

---

35. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 133–135.

36. After an unexploded bomb was found on his porch in January 1957, King was quoted as telling his congregation that he had had “a vision” the previous year in which he was told to “stand up for the truth, stand up for the righteousness.” He also reportedly insisted: “If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I’ve been to the mountain top and I’ve seen the Promised Land and it’s going to be here in Montgomery” (quoted in “‘Montgomery Dangerous’ Negro Warns After Week-End of Violence,” *New York Post*, 28 January 1957).

37. Willie Mae Lee, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at First Baptist Church, 30 January 1956, pp. 113–114 in this volume. King later recalled, “The Montgomery story would have taken place if the leaders of the protest had never been born” (*Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 69).

38. King to H. Edward Whitaker, 30 January 1956, p. 113 in this volume.

39. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 30 January 1956, pp. 109–112 in this volume.

violence. We want to love our enemies.”<sup>40</sup> Hours later Coretta Scott King’s father, Obadiah (Obie) Scott, and King, Sr., along with his daughter Christine and son A. D., arrived to find everyone safe. King, Sr., later reported that after the bombing his wife, Alberta Williams King, “wanted M. L. out of the movement right then,” but that their son was “determined to continue his work.”<sup>41</sup>

By now, the MIA leadership was no longer expecting a quick settlement; the boycott movement, they concluded, should directly confront segregated bus seating. This shift in strategy was prompted by the stalemate and encouraged by discussions with NAACP officials, who were eager to provide legal support for the Montgomery movement once local leaders showed themselves willing to attack segregation forthrightly.<sup>42</sup> At the 30 January executive board meeting, MIA leaders decided to accept the NAACP’s legal help in a federal lawsuit, *Aurelia S. Browder et al. v. William A. Gayle*, in which four Montgomery women challenged the constitutionality of the city and state bus segregation statutes. After debating the issue, board members voted to continue the bus boycott even as they pursued desegregation through litigation.<sup>43</sup> At an executive board meeting three days later, King reaffirmed the MIA’s determination to proceed with both the boycott and the legal challenge despite segregationist intimidation. “We’re not going to give up; they can drop bombs in my house every day, I’m firmer now than ever,” he reportedly remarked.<sup>44</sup>



King’s success as a protest leader derived largely from his understanding of the religious culture that pervaded the local movement and his ability to express familiar ideas cogently, utilizing concepts drawn from his theological studies. Although ostensibly a secular organization, the MIA was dominated by ministers. Its mass meetings, held in churches on Mondays and Thursdays, at times resembled evangelical services with the leaders’ oratory enlivened by call-and-response exchanges, congregational singing, scripture reading, and personal testimonials.<sup>45</sup> King and other ministers, especially Abernathy, shared responsibility for the morale-building “pep talks,” but King’s frequent addresses were exceptional in their merging of inspirational oratory with thoughtful explications of the larger philosophical and historical significance of the boycott movement. King retained some of his ingrained skepticism regarding religious emotionalism, remarking, “If we, as a people, had as much religion in our hearts and souls

40. Quoted in Joe Azbell, “Blast Rocks Residence of Bus Boycott Leader,” 31 January 1956, p. 115 in this volume.

41. Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 169. Coretta Scott King’s memoir mentions that King, Sr., and her father came to Montgomery soon after the bombing in an unsuccessful attempt to convince his son to return with his family to Atlanta (see *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 131–132).

42. See Roy Wilkins to W. C. Patton, 27 December 1955.

43. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 30 January 1956, pp. 109–112 in this volume. See also Wilkins to King, 8 March 1956, pp. 165–167 in this volume.

44. Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, pp. 119–122 in this volume.

45. See, for example, Mass Meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, pp. 71–79 in this volume; and King’s description of meetings in *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 85–87.

as we have in our legs and feet, we could change the world.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, he delivered compelling addresses to emotionally responsive and staid congregations alike. (He fondly recalled his father’s expressive congregation, advising a preacher friend that, when compared to Dexter, Ebenezer had “some of the ‘masses’ in it,” adding that “you can get in an occasional amen there.”)<sup>47</sup> Although King’s doctoral training set him apart from other ministers, his familiarity with African-American preaching traditions enabled him to display erudition without losing the attention of those with less formal education.

King’s effectiveness was enhanced by his “closest associate and most trusted friend,” Ralph Abernathy. The two had met briefly in Atlanta during the early 1950s, and after King’s arrival in Montgomery they dined together almost nightly, engaging in extended conversations that included Coretta and Abernathy’s wife, Juanita. The two men’s personalities and abilities complemented each other. Abernathy later wrote that from the beginning of the friendship, “Martin expounded philosophy, [while] I saw its practical application on the local level.”<sup>48</sup> King later described his fellow Baptist minister as a “persuasive and dynamic” speaker “with the gift of laughing people into positive action. When things became languid around mass meetings, Ralph Abernathy infused his audiences with new life and ardor.”<sup>49</sup> King’s and Abernathy’s skills and abilities were complementary. One observer of the mass meetings recalled that King’s discourses on *agape* and other philosophical concepts were sometimes brought down to earth by Abernathy: “Now, let me tell you what that means for tomorrow morning.”<sup>50</sup> They were constant companions in Montgomery, as well as on speaking trips and family vacations. “It was mighty good to see you and Brother Abernathy yesterday,” one friend wrote King. “To see one is to see the other now. You are sworn buddies in religion and the missionary journey akin to Paul’s of old.”<sup>51</sup> King remembered that they “prayed together and made important decisions together. His ready good humor lightened many tense moments. Whenever I went out of town I always left him in charge of the important business of the association, knowing that it was in safe hands.”<sup>52</sup>

As in African-American churches, initiative and direction within the MIA came not only from male ministers but also from less visible leaders, especially women. Because they were largely excluded from the ministerial ranks that had traditionally provided leadership in black communities, female leaders stayed out of the spotlight and rarely served as speakers at MIA mass meetings or out-of-town support rallies. Black women played crucial roles, however, in sustaining the MIA’s

---

46. Quoted in William Peters, “Our Weapon Is Love,” *Redbook*, August 1956, p. 72.

47. King to John Thomas Porter, 30 September 1955. (Although this document predates the volume time period, it is included in the Calendar of Documents because it was among the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church papers discovered after the second volume of this edition was published.)

48. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74. Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 129.

49. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74.

50. Quoted by Bayard Rustin, interview with Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), p. 54.

51. C. W. Kelly to King, 18 July 1956.

52. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 74.

ongoing committees and volunteer networks. King later conceded that, “more than any other person,” Jo Ann Robinson “was active on every level of the protest.”<sup>53</sup> Besides assuming an influential role as a strategist on the executive board and several committees, Robinson served as a key MIA negotiator because of her extensive experience lobbying white officials. Other women, such as Eurette Adair, Johnnie Carr, Irene West, and King’s secretary Maude L. Ballou, were responsible for most of the daily activities that kept the boycott going, especially the car pool. African-American working women, having once been the primary users of the buses as they commuted to domestic jobs in white homes, were the mainstays of the bus boycott.

Coretta King herself played an active role in the boycott movement, firmly supporting her husband’s decision to accept a leadership position in the MIA and, despite caring for an infant daughter, often joining him at movement events. “All along I have supported my husband in this cause,” she said in March, “and at this point I feel even stronger about the cause, and whatever happens to him [ . . . ] happens to me.” She became more involved as the boycott progressed, speaking publicly on behalf of the protest and singing at concerts.<sup>54</sup>

Members of the Dexter congregation also gave King vital support as he struggled to handle the physical and psychological demands of his rigorous speaking schedule and the basic operations of the MIA. Coretta King confided to a reporter that her husband “never has a minute to himself. When he isn’t in court, he is attending meetings of the Association. When he is home, he is always on the phone.” She depended on the help of others, particularly the women of Dexter, who “rallied around” her and her husband. “The ladies of the church and ladies of other churches and women in general have been extremely kind to us,” she recalled. “All day long they come to my home. They clean our home, wash the baby, and bring food.”<sup>55</sup>

King regretted that his responsibilities as a leader often took him away from Dexter. “For months,” he later recalled, “my day-to-day contact with my parishioners had almost ceased. I had become no more than a Sunday preacher.”<sup>56</sup> (Even then, sixteen of his Sundays during 1956 were spent preaching elsewhere.) In his end-of-the-year report, King apologized for his absences and thanked the congregation for its support. “Due to the multiplicity of duties that have come to me as a result of my involvement in the protest, I have often lagged behind in my pastoral duties.” He expressed appreciation to those who had stepped in for him and “given words of encouragement when I needed them most. Even

---

53. Ibid., p. 78. In a January 1956 interview Rufus A. Lewis commented: “I sense that in addition to Reverend King, there is another leader, tho unknown to the public, of perhaps equal significance. The public recognizes Reverend King as the leader, but I wonder if Mrs. Robinson may be of equal importance” (Lewis, Interview by Donald T. Ferron, 20 January 1956).

54. Reactions to Conviction, 22 March 1956, pp. 198–199 in this volume. See Olivet Baptist Church, Announcement, “Coretta Scott King in Recital,” 19 October 1956; and In Friendship, Program, Montgomery Anniversary Concert, 5 December 1956.

55. “Physical Wear and Tear Gets You, Mrs. King Says,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 March 1956. See also Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 138–139.

56. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141.

when my life and the life of my family were in personal jeopardy, you were at my side.”<sup>57</sup>

Trusted Dexter members acted as King’s personal bodyguards as threats mounted. Bob Williams, a friend from Morehouse and a professor of music at Alabama State, accompanied him nearly everywhere. He was in the car when King was arrested in January and later helped staff the twenty-four-hour protection that the MIA provided the Dexter parsonage after the bombing. “From the moment the protest started,” King later wrote, Williams was “seldom far from my side or Coretta’s.”<sup>58</sup> Coretta King remembered that Williams “came to sleep there every night—not that he slept much.” According to her account, Williams had apparently “slipped his shotgun into the house without Martin’s knowledge of it and sat up most of the night with his gun beside him.”<sup>59</sup> In the tense days following the bombing, King had unsuccessfully sought gun permits for his bodyguards, but he eventually decided to get rid of all guns, including his own, after discussing with his wife and others the inconsistency of leading a nonviolent movement while permitting the use of weapons for protection. “We tried to satisfy our friends by having floodlights mounted around the house, and hiring unarmed watchmen around the clock.”<sup>60</sup>

On 21 February white Alabama officials initiated their most concerted effort to defeat the MIA by indicting eighty-nine boycott leaders for violating a 1921 state law barring conspiracies that interfered with lawful businesses.<sup>61</sup> King was in Nashville when he learned that he, Nixon, Parks, and many others had been charged. On his way home he stopped in Atlanta, where his parents sought to dissuade him from returning to Montgomery. That evening King, Sr., tried to convince his son to leave the Montgomery movement by convening a group of black leaders close to the family, including Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays and Atlanta University president Rufus E. Clement, to discuss the matter. Mays supported King’s view that he should not abandon the movement. “I would rather be in jail ten years than desert my people now,” King recalled telling the group. “I have begun the struggle, and I can’t turn back. I have reached the

---

57. King, Annual Report, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 31 October 1956, p. 411 in this volume. Anticipating the demands on his time to remain undiminished, King asked the congregation to provide funds for an assistant.

58. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141. Williams was later removed from his Alabama State position because of his involvement in the MIA.

59. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 122. Williams arranged his first choral work, “Lord, I Can’t Turn Back,” when he found himself unable to sleep on the night of King’s arrest for speeding. It was first sung in New York by Coretta Scott King at the Montgomery Anniversary Concert on 5 December 1956.

60. See Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 1956, p. 120 in this volume; King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 141. Despite King’s subsequent insistence that he had banned weapons in the parsonage, even in late February a visitor reported that King’s bodyguards possessed “an arsenal” (Glenn E. Smiley to John Swomley and Al Hassler, 29 February 1956). Another visitor in late February remembered nearly sitting on a gun left lying on a chair in the Dexter parsonage (Bayard Rustin, interview by T. H. Baker, 17 June 1969, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas).

61. See Indictment, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr., et al.*, 21 February 1956, p. 133 in this volume.

point of no return.”<sup>62</sup> Finally forced to acquiesce, King, Sr., drove to Montgomery with his son and accompanied him to the courthouse, where the indicted pastor surrendered to the sheriff on 23 February. He was released on bond after being fingerprinted and photographed.<sup>63</sup>

Although the indictment of boycott leaders was intended to weaken the resolve of the MIA activists, in fact it only strengthened the movement, securing extensive national press coverage for King’s advocacy of nonviolent resistance to segregation. The indictments attracted numerous expressions of support from sympathizers outside Montgomery.<sup>64</sup> When King spoke at a mass meeting after his arrest, the *New York Times* provided front-page coverage, quoting King’s comment that the boycott was “not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice.” The reporter highlighted King’s admonition against violence. “We must use the weapon of love,” King was quoted as telling several thousand supporters at First Baptist Church. “We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us.”<sup>65</sup> Even more than the bombing of King’s home three weeks before, the prosecution transformed King and the MIA into national symbols of civil rights protest. Afterward the volume of supportive correspondence, speaking requests, and contributions increased dramatically.

King’s trial, which began on March 19, became a forum for the bus boycott movement, drawing many prominent spectators, including Detroit congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. The legal strategy of the MIA attorneys asserted two main points: first, that the MIA was conducting a constitutional protest rather than an economic boycott, and second, that MIA leaders had only advised local citizens, encouraging them to decide for themselves whether to stay off the buses. Witnesses supported the latter contention. As MIA recording secretary U. J. Fields insisted before the trial, “The people themselves have made up their own minds, their minds have not been made up for them.”<sup>66</sup> Mrs. A. W. West similarly commented, “The leaders could do nothing by themselves. They are only the voice of thousands of colored workers.”<sup>67</sup> (At a February mass meeting, Abernathy had expressed a widely held view when he announced to the audience, “This is your movement; we don’t have any leaders in the movement; you are the leaders.” When the audience shouted their approval, Abernathy added, “We tell Rev. King

---

62. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 145. See also King, Sr., *Daddy King*, pp. 170–172.

63. This photograph appears in the section following p. 33 in this volume. Once he realized that his son was committed to the struggle despite its dangers, King, Sr., joined in himself with characteristic vigor. Speaking at a mass meeting in Montgomery a week later, he reportedly set the meeting on fire with a short presentation, declaring that “I am no outsider, I have vested interest here . . . and if things get too hot I shall move in” (quoted in J. Harold Jones, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, 1 March 1956). During the year King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King traveled with their son to National Baptist Convention gatherings and attended several of King’s addresses, including speeches in Denver and New York; see, for example, King to Anna C. Frank, 7 May 1956.

64. See, for example, letters from Wilkins and Ralph J. Bunche to King, 22 February 1956, pp. 134–135 in this volume; and A. Philip Randolph to Nixon, 23 February 1956.

65. Quoted in Wayne Phillips, “Negroes Pledge to Keep Boycott,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1956, p. 136 in this volume.

66. Fields, interview by Ferron, 28 January 1956.

67. West, interview by Lee, 23 January 1956.

what to say and he says what we want him to say.”<sup>68</sup> Gladys Moore reflected the same sentiments when she testified at the trial, “Wasn’t no one man started it. We all started it over night.”<sup>69</sup>

Despite such protestations, however, the boycott could not have been sustained without effective leadership. Well before the trial, King’s role as the MIA’s main spokesperson and administrator was evident. Moreover, once Judge Eugene Carter and the prosecutors agreed to a defense request that all defendants be tried separately, with King to be tried first, journalists focused on him. Although the prosecution suggested that the MIA leaders did in fact hold authority in the movement, King temporized on the witness stand, understating the extent to which he had influenced the course of the movement. Rather than using the trial as a public forum to proclaim his willingness to risk jail in order to achieve a worthy goal, King insisted that he had only told MIA members “to let your conscience be your guide, if you want to ride that is all right.” Asked if he had ever advocated violence, King was adamant: “My motivation has been the exact converse of that; I urged nonviolence at all points.”<sup>70</sup>

After King testified, Judge Carter found him guilty of conducting an illegal boycott against Montgomery City Lines and fined him \$500 plus court costs. When he refused to pay, the judge converted the fine into a sentence of 386 days of labor in the Montgomery County Jail. King’s attorneys indicated that they would appeal the conviction to the Alabama Court of Appeals; Carter then suspended the sentence and postponed the remaining boycott cases until King’s appeal was resolved. MIA supporters attending the trial had been quiet and composed for much of it and showed little emotion as the verdict was read. When King emerged from the courthouse, however, the waiting crowd cheered and vowed to continue the boycott until they achieved their goal.<sup>71</sup>



King’s signal contribution to the Montgomery movement was to infuse it with a Christian ethos of nonviolence and explicitly Gandhian precepts of nonviolent action. He undoubtedly learned about the Gandhian independence movement while attending Morehouse, where Benjamin Mays occasionally spoke of his travels in India during his Tuesday morning lectures to the student body. King remembered that his first extensive exposure to Gandhian ideas came during his years at Crozer, when, inspired by a lecture at Philadelphia’s Friendship House by Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, he bought “a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.”<sup>72</sup> J. Pius Barbour, King’s friend and mentor during his Crozer years, recalled King arguing for Gandhian methods during his seminary years. “Mike has always contended that no minority can afford to adopt

68. Abernathy quoted in J. Harold Jones, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 27 February 1956. See also Ferron, Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 27 February 1956, p. 144 in this volume.

69. Transcript, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956.

70. King, Testimony, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956, p. 186 in this volume.

71. See Reactions to Conviction, 22 March 1956, pp. 198–199 in this volume.

72. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 96.