Essay

One in an occasional series of essays written by faculty members in their areas of academic expertise

The unexpected emergence of Martin Luther King Jr.

BY CLAYBORNE CARSON

It would have happened without him, but Martin Luther King Jr. gave the Montgomery bus boycott a historical significance it would not otherwise have had. The first day of the boycott, Dec. 5, 1955, was already an overwhelming success when black residents chose King to head the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which was formed to continue the protest against the city's bus segregation policy. King would later admit that his unanticipated call to leadership "happened so quickly that I did not have time to think it through. It is probable that if I had, I would have declined the nomination." A 26-year-old minister with little more than a year's experience as pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he was uncertain about his future, but he quickly sensed that he had become part of a historic movement. At an evening mass rally on the initial day of the boycott, he conveyed the deeper significance of the day's unfolding events: "Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'There lived a race of people, a black people, fleecy locks and black complexion, but 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.'"

During subsequent weeks King gradually became more assured in his understanding of the boycott movement's historical meaning even as he recognized his own limitations and frailties. His resolve weakened during January 1956 as Montgomery city commissioners announced that they had joined the White Citizens Council and launched a "get tough" policy that resulted in King's jailing on a minor traffic violation. Telephone threats from anonymous callers further heightened his fears. Internal conflicts within the black community also became apparent when white officials negotiated with black ministers other than King and suggested that the MIA leader was the main obstacle to resolving the dispute. An editorial in the local newspaper implied that funds raised for the boycott movement had been diverted to personal use. "I almost broke down under the continual battering," he admitted later. At the Jan. 23 MIA Executive Board meeting, he defended himself against criticisms before his spirits were briefly revived by a unanimous vote of confidence from the other MIA leaders. King reached bottom on Jan. 27 when a particularly threatening late-night telephone call brought him to "the saturation point." He went to his kitchen and sat before an untouched cup of coffee, exhausted, his courage "all but gone." As he considered ways to "move out of the picture without appearing a coward," he began to pray aloud. "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before."

King's spiritual experience in the kitchen deepened his understanding of the meaning of his life and of the Montgomery struggle. Press accounts increasingly portrayed him as the great leader responsible for the boycott movement, but recognized that he was part of a great movement beyond the control of any single individual. On Jan. 30, he warned "weary" black leaders that they could not convince local residents to return to the buses. "If we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized." When he spoke at a mass rally later in the day, he affirmed that if he "had never been born this movement would have taken place. I just happened to be here." After allaying his doubts and fears, King came to accept his unanticipated roles, first as a symbol of civil rights protest and then as a proponent of Gandhian nonviolence.

King would later admit that at the start of the boycott he was not firmly committed to Gandhian principles. He had initially advocated nonviolence not as a way of life but as a practical necessity for a racial minority. When his home was bombed at the end of January, he had cited Jesus – "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword" – rather than Gandhi in urging angry black neighbors to remain nonviolent. At the time of the bombing, King was seeking a gun permit, and he was protected by armed bodyguards. Only after the bombing did King alter his views on the use of weapons for protection. His reconsideration was encouraged by the arrival in Montgomery of two pacifists who were far more aware than he of Gandhian principles.

Competing with each other for influence over King, Bayard Rustin, a black activist affiliated with the War Resisters League, and Glenn E. Smiley, a white staff member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, saw themselves as King's tutors on Gandhian precepts. Rustin was shocked to discover a gun in King's house, while Smiley informed fellow pacifists that King's home was "an arsenal." Smiley described King as either a "Negro Gandhi" or perhaps an unfortunate demagogue "destined to swing from a lynch mob's tree." King's conversion would, according to Smiley, have major consequences for the Gandhian movement in the United States: "If he can really be won to a faith in nonviolence there is no end to what he can do."

King was hardly a passive receptacle for the teachings of Rustin and Smiley. Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays had exposed him to Gandhian principles during his undergraduate years, but King had remained skeptical afterward: "I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. I felt that the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships." By the time of the bus boycott, however, King had begun to see nonviolence not only as a pragmatic choice but as a moral necessity. His Christian convictions converged with his increasingly sophisticated understanding of Gandhian ideas. He would explain to a reporter that "the spirit of passive resistance came to me from the Bible, from the teachings of Jesus. The techniques came from Gandhi." In King's view Gandhi had proved that nonviolence could work as a method of resistance for oppressed people. "A little brown man in India" confronted the British empire, King told a cheering audience at the annual convention of the NAACP. "But in the midst of that physical force he confronted that empire with soul force."

CLAYBORNE CARSON

Once King assumed the burdens of nonviolent leadership, he continued to express uncertainty about his role in the expanding African American freedom struggle, but he would never waver in his commitment to Gandhian principles. By the time the boycott movement came to a successful conclusion in November 1956, King had been permanently transformed. "Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life," he would later explain. "Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action."

The Montgomery struggle marked the birth of a new era of African American history; it also signaled the beginning of a new phase of King's life. Doubts persisted, but, by the end of 1956, he had accepted his calling: "I feel that the confidence that the people have in me and their readiness to follow my leadership have thrust upon me a responsibility that I must follow through with." In the aftermath of the boycott he received attractive job offers, but he assured a reporter that he would continue to expand his ministry. "I do have a great desire to serve humanity," he explained, "but at this particular point, the pulpit gives me an opportunity and a freedom that I wouldn't have in any other sphere of activity." During the interview, he recalled a conversation with J. Pius Barbour, an old family friend living in Chester, Pa., who had often provided fatherly guidance to King during his student years at Crozer Theological Seminary. When Barbour teased King about his growing national fame, King allowed himself to reflect on what he had achieved and on the uncertainties ahead: "Frankly, I'm worried to death. A man who hits the peak at 27 has a tough job ahead. People will be expecting me to pull rabbits out of the hat for the rest of my life."

Clayborne Carson, professor of history, is director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project.