

From Civil Rights to Human Rights

Martin Luther King, Jr., and the
Struggle for Economic Justice

Thomas F. Jackson

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cluding women. King followed his predecessor Vernon Johns in pressing for more authentically religious, egalitarian, and politically active congregation. He did not want to pastor an exclusive "social club with a thin veneer of religiosity." The "gospel of Jesus is a social gospel," King preached. Everyone could register to vote and recruit for the NAACP. He set up a new committee focusing on "social, political, and economic" improvement, appointing as chairs Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson, leaders of Montgomery's women's Political Council (WPC). A new Social Service Committee he argued with "visiting the sick and needy." A year later, the Social and Political Action Committee had excelled in registering voters. Dexter led the city in contributions to the NAACP, King boasted. This was hardly mass militancy, it neither was it bourgeois complacency. J. Pious Barbour tried to lure King away from what he considered an anti-intellectual backwater. "This is the day Mass preachers except in certain spots. Hurry and get one," Barbour counseled. The allures of status tested King's commitment to the poor, but events outside his control and the ideal of an egalitarian ministry compelled more democratic choices.⁵¹

Chapter 2 *The Least of These*

"Could the militant and the moderate be combined in a single speech?" King asked himself on Monday, December 5, 1955, preparing to address Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church as the newly elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Fifty thousand Negroes refused to ride city buses that morning. Twenty-four hours earlier, King had no inkling he would be thrust into leadership, but his hastily composed speech pulled in social and ideological crosswinds central to his whole career. Could he be "militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action," yet "moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds"? It was hardly a formal philosophical dilemma. Black Montgomery was lifted up with gales of exhilaration and uncertainty. Could Montgomery's contentious black leaders unite behind King's leadership in a movement comprising college professors, ministers, maids, cooks, and day laborers? Abusive white bus drivers and unfair seating rules brought them to Holt Street. But the buses were lightning rods for grievances against the entire system of segregation codified at the turn of the century to control aspiring, politically restive blacks and to suppress populist alliances at society's bottom. Would white leaders negotiate or repress the movement? That morning, police cars tailed buses, looking in vain for "goon squads" that were presumably intimidating black riders. Could blacks sustain militancy and absorb white retaliation without resorting to violence, which would divide the movement and provide whites a rationale for bare-fisted repression? Thousands listening in and around the church had discovered an "unplumbed passion for justice," King recalled. Reporters were there "to record my words and send them across the nation."

King gathered and focused black grievances at Holt Street, describing collective memories of a people "tired" and "trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." He struck chords of global and historical theme and variation, playing to antinomies of love and justice, persuasion and coercion, black unity and class solidarity. Negroes themselves must transform democracy "from thin paper to thick action." The "right to protest for right" was foundational,

a right denied to people "incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a Communist nation." From this safe cold war rhetoric, King immediately turned to inspiring domestic traditions. "Disinherited" Negroes should emulate American workers "trampled over by capitalistic power," whose powerful trade unions faced down massive repression in the 1930s and 1940s. Then King struck black keys to rhythms of call and response, certain that a "race of people, a black people," would inject "new meaning" into democracy. Though he never rode a bus with Montgomery's working people, he would lead them without fear or thought of expense, he promised. He had heard the voice of Jesus, "If you do it unto the least of these, my brother, you do it unto me." The mass meeting broke into thunderous applause and shouts of "All right!" and "Yes, Sir!"²

King leapt nimbly from elite to vernacular speech across racial and class divides. Sudden and unexpected leadership plunged him into Montgomery's democratic trenches. Sharing the struggle with domestic workers and manual laborers, he shed some of his elitism. A powerful celebrity culture made him the "Alabama Moses," an "American Gandhi." National black elites from the NAACP to the National Baptist Convention (NBC), the nation's largest African American denominational organization, blended rivalry and support for the star of the biggest movement in a decade. Pacifists, socialists, trade unionists, and self-styled Gandhians offered strategic advice, public relations expertise, and dollars. King faced a dilemma of democratic leadership in a mass-media age. Could he be one of the people, identified with their strivings and sufferings in local communities, and yet lead the Negro people and the nation toward nonviolence, integration, reconciliation, and justice?

The yearlong Montgomery boycott, the first mass protest rooted in churches, marked a turning point in the black freedom struggle. Buses had long been rolling "theaters" of racially contested working-class space. There had been bus boycotts before, like the one in Baton Rouge in 1953. But Montgomery sustained an unprecedented community solidarity and attracted undreamed-of outside support. Media attention stimulated contributions, publicized the regional and national possibilities for nonviolent direct action, and elevated King as a symbol of black political aspirations. Black and white American Gandhians persuaded King to embrace philosophical nonviolence. Equally significant, economic war broke out between black and white Montgomery. King learned important lessons about black economic power, economic dependency, and poverty. Though advisors counseled moderation and the mainstream press framed his message in moral terms, King's evolving rhetoric richly documents his growing sense of the linkages between civil rights and economic justice.³

The course of events in Montgomery exemplifies the dynamic relationship between mass mobilization and charismatic leadership, local and national power. Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1 for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Local leaders initiated a successful one-day boycott on December 5. Ready to undertake a concerted campaign, the MIA, made up mostly of ministers, elected King president. The group's goals were remarkably moderate: to modify segregated seating, win courtesy from whites, and get jobs for black bus drivers. Weeks of official stonewalling culminated in mid-January with the city's "get tough" policy of reprisal against black protesters. After white terrorists bombed King's house on January 30, the MIA challenged segregation in federal court, joining the NAACP in *Browder v. Gayle*. In February, a state grand jury indicted 115 black leaders for violating an antiboycott law designed to hamper labor organization. King went to trial on March 19 and then appealed his conviction. A U.S. district court ruled bus segregation unconstitutional in *Browder v. Gayle* on June 5. Segregationists appealed to the Supreme Court. Through the long months of the summer and fall, blacks walked or carpooled to work, sustaining remarkable racial unity and nonviolent discipline. A court upheld a city injunction against the car pools on November 13. But that very day, the Supreme Court upheld the *Browder* decision. On December 20, federal marshals finally delivered writs of injunction, ending bus segregation in Montgomery forever. Direct action, litigation, publicity, and a tide of community and external support delivered the MIA a historic victory. "King's greatest genius" was translating into words "the aspirations of masses of people," Anne Braden later wrote. King transformed "a battle for a seat on a bus [into] a war against an entire system of segregation and degradation." But in Montgomery and the fields of Alabama, the broader battle was already raging. King's genius also grew from soils of social learning.⁴

Ground of Protest

Montgomery's political and economic crosscurrents decisively shaped King's leadership and learning. The Alabama State College historian Lawrence Dunbar Reddick described Montgomery as "maddeningly Janus faced," the capital of a vanishing cotton empire, "part agricultural, part commercial, part government-business and only slightly industrial." Modernizers had recently built a coliseum free of Jim Crow, but segregationists still honored Montgomery's statue of Jefferson Davis. Rural whites flocked to the city, upsetting the elite's political control and swelling a constituency ripe for exploitation by race-baiting segregationists. An independent black middle class led by ministers and

Alabama State College teachers was gaining political confidence with the slow growth of the black electorate and the relentless accretion of grievances. Montgomery's blacks suffered "severe economic deprivation" and job discrimination, King realized. Banned from city and state jobs, they worked as unskilled domestics or day laborers. Demeaning face-to-face contacts while blacks were cleaning whites' houses, hemming their skirts, and carrying their groceries sharpened racial and class grievances. Whites called blacks "boy," "girl," or worse. Bus drivers exercised police powers arbitrarily.⁵ After a day serving whites, black workers riding the buses often had to stand next to empty seats reserved for whites. In "unreserved" sections between the front and back, drivers often bullied blacks out of their seats. King reported several bus drivers' insults during his trial. "Get back, you ugly black apes," was typical. The city's history of white physical and sexual violence was long and horrific. Though intimidated, blacks, including women, were not passive. When a driver called one maid a "motherfucker," she went for her razor, ready to "cut his head stamp off." The terrified driver said nothing.⁶ If King were to preach nonviolence—and his commitment as yet was unclear—he faced a real challenge.

Blacks had not passively suffered the "iron feet of oppression" in Montgomery. Local leaders pressed ongoing political agendas. Black Montgomery had fifty-two churches and fifty associations devoted to mutual aid, such as the Women's Federated Clubs, which aided poor students and elderly people needing medicine. Alabama State College was Montgomery's main cultural center, but it was risky soil for movement organizing because of its financial dependence on the state. Independent mortician and Dexter parishioner Rufus Lewis organized voting rights drives with black professionals and World War II veterans. Jo Ann Robinson, president of the WPC, laid most of the groundwork for the bus boycott, keeping a low profile because she might easily have been fired from her position as an English professor at Alabama State, where the WPC was founded. With three hundred members by 1954, the WPC was a determined group of "educators, supervisors, principals, teachers, social workers, and nurses," according to Robinson, "woman power" organized against manifold injustices. Robinson wrote Mayor W. A. Gayle in May 1954 requesting what became the MIA's early blueprint for bus seating: Negroes should "sit from back toward front, and whites from front toward back until all the seats are taken." Blacks were 75 percent of all bus riders and were well organized. But of course there was no need for "forceful measures," she smoothly threatened.⁷

Local ministers shared King's commitment to the social gospel and political activism. Ralph Abernathy, a World War II veteran, became King's lifelong aide and friend. Born on a poor Alabama farm, he graduated from Alabama

State in 1950 and pastored First Baptist Church, the largest and oldest of Montgomery's "mass" black churches. His flock grew dramatically in response to his earthy and dramatic preaching. Abernathy pushed voter registration and organized the community for improved housing and recreation. King saw his predecessor at Dexter, Vernon Johns, as a pioneer of Montgomery's "social revolution," one of two Montgomery heroes he identified in *Stride Toward Freedom*. Johns urged blacks to "pool their economic resources" in producers' cooperatives like his own Farm and City Enterprises. Skeptical that whites would welcome blacks into an equal opportunity society, Johns believed blacks first needed economic power. He preached folksy sermons about agricultural self-sufficiency, like "Mud Is Basic," to his well-heeled parishioners.⁸

King's other acknowledged hero was labor leader Edgar Daniels Nixon, a Montgomery link to the civil rights unionism of the 1930s and 1940s. Head of the Alabama division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, E. D. Nixon shared Randolph's faith in working-class mass action. His out-of-state employer and union contract ensured his job security and political independence. A leader of the state and local NAACP, Nixon had organized the Welfare League in the 1930s, which provided housing, food, cash, medicine, and job referrals for the poor. Nixon frequently attended Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which trained labor organizers. Head of the Montgomery Voter's League in 1941, he marched with 750 blacks to register at the courthouse. In 1952, he was president of Alabama's all-black Progressive Democrats. Gandhian activist Harris Wofford called him "Gandhi with a gun."⁹

Progressive Democrats aimed to translate electoral power into concrete benefits, especially in public employment. At a public meeting in March 1955, Nixon asked candidates for city commissioner: Would the commission support the WPC's bus seating proposal? What about the deplorable lack of fireplugs, sewers, decent parks, and paved streets in Negro neighborhoods? Would Negroes, who paid taxes, sit on city boards? Would white candidates approve a new subdivision of decent homes for Negroes? Would Negroes ever work for the city? Segregationist candidate Clyde C. Sellers frightened whites by publicizing Nixon's demands and posturing as their defender against "a block of Negro votes." Sellers insisted the Negro already had equal opportunity to find work "for which he is qualified"—somewhere else than Montgomery. In other words, submit to municipal neglect and work under the mudsill, or leave town.¹⁰

Militant segregationists increasingly dominated Montgomery's politics. Sellers was carried to victory by the wave of "massive resistance" to desegregation that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Southern blacks petitioned to integrate schools, exposing themselves to political, physical, and

economic retaliation. The first White Citizens' Council in Mississippi denounced the Supreme Court and NAACP as "socialistic," warned of racial "AMALGAMATION," and denounced "Pinkos in the Pulpit." Such radical black ministers allegedly undermined the Christian principles of "racial preference" (for whites), "private enterprise, rugged individualism and conservatism." The group expanded to Alabama in late 1954, promising integrationists they would make it impossible "to find and hold a job, get credit or renew a mortgage." Over half of the twenty-nine blacks who petitioned officials to integrate schools in Selma lost their jobs. Whites torched the business of a black grocer who boycotted the dairy of a white councilman.¹¹ How southern blacks overcame this economic warfare is one of the most fascinating dimensions of the civil rights era. Stories of reprisal and relief illustrate how community-based civil rights struggles remained struggles for economic autonomy and justice. King helped fight these poorly publicized battles in numerous local movements that captured his attention.

Chains of Democratic "Mutuality"

When King went on trial for conspiracy, legal strategy dictated he deny the boycott had any one leader, which was true. "Wasn't no one started it. We all started it over night," Gladys Moore testified on March 22. Many leaders described a mutual transformation of leaders and masses in the democratic struggle. Mass militancy pushed leaders into confrontations they might not otherwise have sought. Leaders sought to guide the masses toward victories they believed only nonviolence could ensure. Before the boycott, King thought only a miracle would cure black Montgomery's "crippling factionalism." For Montgomery's middle- and working-class blacks, fear of losing "economic security" paralyzed resistance, he mistakenly thought.¹²

When Rosa Parks refused a bus driver's order to give up her seat to a white man, black leaders had the test case they had sought for months. Parks was educated and respectable, youth secretary to the NAACP, and Nixon's assistant. Born into rural poverty, she found that her high school education earned her no respect from white employers, so she labored for low wages in a hospital and as a seamstress. On Thursday, December 1, she spent a full day altering clothing for whites at Montgomery Fair Department Store. Black labor made daily life "easy and convenient for white people," but their rights on buses were limited to paying and being pushed around. When would blacks win their "rights as human beings?" she wondered while awaiting arrest. Immediately, Jo Ann Robinson secretly printed 52,500 leaflets at Alabama

State. Robinson recognized that if the boycott became a sustained, mass protest, neither she nor the WPC had the resources or independence to guide it. Thelma Glass remembered that within several months, under the threat of firings, the WPC dwindled to three members.¹³

Over the weekend, ministers, professionals, and teachers canvassed black neighborhoods and immediately felt a democratic leavening. King and Abernathy roved through Montgomery's "clubs and dives," where Abernathy recalled the enthusiasm of working-class "sinners." Upper-crust "saints" met them with cautious respect. Canvassers found "poorly clad and undernourished children, alcoholics [and] human deprivation they hardly realized existed," Rev. Edgar French recalled. Almost no blacks rode the buses on Monday morning. King was awed by the "majestic" bravery of working-class folk. Men rode mules to work, and the sidewalks were thick with "laborers and domestic workers . . . trudging patiently to their jobs."¹⁴

The successful one-day boycott led sixteen leaders to form the MIA on December 5. Nixon and Lewis vied for the presidency, but, sensing his vulnerability, Lewis nominated his pastor and they all acclaimed King. King later speculated that as a newcomer, he had "no known enemies." King owed no debts to "city fathers" who would purchase any minister's soul with a hand-out, Nixon believed. Calling the ministers "scared boys" for even thinking they might hide their names and rebuking them for living off of "poor washwomen" and never returning the favor, Nixon admired King when he shouted he was no coward.¹⁵ King soon preached about the leadership's utter dependency on the poor washwomen of Montgomery.

Indeed, it was the people who "picked up and swept along their leaders," Reddick recalled. Militancy moved from pew to pulpit. Leaders had "to catch up with the masses," Robinson remembered. Yet Ministers and independent businessmen, those most secure from reprisals, lent resources and social spaces to the protest and dominated the MIA board. Robinson endorsed the view that ministers must "give Christian guidance to a rebellious people." Rev. B. J. Simms thought a "blood bath" would have been inevitable had not "educated and civic minded" leaders joined militant "lower economic blacks." Few followed King into philosophical nonviolence, but together they remained nonviolent for a year.¹⁶

Late in December the MIA pursued negotiations to modify segregated bus seating and win jobs for blacks. Nixon was confident that a black consumer "strike" would compel negotiations. The MIA adopted the WPC's plan for bus seating: blacks starting at the back, whites at the front, taking seats as available with none "reserved for any race." Their first request was "courtesy," which company representatives quickly promised. The third goal spoke to

broad aspirations: "employment of Negro bus operators in predominantly Negro residential sections." This demand was more radical than it seemed, because bus drivers wielded police powers and white supremacy demanded no black ever hold authority over any white. African Americans appealed to whites mainly as aggrieved consumers, however. An ad in the *Montgomery Advertiser* in January protested, "DEMOCRACY gives to each Citizen equal opportunities and privileges to enjoy the benefits of what ever service he is able to pay for."¹⁷

Official intransigence and escalating white violence in December and January led the MIA to seek complete integration on the buses. On January 30, the MIA voted to join with the NAACP in filing *Browder v. Gayle*, which challenged the constitutionality of Montgomery's segregation ordinance in federal court. King had pushed the jobs goal, but bus company negotiators stonewalled the proposal, fearing white hate strikes if blacks received any job assignments. On December 17, King had asked the company simply to accept applications, but they refused. MIA board member Ronald Young argued that jobs should be their highest priority. Black bus drivers with police powers could implement both courtesy and desegregation. They never put it to a vote. The NAACP's refusal to take any case that stopped shy of a full challenge to segregation led the MIA to drop the jobs demand. There was nothing unconstitutional or illegal in Montgomery about job discrimination—yet.¹⁸

The official "get tough" policy began on January 23 when Mayor Gayle announced that he and the city commissioners had joined the White Citizens' Council. Just as much as Negro radical outsiders, the "cooks and maids who boycott the buses 'are fighting to destroy our social fabric,'" he had announced. Whites should fire them. Dozens of businessmen pledged to do so. Then on January 26, King was arrested for speeding and thrown in jail. King recalled concluding from the severe repression that segregation was designed not just to separate but to "oppress and exploit" people. The privileged did not "give up their privileges on request."¹⁹

Official repression paved the way for death threats and violence. A telephone caller threatened King's life the night after his release. Sleepless, King prayed into his coffee cup, fearing the people would lose heart if he lost his "strength and courage." A quiet "inner voice" told him, "Stand up for righteousness, and God will be at your side forever," he recalled. It became a pivotal moment in his private and public autobiography. More than just the discovery of a personal relationship with God, the "kitchen conversion" marked King's shift from pastoral to mass leadership: exemplary, humble, identified with the sufferings and struggles of ordinary blacks. "It came to feel that, as we struggle together, we have cosmic companionship," he later told an

interviewer. King later hitched his story to the parable of the rich fool, the "self-made man" who ate, drank, and was merry, heedless of others until God revealed he would soon lose his life and all his wealth. Daddy King had wrapped up King, Jr.'s life "in a Christmas package." But the democratic "struggle" and the death threats put him on a road more dangerous than any path circling family or congregation. "The choice leaves your hands," he often said. People would be demoralized if they saw him falter; they depended on him, as he did on them and on God. In other versions, the "voice of Jesus" had assured him. Know his name, King insisted, and don't try to find it in the "principle of concretion," or the "architectonic good," theological abstractions useless to anyone in distress. Their slave ancestors knew Jesus "as a rock in a weary land . . . my bread in a starving land . . . my sister and my brother . . . my mother and my father." King's new relationship with God emerged from and reaffirmed his commitment to the common struggles of humanity, the gospel of Luke, and his ministry to the poor, bruised, and imprisoned.²⁰

Even as he rose in the celebrity culture, King achieved new intimacy with the masses, who responded with love and adulation. False rumors of a settlement in January 1956 compelled the MIA to delegate all official statements to Nixon and King, boosting King's media prominence and symbolic power. On January 30, city officials offered the MIA a compromise that would have barely altered the humiliating seating rules. It was tempting to return to safe obscurity, but King warned the leaders they be "would be ostracized" if they even mentioned the compromise to a mass meeting. People would reject his leadership if he failed to mirror their militancy. "If M. L. King had never been born this movement would have taken place," he told the people that evening. Pew and pulpit had been joined in a democratic "mutuality." "We are a chain. We are linked together, and I cannot be what I ought to unless you are what you ought to be." King tried to feign "strength and courage." But Mother Pollard, the revered stalwart of Montgomery's "walking city," was not fooled. "Poverty-stricken and uneducated" yet "amazingly intelligent," she saw King's distress and reassured him of popular and divine support. Just then he learned that whites had bombed his house.²¹

King's toughest test of nonviolence made him famous before any outside Gandhians arrived to counsel him. Rushing home to find his family fortuitously unharmed, he calmed an angry crowd on the edge of "race war," he later wrote. Several people reportedly had weapons, and one challenged a policeman to a shootout. "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword," King cautioned. Calming the crowd won him praise even from segregationists, but black Montgomery's nonviolent commitment remained uncertain. "Colored folks ain't like they use[d] to be. Guns don't scare us," a maid

told one researcher. If whites started a war, she was ready to "kill 'em all 'cause if they hurt Rev. King, I don't mind dying." King had armed guards and loaded revolvers in his home when he called for restraint. King acknowledged that in many places there was no nonviolent space for a protest like Montgomery's. In brutal Mississippi, "a couple of those white men [need] to lose some blood," King told an interviewer shortly after the bombing; "then the Federal Government will step in." King knew any move in Montgomery from self-defense to retaliation could provide whites with an excuse for massive repression. Headlines would sensationalize "racial unrest" or state simply that violence had "flared" in Montgomery, leaving whites to fill in the blanks with stereotypes of insurrectionary Negroes. "Bullet Clips Bus" was the *Advertiser* headline the day after Holt Street.²²

King was exploring the public and private requirements of his own Gandhian convictions. "I never heard of Attila drinking the Hemlock or Stalin going to the cross," J. Pious Barbour had written. "Don't believe that mess about the Pen is mightier than the sword. Give me the Sword!" Now, Barbour was thrilled with King's publicized statement that protesters should not morally stoop "so low as to allow our enemies to make us hate." Barbour recalled King's all-night arguments with him in the 1940s "about Gandhi and his methods, against my thesis of coercion." Barbour was amazed: "YOU REALLY MEANT IT!" Black America was aflame with the news. The Chicago sociologist St. Clair Drake wrote that he and Reinhold Niebuhr had dreamed in the 1930s of an indigenous black Gandhi. Now he was here. Drake "burned up the wires" raising money.²³

Activists as well as academics were convinced they had found the American Gandhi. Strategist, spokesman, orator, administrator, fund-raiser, negotiator—King played many roles at the center of a local struggle that became a national and international cause célèbre. King felt called to speak for those at the bottom of society, to elicit support from black religious elites and professionals, and to explain the "New Negro" to the national and international press. Thereafter, his monumental celebrity and the brevity of his presence in local movement struggles made sustained contact with local people difficult, though he never stopped learning from them and preaching service to their needs for bread and dignity. National publicity highlighted exceptional personalities and obscured collective leadership. The media spotlight also cast into the shadows women's roles in initiating and sustaining the boycott and obscured the movement's economic methods, challenges, and goals. Admired by most national reporters, King emerged in these accounts as a more central figure in initiating and sustaining the protest than he or anyone in Montgomery ever claimed.²⁴

In late February 1956, an all-white grand jury indicted 115 leaders of the bus boycott and police arrested 75 of them under a 1921 anti-union statute prohibiting boycotts. King voluntarily submitted to arrest, advised to do so by pacifist Bayard Rustin. "Television cameras ground away" as 100 leaders joined 5,000 cheering men, women, and children at a rally on February 23, Rustin remembered. Though militant local people ensured that King remained identified with the masses, they, too, shared with the MIA leaders a mixture of adulation, pride, and protectiveness toward him. Robinson observed that King "knew how to deal with angry people, poor people, frightened people, uneducated people," and they never doubted him in Montgomery. Popular adoration reached its zenith at a mass meeting following King's March 22 conviction. "He's next to Jesus himself," said a woman. Rev. Moses Jones introduced King: "We all know him. He is a part of us. . . . Whatever happens to him, happens to us. Today he was crucified in the courts."²⁵

Self-styled Gandhian advisors cautioned King about outside "interference" but offered themselves as mentors. The southern novelist Lillian Smith doubted nonviolence had any "experts" but suggested consulting Howard Thurman and Bayard Rustin. Stick to "indigenous" roots, interracialism, "love and quiet courage," Smith wrote, informing King about how left sectarian struggles in Arkansas sharecroppers' unions during the 1930s completely alienated the people. "Northern do-gooders" should raise money and cultivate a "sympathetic and honest press." Meanwhile, Harris Wofford counseled massive Gandhian "jail going" on the buses; he was the only true radical Gandhian around, King joked in response. Wofford also warned King about Rustin, who treated King like "a precious puppet." But "King was a symbol we were all manipulating," he later admitted.²⁶

Bayard Rustin of the War Resisters League and Rev. Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) earned King's greatest trust. Rustin traveled to Montgomery with the blessings of pacifist A. J. Muste, Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, John Swomley of FOR, and A. Philip Randolph himself. Rustin had been a Communist during the 1930s, joined Randolph's March on Washington Movement, and served prison time as a World War II draft resister. He helped found the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and led its southern freedom rides in 1947; he was sentenced to a chain gang for the offense. Rustin later claimed he and the Montgomery struggle itself, not King's earlier "professors who had read Gandhi," taught King nonviolence. But Rustin and Smiley's tutelage has been overstated. J. Pious Barbour knew that King's engagement with Gandhian thought was not shallow or derivative. For three months, King sorted out the balance between preaching nonviolence and protecting himself. King recalled deciding to disarm just after his house was

protect themselves from economic reprisals and to support protesters who lost their jobs or homes. In doing all these things, black Montgomery challenged white supremacist assumptions that blacks produced nothing and remained parasitically dependent on whites.

Montgomery taught King profound lessons about the importance of economically independent activists, powerful black consumers, and the resourcefulness and economic vulnerability of black workers. King knew that integrated buses were temporary vehicles for black freedom dreams. The boycott revealed both the need and the potential for broad changes in the region's politics and political economy. Supporting the boycott, local pockets were deep, but not deep enough, and the scramble for external support taught King how to speak multiple languages of social struggle. The national press framed the boycott as a moral and constitutional conflict with King as its inspiration and guiding light, a northern-educated new Negro bringing nonviolent wisdom to uneducated, emotional southern Negroes locked in titanic struggle with white bigotry and ignorance. A rare exception was black reporter Ted Poston of the *New York Post*, who described a struggle for economic power. Poston's main characters were working-class women and economically independent blacks using humor and their wits to spiritually and economically overcome white economic power. "We've got to get political and economic power for our race," Poston heard King preach in May 1956.³⁰

The night riding and whipping of the 1920s had become an "abomination," the *Montgomery Advertiser's* editor, Grover Hall, wrote in February. But the bigots now practiced "a more decorous, tidy and less conspicuous method—economic thugery." Hall had warned blacks in December 1955 about white artillery and skill in waging "economic warfare." But Hall's also printed open threats on his editorial page. "Where is your appreciation, your sense of duty?" one white man asked blacks. The white race provided black people with food, medical care, housing, electricity, clothing, automobiles, and every other amenity, including "95 percent of your education." "Now what have you done for yourself?" And where would they go if they found themselves sacked or evicted, he asked. Negroes accepted white privileges and made "no contribution to civilization," an attorney told Fisk University researchers. He regarded segregation as white people's only defense against Negro crime, Negro rape, and the mounting Negro burden on public school and welfare agencies. At a White Citizens' Council rally of over 12,000 people on February 10, 1956, a flyer warned whites to stop supporting "African flesh eaters," lest everyone "wake up to find Reverend King in the White House." Removing even one stone from the political and economic pillars of white supremacy risked demolishing the whole edifice.³¹ In *U.S. News & World Report*, Grover

bombed in heated discussions with his father and with Coretta. Actually, it took a bit longer. By the end of February, King was "decidedly Gandhi-like," Rustin reported with considerable satisfaction.²⁷

Arriving in Montgomery in late February, Smiley confirmed King had "Gandhi in mind when this thing started." But Smiley worried about King's ambivalence and "violent" associates. The "deadly" news was "the place is [still] an arsenal," Smiley confided on February 29 in a letter to Swomley. King was a national "symbol of growing magnitude." But could he control the movement through the "sheer force" of symbolism? Only if he practiced and preached pure philosophical nonviolence, Smiley concluded. "King can be a Negro Gandhi, or he can be made into an unfortunate demagogue destined to swing from a lynch mob's tree," Smiley advised two dozen clergy. "*Hold Martin Luther King in the light.*" Who would make King into a demagogue? Smiley's assumption that King was safer without armed protection spoke mainly to the public requirements of Gandhian symbolism. King embraced and preached nonviolence, but his high profile put him in constant jeopardy. "Go where the Mahatma goes. He might get killed," Pat Watters remembers his *Atlanta Journal* editor telling him. King lived the rest of his life with an agonizing sense of personal responsibility for averting collective violence. Ralph Abernathy seems to have agonized less, expressing a more practical nonviolence: "The white folks have more guns."²⁸

King finally got rid of his armed guards and guns. By June, he was teaching "non-violence as a way of life and as a technique," he wrote Rustin. Armed MIA leaders now saw retaliation or even self-defense as futile, King reported in September. Evoking shared hopes in revolutionary change, King noted that mass meetings embraced a vision of struggle "much larger than a bus situation . . . just one aspect of the total question of integration."²⁹

The Political Economy of the Boycott

Montgomery represented more than the victory for nonviolence that King, journalists, and scholars proclaimed it to be, and more than the constitutional victory the NAACP celebrated. Montgomery's predominantly working-class black population won an economic battle with a wealthier adversary wielding a formidable arsenal. Black Montgomery needed a leadership protected against reprisals. Shifting the terms of economic struggle to a moral high ground, they won vital outside financial support. They banked on King's national image of nonviolence and incorruptibility. They appealed to conservative black churches, left-led interracial unions, and everyone in between. They needed to

Hall insisted Negroes must "work their passage" from poverty to wealth, just like earlier immigrants. Blacks could not prosper by idly dreaming of handouts or "40 acres" and a mule. Their weak work ethic was their problem, not his bigotry, Hall argued, as any glance at "welfare rolls and crime statistics" in northern cities could attest. King's "adverse" mail between 1956 and 1968 was filled with attacks on liberalism for coddling blacks dependent on welfare. Blacks must earn citizenship first and only then expect to be accepted as equals, many whites argued.³² African Americans knew about their dependency on white employers, but equally about their contributions, self-reliance, and economic weapons.

King joined the war of words and principles, seeking to place the black boycott on a higher moral plane than the economic thuggery of the White Citizens' Councils. Whites wielded "terror, brutal intimidation and threats of starvation to Negro men, women and children," he protested. White integrationists also suffered devastating reprisals. By contrast, white economic suffering was "incidental" to the Negro strategy of noncooperation with evil. The point was not to "to put the bus company out of business," he repeatedly insisted, "but to put justice in business."³³ Rustin ghostwrote King's first published article in the pacifist *Liberation* magazine, announcing that "economics is part of our struggle." King hoped whites would see they were losing business to black merchants and then talk sense to the bus company and politicians. The MIA was attacking "the basis of injustice," not capitalistic power but "man's hostility to man." Rustin wrote King that their attention to the "moral aspects" of the boycott would appeal to religious leaders "intensely interested in non-violence." Elsewhere, King showed himself a shrewd tactician of economic power, telling *Redbook* magazine that boycotts were useless in poor communities where white "counter boycotts can upset the total economic structure of the Negro." In Montgomery, on the other hand, "the Negro wields a great deal of economic influence and power."³⁴

Evidence of black economic resourcefulness abounded. Independent institutions and businesses serving a black clientele provided the movement's protected meeting spaces. The MIA was evicted from its offices several times, finally settling in a building owned by Montgomery's predominantly black bricklayer's union. The city ended "cheap taxi service" by ordering cab companies to charge a minimum fare of forty-five cents, King recalled. Rufus Lewis improvised a car pool, and drivers paid uncounted bogus traffic tickets. Lewis established fifty transfer stations, mainly at churches. Eddie Posey's privately owned parking lot became the car pool's central downtown hub. Across the street, pharmacist Richard Harris dispatched the cars and doled out emergency cash. Whites couldn't touch him: his clientele was 90 percent black and rela-

tives owned the building. Beauticians Hazel Gregory and Bertha Smith publicized and donated to the boycott. The bus company and downtown merchants were deep in the red. "We buy all of our gas from eight Negro filling stations," Lewis boasted. White business moderates, afraid bad publicity would scare away outside investors, called for negotiations. Politicians were trashing Montgomery's image as "a city of good will, pleasant living, and cordial relations between the races," a white woman publicly complained.³⁵ One merchant asked Ted Poston in frustration, "Don't King and that bunch realize that people are losing their jobs over this foolishness?" Were they Negro people, Poston asked. Obviously not. Sure, protesters were "beefing about having Negroes hired in sales jobs," the merchant complained, but if "they wreck the stores, there won't be no jobs for anybody." Lewis saw the white merchants suffering, correctly pointing out it was the politicians who were the hard-liners. Despite a 50 percent fare increase, the bus company was pulling in only half of what it cost to keep the buses running. They laid off thirty-five white bus drivers, their union now permanently hostile. Poor whites also lost out when the company cut back on service. But they did not support the boycott.³⁶

Crosswinds of race, class, and gender could blow in the boycotters' favor. For all Mayor Gayle's haranguing, white women would not live "without their maids," King noted. Domestic workers knew they occupied subordinate but strategic positions in white families that relied on wives' earnings to keep up middle-class appearances. One maid earned \$12 a week working for a white woman who earned \$52 a week. "Without that \$40 a week she makes on me," she told Poston, they couldn't make payments on their nice house and new Buick. When "the Mister" fired her for supporting "all this Communist foolishness," his wife kicked him out the door to get her cheap labor back. No way would she return without a \$3 raise, the maid insisted, because half of the wife's recent \$6 raise "belonged to me." The Mister relented—for the kids' sake. For other African Americans threatened with job loss, kin and community also provided security. A white woman overheard talk of "starving the maids for a month" and asked her own to come secretly. "Well, Mrs., I just won't come at all and I sure won't starve," she replied. Her husband and children had jobs, and her father's farm produced "plenty of food." She couldn't wait to see Negroes driving buses downtown.³⁷

During the first weeks of the boycott, fund-raising was entirely local. "Wealthy or poor," King wrote, Negroes "gave what they could." The MIA paid four women to run the office, the mass meetings, the car pools, and finances. A women's "Club from Nowhere" competed with another "Friendly Club," raising funds through bake sales that catered to both whites and blacks. Thousands of dollars poured in from mass meetings, special church funds,

club dues, and hat passing in pool rooms and bars. Montgomery's working class rose up to challenge "the racial status quo at its weakest link, white economic dependence on black consumers," Elizabeth Cohen writes. It was a mass movement, not just a "middle-class" movement.³⁸

Blacks' economic resourcefulness may have initially prevented King from appreciating the costs Montgomery's working people were paying. But he soon learned from national and local relief efforts and from struggling to help Montgomery's poor people. Drawing up the list of plaintiffs for *Browder v. Gayle* on January 30, all of whom were women, King insisted on brave people who were "not susceptible to losing their jobs."³⁹ A "lot of people lost their jobs," recalled Rosa Parks, head of the MIA Welfare Committee, who sought employment for laid-off workers. Financial secretary Erna Dungee Allen bought food and paid people's rent, gas, water, and doctor bills. "We even buried somebody," she said. Usually the poorest people needing help went to King, who was "real sympathetic" to their needs, Allen remembered. King realized the impossibility of sorting out deserving from undeserving cases. Rosa Parks suffered greatly. After she was fired, her rent was raised and her mother and husband became ill. Virginia Durr appealed for support to Highlander Folk School director Myles Horton, commenting, "It is fine to be a heroine but the price is high." The Parks moved to Detroit after failing to find work in Montgomery. "Some people never knew the sufferings that she was facing," King later lamented.⁴⁰ "So far the economic conditions of Montgomery are holding up very well," King wrote in June to a northerner curious about reprisals. He was thrilled with all the outside financial support. "We have had only minor cases of Negroes losing jobs."⁴¹ His view would quickly change.

King's growing national support network helped him comprehend the widespread havoc the White Citizens' Councils wrought. In February 1956, radical NAACP activist Ella Baker joined A. Philip Randolph, New York lawyer Stanley Levison, and several northern clergy to found In Friendship, an organization devoted to providing financial relief to southern activists suffering reprisal, including those in the MIA. In Friendship organized two New York City benefits for the MIA and supported voting rights and school desegregation activists like Mississippi's Amzie Moore, struggling under reprisals to keep his service station in business. In Mississippi, Baker learned the difficulties involved in discerning who was suffering from political reprisals and who were victims of economic deprivation. They were two sides of the same counterfeit coin.⁴²

By the time King testified in August before the Democratic National Convention, he had learned much more about violence and reprisals. "Many noble

citizens are losing jobs" for supporting the Constitution, he testified, demanding federal protection. Whites boycotted then bombed a roadside market operated by Koinonia Farm, an interracial Christian cooperative devoted to nonviolent integration and "common ownership," a group with whom King had several ties. By November, King was publicizing the Montgomery problem with supporters of In Friendship. All two hundred drivers in the Montgomery car pool were "marked men and women" whose long-term job prospects were bleak.⁴³ In December, King addressed the National Committee for Rural Schools, a relief organization sponsored by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. King denounced region-wide "economic reprisals and boycotts and threats." King listened to labor leader Jack Stetson tell of arson and terror directed against integrationist farmers and businessmen in South Carolina. When family farms failed because white suppliers denied them fertilizer or seed, it was silly for northerners to send schoolbooks to black kids. Schools were "a part of a total economic problem." King then listened to businessman Billy Fleming dream of building a cooperative store "to beat the white man at his own game" by furnishing rural victims of reprisals with "fertilizer, seeds, feed, groceries, clothes, gas," and the spiritual balm of "self-support."⁴⁴

From the outset King knew the MIA needed all the material support it could get from anyone who might donate a few dollars or a station wagon. With legal fees and the cost of the car pool mounting, the MIA turned to outside sources. Publicity after the February arrests ensured a steady flow of contributions. King knew he had to maintain an image of incorruptibility. One Quaker woman advised him that since "the greatest are the humblest," celebrity should not lead him to "put on airs" or buy a Cadillac. His "old Pontiac" was just fine, King wrote back; he sought to lead with "humility and staggering simplicity." King's hate mail is filled with ugly allegations of King as a corrupt huckster, using his celebrity to bilk poor dupes and ride in fancy cars while the people walked. Public allegations of corruption could wreck the MIA's reputation and destroy internal morale. When MIA official Uriah Fields charged in June that "egotistical" leaders were profiting at the masses' expense, King dashed home from California to deal with a major crisis. The leaders quickly persuaded Fields to recant.⁴⁵

King sought major contributions from NAACP chapters, northern black churches, and labor unions. He wrote Revs. J. H. Jackson and James A. Carey of the NBC in late December 1955 asking for help. But they apparently did not respond. On February 13, he met in Chicago with officials of the UPWA, whose president, Ralph Helstein, had skillfully avoided anticommunist purges and maintained the meatpackers union's interracial progressivism. Many UPWA locals defied the race baiters and red baiters, organizing workplaces and com-

munities to agitate for equality in wages, jobs, housing, schools, and recreation. Two Montgomery locals supported the MIA, and northern locals donated thousands of dollars. But King's overture to the meatpackers may have irked the NBC ministers. In late February, after the mass arrests, Carey offered support but warned King against encouraging any perceptions that the MIA was "financed by northern money or directed by outside influence."⁴⁶ By mid-February, the MIA had raised over \$25,000. Publicity around King's court conviction in March boosted contributions dramatically. In mid-March, E. D. Nixon addressed a convention of the UAW, stunned by their pledge of \$35,000. Even generous unions with radical pasts donated money under banners of broad social unionism harkening back to nineteenth-century "producerist" appeals. San Francisco Longshoremen sent \$500, predicting victory when "untold numbers of men like longshoremen, miners, doctors, painters, ministers, teamsters and lawyers are willing to lend a hand."⁴⁷

Polarities and Constituencies

King balanced militancy and moderation as he spoke to diverse audiences, transposing Montgomery's struggle into a national and international epic. Novelist Robert Penn Warren heard in the rhythms of King's antiphonal speech an intense intellectual effort to "deal with and include antitheses, to affirm and absorb the polarities of life." Warren thought it a matter of temperament, but King's leadership demanded it. King dealt with many overlapping social and ideological polarities. King appealed to middle-class, working-class, and poor blacks across economic lines, to middle-class whites across racial lines, and to working-class and poor whites along class and across racial lines. He preached racial unity, integration, and economic justice, varying his language and emphases according to his audiences. Setting local and national struggles in international context, he envisioned a world of peace and of racial and economic equality.⁴⁸

King was careful not to offend cold war sensibilities. The NAACP promoted domestic civil rights as necessary to America's credible leadership of the "free world," but segregationists still red baited it as a Communist front organization. King wrapped the Montgomery movement in the flag whenever possible. Nonviolent protest had no kinship with "'damaging revolution' as set forth by 'Karl Marx and communism,'" King told a February mass meeting. Hegel was right, "growth comes through struggle," he told L. D. Reddick, "but not when Marx makes it necessarily a class struggle." Correspondents warned King to beware of "the trained Red agitator" manipulating "mob psy-

chology" and subverting democracy with "strife, violence, and disorder." The movement must be ever vigilant against "exploitation by Communistic forces," King responded.⁴⁹

The cold war card was also potentially powerful with American elites. The world's colored "uncommitted peoples" smelled hypocrisy in U.S. claims to defend freedom. To compete with "evil communistic ideology," America had better put its house in order, King told the June NAACP convention. "To Asia and Africa—let the world know—that we are standing up for justice," King preached to 2,500 people packed into Brooklyn's Concord Baptist Church in late March. God was threatening to break the "backbone" of American power by destroying its "international prestige," King told a Montgomery rally. Liberal Democratic congressman Chester Bowles wrote King from New Delhi agreeing that nothing "undermines America's prestige more than our lingering racial discriminations" in Asia and Africa. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy found this logic compelling when racial crises embarrassed the United States on the world stage.⁵⁰

King's addresses also reached beyond cold war rhetoric to proclaim solidarity with independence movements in Asia and Africa. "We are God's children," he preached to an MIA mass meeting in early March, "tired of being suppressed politically [and] economically; tired of being segregated and discriminated." For King, the triple oppressions that Mordecai Johnson identified in his 1950 Philadelphia speech characterized Asian, African, and American inequality. "Every true Christian is a fighting pacifist," King told his Dexter congregation. If "peace" meant enduring exploitation, domination, and humiliation, he wanted none of it. At New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine on May 17, King equated America's civil rights movement, the world's anticolonial struggles, and the Israelite Exodus. The biblical Egypt was the symbol of "humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination." He often praised Gandhi's anticolonial movement in the same terms. Before a Wisconsin Baptist assembly in July, King described the billion and a half Asians and Africans who had lived "under the pressing yoke of some foreign power" and were resisting domination, humiliation, and exploitation. "The struggle of the Negro" was part of this great global struggle, he announced.⁵¹

Racial unity was King's most common clarion call. He flattered and shamed a newly prosperous and confident black middle class into lending their wealth and skills to organized protest. King joined a chorus of Montgomery leaders claiming the boycott had leveled occupational and status distinctions and fostered social intimacy and solidarity. "Preachers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and ordinary folks picked up people walking," treating them all "as

brothers," Jo Ann Robinson remembered. Fisk University researchers noted that "college professors, maids, ministers, and drunkards" mixed intimately in mass meetings and car pools. Coretta King later credited Martin with single-handedly forging this unity, but King credited the people. "The Ph.D.'s and the no 'D's' were bound together in a common venture," he wrote. "People separated from each other by false standards of class were now singing and praying together in a common struggle." "False standards of class" was a telling choice of words, in which class seemed more an illusory status to be overcome than a system to be transformed. King evangelized middle-class churches, fraternities, and civic organizations to take up a life of "service" and guide social change. In August, he demanded that his Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brethren reject selfishness and serve the masses rather than trample upon and exploit them. They were wealthy and esteemed "because the masses have helped you get there." Playing to traditional ideas of racial uplift and leadership, he described the masses wandering "in the wilderness," unable "to speak for themselves," waiting for educated leadership. But he pointed them toward equality, not paternalism, demanding a "new world in which men will live together as brothers." Ordinary folk mattered. "Teamwork and unity are necessary for the winning of any game," he told the June NAACP convention. "The backfield must recognize that it needs the men on the line. . . . So away with our class systems."⁵²

King left abundant evidence of a moderate repertoire, as he appealed to ideals of self-help and mutual aid, black unity and racial reconciliation. He often assured northern financial contributors that they could count on Negro "discipline, wise restraint and dignity." Blacks must prepare themselves to compete in newly desegregated schools and workplaces, King preached to the Dexter congregation on Mother's Day. Black mothers should teach their children hard work and self-respect, because Negroes "must run a little harder or forever remain behind." If one's lot was to be a street sweeper, he exhorted, echoing Benjamin Mays, "sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures." King added an egalitarian twist, stressing the dignity of all work, even mother-work among the poorest of the working class. "There have always been mothers . . . who didn't know the difference between 'you does' and 'you don't,' but who wanted their offspring to 'get it all.'" King's persistent call for self-help invariably pointed toward political agitation. "Integration will not be some lavish dish that will be passed out by the white man on a silver platter, while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite," King declared, sounding like Vernon Johns.⁵³ Freedom would not simply be handed to Negroes; they must seize it with economic grappling hooks of self-sufficiency.

King simultaneously voiced more radical themes drawn from the social

gospel, America's equal rights tradition, and international anticolonial movements. Throughout 1956, he indicted monopoly capitalism in terms similar to those he used in 1966, linking capitalist materialism, militarism, and racism. When whites insisted King stay out of politics, he preached the social gospel. King asked a January MIA mass meeting: how could he preach about honesty to poor folk without condemning the "economic conditions" pressuring them into theft and trickery? With black audiences, King explicitly criticized capitalism. Twice before the NAACP, King attacked the unequal distribution of American wealth. On May 17, he called for "creative maladjustment" against the status quo of "segregation and discrimination . . . the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes . . . [and] the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence." He later printed the speech in the Socialist Party newspaper. At the June NAACP convention, King linked American white supremacy with the world colonial system. His enslaved forebears had to accept "injustice, insult and exploitation," toiling as "depersonalized cogs" of plantation machines. Southern segregation was "glaring and conspicuous," but northern segregation was equally menacing, if "subtle and hidden," he added.⁵⁴

King's radical visions over time gained historic depth and programmatic concreteness through A. Philip Randolph's influence. Addressing the same NAACP convention, Randolph presented a radical history lesson and a road map for political revolution through interracial unionism. After Reconstruction, when class power shifted from planter oligarchs to industrial capitalists, New South Negroes confronted "prejudiced and illiterate white workers-competitors," people "drugged with the opium of white supremacy by political demagogues." The "color caste" system reserved jobs for whites and paid Negroes the lowest wages, inviting "lily-white unions" to protect their material caste interests. Whites in the 1950s still monopolized jobs as railroad engineers, train conductors, skilled textile workers, and skilled construction workers, Randolph explained. Black workers had long believed capital a better friend than labor, accepting business propaganda and philanthropy and willingly serving as strikebreakers. The racial split in the working class helped only union-busting bosses, depressing wages for everyone and retarding southern growth and purchasing power. White and black workers alike needed "decent wages, improved working conditions and shorter hours of work." Poor whites were also disfranchised by poll taxes and literacy tests. They shared blacks' interest in unionizing and raising their wages by repealing Taft-Hartley and the "sinister right-to-work laws" proliferating in the states. While the Democrats and Republicans wrestled in the swamp of 1950s corporate centrism, Ran-

dolph demanded that the newly merged AFL-CIO organize unorganized southern workers. Union locals would have to fight discrimination in their own ranks and in company hiring. The whole AFL-CIO leadership needed integration, he said. Praising AFL-CIO vice president Walter Reuther, chief of the new Industrial Union Department, Randolph insisted they fight racism as vigorously as they had fought communism. Only then could they forge a social-democratic coalition of students, teachers, unionized workers, preachers, and journalists against a "decadent racist oligarchy" that controlled Congress and southern state governments. Though you can search in vain for King's speeches for further references in 1956 to labor "trampled over by capitalist power," by 1958 King trumpeted Randolph's themes as he grew closer to the organized socialist left.⁵⁵

King issued his most scathing indictment of capitalism at the NBC annual convention in September 1956. Over 10,000 black clergy listened to him read his fictional letter from Saint Paul to American Christians. Avoiding specific references to class struggle or corporate control of the means of production, King criticized capitalism's moral and economic consequences. Capitalism, technology, and science dramatically advanced wealth and productivity, he argued, but America's "moral and spiritual progress" failed to keep pace. The country was a tightly wired "neighborhood" and not a real "brotherhood." Americans made idols of skyscrapers and big cars. "Money can be the root of all evil," he preached, producing "gross materialism" and "tragic exploitation." The unequal distribution and control of wealth particularly troubled him. Just one-tenth of 1 percent of the population controlled 40 percent of the nation's wealth. Americans could democratically redistribute this wealth, ending the "abuses" of capitalism. The United States could use its "powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth."⁵⁶

King's critique was controversial in the black world, but it did not make mainstream news. Alabama Baptist minister Charles Kelly praised King's critique of "capital's misuse of capitalism." J. Pious Barbour praised King for upstaging NBC president J. H. Jackson: "the center of attraction was THE KING," he wrote. A Philadelphia lawyer protested King's reference to "the exploitation of the masses." "Gaps in the economic system" challenged the whole nation, King replied; the nation did not need "a socialistic economy" to equalize wealth or provide "economic security" for Negroes. The attorney advised King to stay within safe boundaries of racial liberalism and not harm his powerful celebrity by thoughtlessly impairing "the prestige of 'our economic system.'" King stood his ground and later published the sermon.⁵⁷

As the boycott approached its dramatic conclusion, King increasingly insisted that overcoming immoral racism also required social and economic

leveling. The social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark introduced King at the December meeting of the National Committee for Rural Schools, and King praised Clark's analysis that had informed Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the *Brown* decision: "segregation generates a sense and feeling of inferiority within children that distorts their personality." Clark followed sociologists and psychologists such as E. Franklin Frazier in concluding that slavery and white racism produced black "pathology," "family disorganization," and religious "emotionalism." King shifted his audience's attention back to the source. Segregation still reduced the Negro to "a depersonalized cog in a vast economic machine." And whites internalized a "false sense of superiority" that was equally damaging. Segregation scarred both oppressed and oppressor.⁵⁸

For King, the end of segregation demanded not an aggressive assertion of individual rights but communal reconciliation and a mandate for extending equality. On November 13, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on the buses was unconstitutional. The same day, Montgomery's city attorney won an injunction against the car pool as a "public nuisance and private enterprise." Montgomery's African American citizens continued to walk for five weeks before the court order reached Montgomery. King preached restraint in asserting black "rights." Freedom could never mean black supremacy, he insisted. Blacks must respect everyone's rights, even those of whites who wished to deny their freedom. But exercising freedom's duties required equal respect and real social equality. They had to keep "the whole of humanity level" and to discourage spiritually deadening, community-killing delusions of superiority and inferiority. The ancient god Nemesis raised the lowly and lowered the mighty, King preached. Negroes had "a right to level this thing off."⁵⁹

The costs of struggle could not diminish the sweetness of victory. On December 20, the Supreme Court's desegregation order reached Montgomery. The next day, King rode a desegregated bus with Glenn Smiley. "We started out to get modified segregation," he boasted, "but we got total integration." For now, King endorsed Smiley's commitment to interracial reconciliation more fully than Rustin's belief in mass black mobilization. Negroes must move "from protest to reconciliation," seeking "integration based on mutual respect," he told mass meetings of over 2,500 ecstatic and victorious boycotters. Desegregated buses were merely the first step toward real integration, "genuine intergroup, interpersonal living."⁶⁰

For Rustin, Montgomery's extraordinary unity and mass nonviolent discipline showed the way to a regional direct action movement. "People who had a daily task of action and dedication" could move mountains, he wrote King. "The movement must now widen to political areas," Rustin advised. But the community had been involved in politics for years. King was receptive to

the idea of a wider regional movement, but his immediate action was to reaffirm Montgomery's longstanding political agenda. On Christmas Eve, King presented the MIA program: desegregation of parks and schools and a voter registration drive to challenge Montgomery's segregationist coalition of power. Envisioning a Gandhian "constructive program," King recommended community self-help campaigns "to raise economic, health and intellectual standards."⁶¹

The *New York Times* did not report the new MIA agenda. The headline news of December 23 was that King's front door had been shattered by a shotgun blast. "Some of us may have to die," King reportedly said, but he vowed the struggle would continue. The next day, King cautioned the bus riders to remain calm in the face of possible violence. If local police did not act to protect citizens in their new constitutional right, "there is always the FBI." That, too, was a leap of faith, as future waves of white violence would show. "Dear Mike; Can you overthrow a social system without violence?" J. Pious Barbour later asked. King gave his life to find an answer.⁶²

Chapter 3

Seed Time in the Winter of Reaction

The three years following the Montgomery bus boycott have been called "fallow years" for King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the regional organization that King and sixty affiliated ministers formed in 1957. During these difficult years, King widened his ideological horizons and extended his networks of support, raising money from outside the region for local leaders who otherwise would have worked in isolation. King projected reformist and moderate messages to middle-class white and black audiences, but when he spoke to local groups or took inspiration from newly independent nations, he could be quite radical. King developed increasingly sophisticated analyses of racism and of the national and international political economy. He consistently looked to voting as the key to a democratic political revolution in the South with far-reaching economic implications, including rights to equal education, trade unionism, fair and full employment, and decent social welfare protections for all working-class southerners, especially blacks, who remained disproportionately poor. Ella Baker, SCLC's acting executive director, thought King traveled too much, flaunted his charismatic authority, neglected grassroots leadership, and devalued women's contributions. King did cultivate his own celebrity more than local indigenous leadership; he accepted honors and speaking invitations mainly to raise money for the organization. But he was not stuck in the "middle-class outlook" of the "traditional Negro leadership class," seeking to contain "the awakened black masses," as Glen Eskew argues. Certainly, SCLC failed to develop direct action or massive voter registration during this period. Its decentralized structure relied mainly on local initiative, and it fielded few organizers. Above all, a harsh winter of repression almost immobilized the grassroots and left half the southern NAACP frozen on the vine. White repression and reprisals are principally to blame for SCLC's lack of momentum. Mass protest did not spread across the South until the student sit-in movement inspired broader community action in 1960. Only when the masses were already in motion did King involve himself again in direct action.¹

King took political risks by supporting known leftists and exposing him-