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To Walk in Dignity: The Montgomery Bus Boycott

“...when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people, a black 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.’ ”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., December 5, 1955 (1)

King’s sense of the historical importance of the Montgomery bus boycott was remarkable, given that it had just begun the morning of his speech. Although boycott leaders were not sure at first that they should seek desegregation on the city’s buses rather than simply better treatment, King correctly understood that the Montgomery protest concerned more far-reaching goals and ideals. “We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream,” he announced at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) held on Monday, December 5, 1955, four days after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man (2).

Because he was selected to head the MIA, King became the best known of the boycott’s participants and his *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958) has remained the most widely read narrative of the protest. Yet, a King-centered perspective of the Montgomery movement is misleading in ways that also distort understanding of the subsequent decade of southern African American struggles. As we approach the boycott’s fiftieth anniversary, it is vital that we see what happened in Montgomery as a social justice struggle that was sustained by many grassroots leaders apart from King. Although King played a crucial role in transforming a local boycott into a social justice movement of international significance, he was himself transformed by a movement he did not initiate.

Like other sustained mass movements, the Montgomery bus boycott should be understood as the outgrowth of a long history of activism by people from different educational backgrounds and economic classes. Unlike King, who had arrived in Montgomery little more than a year before Parks’s arrest, nearly all the other key participants in the boycott were longtime residents. They were self-reliant NAACP stalwarts who acted on their own before King could lead.

The insights of contemporary social history and women’s history have already revised popular perceptions of Rosa Parks, who is now more often seen as a veteran civil rights activist rather than a middle-aged seamstress with tired feet. Even before becoming secretary of Montgomery’s NAACP branch during the 1940s, Parks’s commitment had been deepened by her husband Raymond’s involvement during the 1930s in the campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys”—nine black teenagers who faced the death penalty on trumped-up rape charges. A decade before she refused to obey the white bus driver’s order to give up her seat, Parks had clashed with the same driver when she was required to re-enter through a rear door after paying at the front. During the summer of 1955, she attended the Highlander Folk School, a gathering place for organizers that was labeled a “Communist training school”

by Tennessee officials. It was Parks who encouraged King to participate in the local branch of the NAACP soon after the young minister began preaching at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.



Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King are in good spirits as they leave the courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 26, 1956, despite King’s having been found guilty of conspiracy during the bus boycott. King appealed the verdict. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman)



Following the successful boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955-1956, Martin Luther King, Jr., (left) sits next to Reverend Glenn Smiley of Texas on a Montgomery bus, symbolizing the victory. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

After Parks was jailed on December 1, she got word to the person she thought was best prepared to help her: fifty-six year old E.D. Nixon, a veteran civil rights leader whose contributions to the rapid mobilization of Montgomery's black community can hardly be overstated. Nixon was not only an experienced NAACP leader but also a veteran official of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the nation's largest predominantly-black union. Despite his limited formal education, Nixon was a dedicated civil rights proponent who became one of the MIA's links to northern supporters such as the Brotherhood's head, A. Philip Randolph. For most of the decade following World War II, Nixon worked closely with Parks—her secretarial skills complementing Nixon's forceful leadership. Faced with the task of getting Parks out of jail, Nixon realized that black attorney Fred Gray, who had assisted in previous civil rights cases, was temporarily out of town. Therefore, he called Clifford Durr, a white former New Dealer who had resigned from the Federal Communications Commissions during the late 1940s due to his opposition to cold war loyalty oaths. Durr's wife, Virginia, occasionally hired Parks to tailor clothes for the Durrs's daughter and had made arrangements for Parks's Highlander stay.

After Nixon accompanied the Durrs to Montgomery's jail and offered his home as bond to secure Parks's release, he began calling other black residents to discuss the possibility of launching a boycott to change bus seating policies. This idea did not spring spontaneously from Nixon's mind; instead, it had already been considered as a response to earlier incidents in which black bus riders were mistreated. On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, a fifteen year old high school student, had been arrested for allegedly violating Montgomery's bus segregation ordinance. Nixon discussed launching a boycott with other leaders, including Gray and Jo Ann Robinson, the Alabama

State College English professor who served as head of Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC). Although these leaders ultimately decided against trying to mobilize black residents on behalf of Colvin—in part because she became pregnant—awareness of Colvin's arrest and that of another teenaged resister, Mary Louis Smith, later in the year contributed to a sense of readiness for action among NAACP members. A brief 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, also served as a stimulus for Montgomery residents considering how to respond to the indignities associated with segregation in public facilities.

Thus, a number of local residents were ready to move into action when Nixon telephoned them to urge that something should be done to protest Parks's arrest. Robinson was perhaps the most enthusiastic in supporting the boycott idea. Just after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of May 1954, she had written a letter to city officials on behalf of the WPC warning of a bus boycott if bus segregation policies were not changed. During

the evening after learning of Parks's arrest, Robinson spent most of the night at her Alabama State office working with two of her students to print thousands of leaflets, which her WPC colleagues helped to distribute, calling upon black residents to stay off buses on December 5.

Although planning for the boycott was already well underway by the time Nixon called King, the veteran activist the young minister at Dexter Church might make a special contribution. Though he was still only twenty-six years old and had become Dexter's pastor just a year earlier, King had already gained a reputation as a speaker and civil rights advocate. Upon accepting the call from Dexter, King had established a Social and Political Action Committee to keep the congregation politically informed and involved. Among those who volunteered for the committee were Robinson, WPC founder Mary Fair Burks, and Rufus Lewis, the former Alabama State football coach and funeral home owner who formed the Citizens Club in the late 1940s to encourage black voter registration and voting.

King's predecessor at Dexter, the outspoken and combative Vernon Johns, had warned King about the complacency of some Dexter members when the two met early in 1954 at the home of Ralph Abernathy, another young Baptist minister in Montgomery. Although King would soon form a more positive opinion of the Dexter congregation, he took to heart Johns's credo: "Any individual who submitted willingly to injustice did not really deserve more justice." With encouragement from Abernathy, who became a lifelong friend, King soon established ties with NAACP activists in the region. In June 1955 he had accepted an invitation to address a mass meeting held by the Montgomery branch, and Parks herself was taking notes when he announced, "Jim Crow is on his deathbed but the battle is not won." Parks and Nixon were encouraged when King argued against the

"peril of complacency." Parks soon afterwards conveyed an invitation to King to join the branch's executive committee (3).

By the fall of 1955 King had already received entreaties to consider running for branch president; thus, it was hardly surprising that some residents later were eager to involve him in the fledgling boycott. But King was initially hesitant. His first child had been born just weeks before Parks's arrest, and he and Coretta Scott King believed he needed to give more time to church work given that his doctoral dissertation had only recently been completed. King had gained widespread respect, however, due to his forceful civil rights advocacy. Nixon recognized that his own frequent travels as a train porter made him a poor candidate to direct a boycott, and he saw King as an articulate spokesman capable of standing up to white segregationists. "I always knewed that one day this fight would reach a point where better educated and better talkin' folks would have to take over if we is to succeed," Nixon later told a friend. "That's how come I got my eyes set on this young Reverend Martin Luther King."

When black leaders met on the afternoon of December 5 to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the boycott effort had already succeeded in convincing almost all black riders to stay off the buses. Since King was a recent arrival in Montgomery, his emergence as a boycott leader required the intervention and support of others, including the person who nominated him—Rufus Lewis, a member of Dexter's Social and Political Committee. Lewis would later play an important role in organizing the car pool system that sustained the boycott.

That King did not initiate the boycott does not diminish his role in sustaining it through inspirational leadership that linked its goals with larger moral and democratic principles. With only twenty minutes to prepare his first major speech at the first MIA mass meeting, twenty-six year old King expressed these principles with remarkable eloquence: "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 merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth" (4).

But King's leadership involved more than inspiring oratory. His awareness of his own limitations and doubts provides a context for appreciating his courage and resilience. After repeated threats against his life and his family, King had a severe crisis of confidence late on the evening of January 27, 1956. He was able to continue only after a profound religious experience—"I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before" (5).

A few days later, King admitted to a friend that he was "so busy that I hardly have time to breathe" but he also advised other boycott leaders that "if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized. They wouldn't get back [on the buses]." He added that "my intimidations are a small price to pay if victory can be won" (6). During this period, however, King and other boycott participants remained united in maintaining that no individual was responsible for the protest. "The leaders could do nothing by themselves," one woman commented. "They are only the voice of thousands of colored workers." King himself remarked at an MIA rally, "I want you to know that if M. L. King had never been born this movement would have taken place" (7).

Even as King became an advocate of Gandhian principles of nonviolence, he realized that he was only one of many leaders of the Montgomery movement. In February 1956 Alabama officials indicted King and eighty-eight other MIA activists for violating a state law

barring conspiracies to interfere with lawful businesses. King's trial took place the following month, and, before the other "conspirators" faced trial, his conviction was quickly appealed.

The ultimate success of the boycott resulted not only from the perseverance of MIA members but also from the determination of the lawyers who challenged segregated bus seating in the courts. Clifford Durr worked closely with black attorney Fred Gray to provide legal defense for Parks and later advised NAACP attorneys involved in the *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) case that struck down the legal basis for segregation on Montgomery's buses, achieving the boycott's objective. Claudette Colvin, the teenager whose initial act of defiance had spurred the boycott movement, was one of the plaintiffs in that suit. When King received word in November 1956 that the Supreme Court had ruled against bus segregation, the MIA was facing a court injunction that threatened to halt the MIA's car pools. "The darkest hour of our struggle had become the hour of victory," King remembered (8).

As was the case on the first night of the boycott, King was best able to assess the boycott's historical significance as it came to an end. "Little did we know that we were starting a movement that would rise to international proportions," he said as the MIA hosted a gathering of southern activists in December 1957. The Montgomery movement, King proclaimed, "would ring in the ears of people of every nation . . . would stagger and astound the imagination of the oppressor, while leaving a glittering star of hope etched in the midnight skies of the oppressed" (9). □

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church," in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume III, Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 74.
2. Ibid., 73.
3. Parks's minutes are quoted in Introduction, Carson, et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume II: Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951-November 1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 36; Parks to King, August 26, 1955, in *Papers II*, 572.
4. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 18.
5. Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 78.
6. King to H. Edward Whitaker, January 30, 1956, and Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, by Donald T. Ferron, January 30, 1956, in Carson et al., eds., *Papers III*, 113, 110.
7. Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at First Baptist Church, by Willie Mae Lee, January 30, 1956, in Carson et al., eds., *Papers III*, 114.
8. Carson, ed., *Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 94.
9. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Some Things We Must Do," address delivered at Holt Street Baptist Church, December 5, 1957, in Clayborne Carson, et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 329.

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