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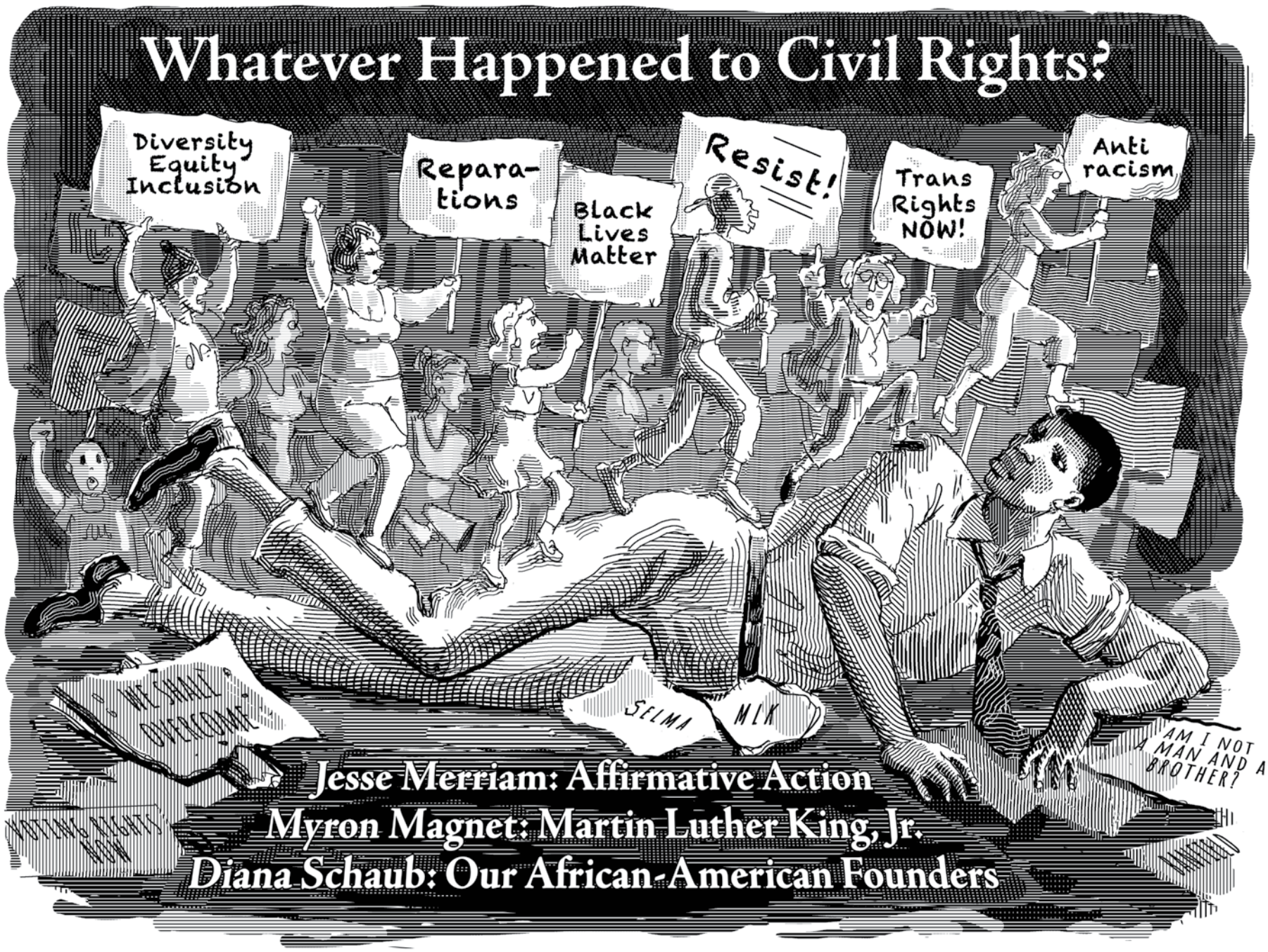

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Book Review by Myron Magnet

Like Some Prophet of Old

King: A Life, by Jonathan Eig.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 688 pages, $35

Imagine the conflicted feelings of a black Southerner as 1955 drew to a close. A new world seemed struggling to be born, now that the Supreme Court had strengthened its year-old *Brown v. Board* school desegregation decree in May by demanding compliance "with all deliberate speed." Yet in August, progress came to a gruesome halt. The savage murder in Mississippi of 14-year-old Emmett Till for a hint of flirtation with a white woman, along with the instant acquittal of his killers, showed that the old world of segregation and lynching refused to die. On December 1, with mutilated Emmett Till on her mind, 42-year-old Rosa Parks, ordered by a white bus driver to give up her seat to a white passenger, as Montgomery, Alabama, law required, firmly refused. She was, she said, "tired of giving in." The driver called the cops. Her mug shot radiates quiet contempt.

Montgomery's indignant black leaders resolved to stage a bus boycott to challenge the segregation rules, and they posted flyers setting the protest for the start of the week. On Monday morning, the buses rolled without their normal crowd of black passengers. But the leaders' rivalries complicated the choice of a captain to steer the movement forward. Why not try our new Baptist preacher, one suggested—fresh, pleasant, and unaligned? Accordingly, 26-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., with 20 minutes to prepare, was almost literally thrust upon the stage of world history.

As he stepped up to the microphone that Monday evening to address the boycott's first mass meeting, recounts Jonathan Eig in his absorbing new biography, *King: A Life*, something magical happened. The crowd of around 5,000, spilling out of the church and clustering round loudspeakers in the surrounding streets, vibrated with an energy that "swept everything along like an onrushing tidal wave," King later wrote, flooding him with confidence. When he opened his mouth, he felt that God spoke for him.

Certainly his message was majestic, a mixture of constitutionalism and Christianity. His hearers, he said, were American citizens, entitled to the equality before the law and the civil rights that the Constitution guarantees to every citizen. As befits Christians, they were demanding what is justly theirs peacefully, so they held the moral high ground twice over.

> 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, justice is a lie.… And we are determined…to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

As the crowd's energy inspired King, he cast his own spell on them. They were the fearless righteous, and their pastor, one congregant said, "was a God-sent man," who shepherded them throughout the boycott, keeping the carpools rolling, the volunteer taxis fueled, and the crowd peaceful. Though the cops briefly jailed and the court indicted him, and racists bombed his house—with much damage but no injuries—he remained stoutly nonviolent. After 381 days, the boycott ended in success, and America's civil rights movement was under way. What's

more, because of the widespread press coverage King had attracted, along with the fervent support of many celebrities, it was instantly a national movement, its leader a national luminary, whose face soon graced the cover of *Time* magazine.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man, the old adage goes—wrongly, I think. Thomas Carlyle had it right: "Alas, we have known Times *call* loudly enough for their great man; but not find him when they called. He was not there." But when the right man *is* there, he makes history according to his own particular ideas and choices, not as the blind instrument of impersonal forces that bend history in some determined way. The young pastor was one of those few whose actions shape the world, and he stamped it with his own personality, including his flaws. But then, as with every world-historical individual, his contribution wasn't perfect, either—which makes his biography, with all his quirks, not just interesting but something like fateful.

A journalist whose previous books include biographies of Muhammad Ali and Lou Gehrig, Eig has written the first comprehensive biography of King in 40 years, since Stephen B. Oates's award-winning *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1982). Eig's account stresses how King's sheltered, solidly middle-class upbringing, with two caring, college-educated parents in a flourishing black neighborhood, was a recipe for self-confidence. He was the scion of a clerical dynasty. His maternal grandfather was the pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, a pulpit to which his father—who had changed his name from Michael King to the grander Martin Luther King—succeeded in turn. When the younger MLK, also born Michael in 1929, entered Morehouse College, his grandfather's alma mater, in 1944, his natty wardrobe and dazzling smile proclaimed him to the manner born—an air that never left him, though in time his tweeds gave way to well-cut black suits, starched white shirts, a precisely trimmed moustache, and a commanding gravity of demeanor that made him seem older than his years and bigger than his five-foot-six height.

Morehouse president Benjamin Mays, a former dean of religion, was a disciple of the Progressive era's Social Gospel, an outlook that pervaded the college and decisively shaped King's worldview. Now that evolution and the Hegelian march of history have worked to cleanse human nature of original sin, the Social Gospel held, men can build the Heavenly City on earth. Protestants therefore should dial back their selfish emphasis on personal salvation and the moral perfection of the individual soul, and focus instead on service to others, especially on uplifting the masses through political activism. For achieving racial justice, Mays taught, one effective technique was Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance—an idea that instantly appealed to King, strengthened both by his eager college reading of Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and his talks with Gandhi's relatives and with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on his 1959 visit to India.

Ordained as a minister in his senior year at college, living at home, and serving as his father's assistant pastor, King felt he was satisfying his Morehouse-bred "inescapable urge to serve society," as he called it. But after graduation, when he enrolled in the tiny Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, he deepened his understanding of Protestantism's double imperative. "On the one hand," King wrote of the duties of a pastor, "I must attempt to change the soul of the individuals so that their societies may be changed. On the other hand I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a change." As his career advanced, however, the equipoise of this formulation, rendering unto Caesar and unto God, fell out of balance, with social activism crowding out individual self-perfection. This transformation of religion into politics turned out to be his legacy's greatest flaw, as we'll see, and it is a flaw that undermined the black church as a whole, making that powerful institution less of a force for black uplift than it otherwise might have been.

King had two personal moral flaws that also muddied his accomplishment, and Eig forthrightly acknowledges them. First, he plagiarized shamelessly, beginning with his speech in an oratory contest when he was 15, extending to his first sermon and many subsequent ones, and culminating, notoriously, in the dissertation he submitted to Boston University for the Ph.D. he received in 1955. His advisor should have spotted whole chunks lifted from another B.U. dissertation that he had recently supervised, Eig grumbles, but the transgression went unnoticed for 35 years. Eig tries to rationalize these offenses by quoting one scholar's fatuous claim that black preachers traditionally "presumed that 'words are shared assets, not personal belongings,'" but it's hard not to think of the more fundamental religious injunction against confusing mine and thine. Certainly the 1990 disclosure of the plagiarism sullied King's reputation as a moral leader.

A second flaw ended up harming King more directly later in his career. At B.U., he had met and married Antioch grad Coretta Scott, as much a business move as an affair of the heart. Stately and refined, "she would impress the deacons at any church in which Martin might choose to start his career," Eig writes. But before and after his marriage, though he esteemed and depended on Coretta, King was a compulsive womanizer, like his notoriously promiscuous father. As a B.U. grad student, he had approached seduction as a competitive sport, setting out to "win the girlfriend of the tallest…handsomest guy on the campus," recalled Dorothy Cotton, who became his trusted staffer and longtime mistress, virtually his other wife. When he first met Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, who became his closest friend and colleague, his main interest was in stealing—successfully—his fellow cleric's date. When traveling after he became famous, he would sometimes have Cotton in one hotel room and also visit another flame somewhere else. The animal magnetism that mesmerized his audiences had a hypnotic effect on women, too. Abernathy recalled

> on more than one occasion sitting on a stage and having Martin turn to me and say, "Do you see that woman giving me the eye, the one in the red dress?"… Already she had somehow conveyed to him her attraction and he in turn had responded to it. Later I would see them talking together, as if they had known one another forever.

Thurgood Marshall, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's top lawyer and later a Supreme Court Justice, didn't have much use for crowd-pleasing magnetism. King and the bus boycott, he harrumphed, were just a sideshow. It was the NAACP's litigation that really ended Montgomery's bus segregation, with its Supreme Court victory in *Browder v. Gayle* in November 1956, a decision that banned segregation in intrastate bus transportation.

But Marshall didn't understand either the power or the purpose of King's ability to sway crowds. The preacher, like some prophet of old, was trying to effect a cultural transformation, to win the hearts and change the minds of the whole nation, shining a spotlight on racism and segregation and showing white Americans that there were evils to be expunged—evils, writes Eig, that "reflected not only a failure of democratic policies and principles but also a failure to live up to Judeo-Christian values." King was an orator, whose

performances a rapt national press amplified from coast to coast, and in less than a decade he really did reshape public opinion and mold national policy.

He was a showman, whose success depended less on the eloquence or originality of his words than on the virtuosity of his delivery. Longtime civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, an early advisor who helped King write his first national speech in May 1957, puzzled over this oddity. King's plea for voting rights, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, was not deathless prose, Rustin knew, yet it moved the 20,000-strong crowd to rapture. What Rustin didn't know was that, from the very start of his career, King spent up to 15 hours on each of his sermons, practicing them before a mirror to hone his tone of voice, his rhythm, his facial expressions, his gestures, to achieve just the effect he wanted. Even President John F. Kennedy, when he first watched a King speech on TV, remarked, "He's damn good."

King was an even less stellar planner than he was a wordsmith. To organize black voter registration, he had formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, with himself as president, but he formed no grassroots organization and never joined forces with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had such a network, or with the NAACP's litigation program. Opportunism, rather than planning, often guided his activities, like the man who runs to the front of a passing parade and anoints himself its leader. When four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down and tried to order coffee at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in 1960, and then 20 more arrived the next day, "sit-ins" spontaneously spread across the South. With no leader, this grassroots movement gained little publicity, until King began visiting the college towns to address the students, becoming their highly visible spokesman. When a sit-in began in Atlanta, where he had recently moved his family to rejoin his father as co-pastor, MLK joined the demonstrators, got arrested, refused to post bail, and found himself in a Georgia penitentiary in October, two weeks before the 1960 presidential election.

Baseball great Jackie Robinson, in Richard Nixon's camp, urged the GOP candidate to intervene—in vain. But John Kennedy, unprompted, phoned to ask Coretta how he could help. He secretly called Georgia's Democratic governor, who secretly got King released—except that the black press and the black clergy trumpeted the secret throughout the community, switching the Kings and many other blacks from the party of Lincoln and Emancipation to the Democrats, contributing to JFK's razor-thin win. Thereafter, King had ready access to the president and was in frequent contact with the attorney general, his brother.

With Kennedy in the White House, King's next campaign was planned rather than opportunistic. He was going to bring the civil rights movement to the South's reputed segregation capital, Birmingham, Alabama. The Freedom Riders—activists who recently had ridden buses into the South to test the strength of the Supreme Court's 1960 ban on segregation in interstate bus and rail terminals—had shown that confrontation could produce the violent backlash beloved by the TV news shows that King now knew were his best tools for shaping public opinion. He resolved to stage a made-for-television drama, contrasting the dignified nonviolence of his followers to the viciousness of their opponents, an object lesson in right against wrong. He meant the spectacle to shape the president's opinion, too, with a view to sparking legislation. "The law may not be able to make a man love me," he acknowledged, "but it can keep him from lynching me. The fact is that habits, if not the hearts of men, have been, and are being changed every day by federal action."

He got the show he wanted all right, starting with a protest march to Birmingham's city hall on Palm Sunday 1963. As if following King's script, Commissioner of Public Safety Theophilus "Bull" Connor set dogs on the group. A photo of a snarling German Shepherd threatening a fallen marcher, while a cop brandished a nightstick over him, hit front pages across the land, as King had hoped. A few days later, he and Abernathy led a second march, straight into Connor's arms. The commissioner threw them each into solitary confinement for a week, where King wrote his instantly famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" on sandwich wrappings and toilet paper. Upon his release, he began recruiting high school kids for the marches, and on May 3 he led 2,000 of them, singing "We Shall Overcome," toward a Birmingham park, where Connor's massed forces met them with fire hoses and police dogs. A news photo of a dog lunging with bared teeth at a 15-year-old, as its cop handler grabbed the

front of the boy's sweater—brute force assaulting innocence—became the iconic image of the whole movement.

President Kennedy had sent Justice Department officials to help negotiate a desegregation plan, finalized on May 10 and greeted in Birmingham with bombs at a black-owned motel and at King's brother's house. In a June TV interview, King called on the president to address the race issue more directly. Kennedy gave his answer days later, when Governor George Wallace blocked the door of the University of Alabama to bar the enrollment of two black students. The president had federalized the Alabama National Guard and sent it to the university, where the commanding general ordered Wallace to get out of the way and let the two students in. That night JFK told the TV audience that black Americans "have a right to expect that the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color blind, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century," and that in America, as Harlan went on to say in his lone dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)—the greatest Supreme Court opinion ever penned—"the law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guarantied by the supreme law of the land are involved."

The next week, the president proposed a sweeping civil rights bill. "I think Birmingham did it," said King. JFK agreed. Bull Connor, the president said, "has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else."

To do his part, King planned a mammoth march on Washington to pressure Congress to pass the bill. What materialized on August 28 was "the biggest gathering of American Negroes in their three hundred years in this country," as CBS described the crowd of more than 200,000. Eig cleverly presents King's speech, the climax of the event, through the recollections of two spectators, a Chicago teenager and a park ranger, so that readers can experience the powerful emotional impact of the brilliantly delivered but not notably well-written address. When King reached the end of his prepared text, he sensed that the rapt crowd thirsted for more, so he recalled a speech he had given two months earlier in Detroit, a speech inspired by a Langston Hughes poem, "I Dream a World."

No one can forget King's peroration: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," he declaimed. "I have a dream that one day…little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." And when that day comes, he concluded, all Americans "will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

He went straight from the speech to the White House, where the president shook his hand and echoed, "I have a dream." JFK urged him to keep up the pressure on Congress to pass the civil rights bill and also to steer black Americans toward self-help—to encourage them to better their condition themselves, like American Jews, and to "get the Negro community to regard the education of their children as the best way out." NAACP head Roy Wilkins countered that black kids, uniquely, faced "built-in discrimination."

This exchange mirrors the tension at the center of King's own thought. Which is more important: self-development that refines the content of one's character, or the removal by political pressure of the external obstacles to group advancement? The old Protestant perfection of one's individual soul, or the Social Gospel's emphasis on social justice? Back in 1958, radical New York lawyer and businessman Stanley Levison, a key King advisor and speechwriter who was helping MLK write his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, had objected to King's section on "Negro self-improvement." How can blacks be expected to improve themselves and their condition when their problems stem mainly from segregation, he asked. After all, he wrote King—in a cliché that Thomas Sowell has subsequently exploded—"Few people understand the rate of illegitimacy, broken homes, irresponsibility toward children is a product… of hundreds of years of slavery in which the family unit was brutally ripped apart." The black predicament, Levison insisted, is political and social, not moral.

> Little did King foresee how much of a revolution courts and federal bureaucrats would later make by stretching the Civil Rights Act.

King himself was a much subtler analyst of the effects of segregation on the content of one's character. When you have to explain to your kids why they're excluded and insulted, and you watch their characters get distorted by the answer, he wrote in the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"; when you are called "nigger" and "boy," "when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness,'" he writes, then you will have an idea of segregation's destructive psychological consequences. Moreover, there are "academic and cultural lags in the Negro community [that] are themselves the result of segregation and discrimination," as King put it elsewhere. But none of this robs black Americans of agency or the ability to make moral choices or efforts at self-improvement—which is why they need not flinch at being judged by the content of their character, as he had just told over 200,000 people.

President Kennedy's murder three months after King's speech stands as a shocking punctuation mark in American history, and it marks a turning point in MLK's career too. His worldview shifted. First, when he heard the news of the president's assassination, he turned to his wife and said, "This is what is going to happen to me also." Coretta had no answer. "I could not say, 'It won't happen to you,'" she recalled. "I felt he was right." Thereafter, he lived with the specter of being a marked man with limited time. Second, he began to think that he had to address segregation in the North, a knottier problem than the South's Jim Crow laws. And third, as he pondered the North's *de facto* segregation, he came to agree wholeheartedly with Levison's view that the problems of black America were to be solved by changes both in the laws and in society that had to precede blacks' own efforts.

Lyndon Johnson, who phoned King to ask for his support three days after assuming JFK's mantle in November 1963, shared the civil rights leader's views about race and the laws so closely that he sometimes seemed to echo King's rhetoric on the issue, Eig notes. But their collaborative Herculean effort to solve America's greatest national dilemma, for all its success, also contains a streak of tragedy that Eig doesn't fully grasp.

LBJ passed all the laws King favored. In his first eight months in the Oval Office, and with King's full support, he got JFK's Civil Rights Act through Congress. The law banned segregation in public accommodations, discrimination in the workplace, and federal funding of discriminatory state and local programs. Concurrently, also after co-

ordinating with King, he launched a national War on Poverty. In March 1965, introducing the Voting Rights Bill that King had helped him plan, Johnson cited the protest MLK was then leading in Selma, Alabama, to illustrate the patient dignity in the face of violence with which black citizens were trying "to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life." The bill, outlawing the poll taxes and literacy tests that barred Southern blacks from voting, passed in August. The next month, the president issued a new executive order broadening his predecessor's original decree of race-based "affirmative action" in government employment.

Behind this momentous lawmaking was the dream that, in a non-discriminatory society with equal voting rights, black voters would help elect integrationist candidates, who would ensure good, interracial schools, clean neighborhoods, and equal justice, which would foster rising black achievement, higher incomes, and, in time, voluntarily integrated neighborhoods and workplaces. But LBJ expressed some reservation in a remarkable speech at Howard University in June 1965, written in part by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan and echoing his just-completed report, *The Negro Family* (which Eig never mentions). While the number of blacks in college and in the professions had doubled in the last ten or 15 years, and that select group was flourishing, why for the rest of black Americans—the majority—had unemployment, poverty, infant mortality, and family breakdown increased, Johnson asked. Trapped in urban slums, lacking skills and training, burdened with "a cultural tradition which had been twisted and battered by endless years of hatred and hopelessness," far too many were losing ground every day. Of course, he asserted, "centuries of oppression and persecution" inflicted by white America explain the breakdown of the black family, but since the family "shapes the attitude, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child," what are we to do when less than half of black children reach age 18 in an intact two-parent family, and a majority of them have been on welfare? How are we to achieve "not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result?" To these questions, Johnson had no answer but to convene a commission.

When MLK took a dank apartment in a Chicago slum and moved his campaign north, he found himself with no satisfactory answer either. There were no Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights Act was in effect, with some positive results, but real integration and dramatic black uplift wasn't happening. King presented a list of demands to Chicago mayor Richard Daley, and Daley replied that the city was working to fix its slums and to foster employment—and, after all, 100,000 black Chicagoans were already working in government jobs. What more should he do, Daley asked King and his colleagues. "They had no answers," the mayor recalled.

As he flailed around for solutions, King's proposals grew both more radical and more diffuse. White Americans should pay blacks cash reparations for slavery, he proposed, as one way of curing the inequalities of wealth and opportunity that he had begun to consider the fundamental problem. If economic inequality was really to blame, perhaps socialism was the answer. Better still, he hazarded, "the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a… guaranteed annual income." After a two-year stalemate in Chicago, he had reached an intellectual impasse as well, in a scheme as impracticable as it was grandiose. "For years, I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there," he said in the spring of 1967. Now, he said, "I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values." Even his radical friend Levison knew that this was many steps too far, and an admiring posterity has airbrushed away this streak of almost Jacobin radicalism in King's thought. "The American people are not inclined to change their society in order to free the Negro," Levison had written King. "They are ready to undertake some, and perhaps major, reforms, but not to make a revolution." Little did he foresee how much of a revolution courts and federal bureaucrats would later make by stretching *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act.

Shortly after meeting with Mayor Daley, King led a march through a working-class white-ethnic Chicago neighborhood to demand integrated housing. Angry residents lined the streets. "I'll go to school with 'em and I'll work with 'em," one young white said, "but I won't live with 'em. I seen what they did to other neighborhoods and I don't want 'em doing it here." Before you condemn him as one more racist, consider (as Eig doesn't) what he means. He has worked his way into a "nice" neighborhood, but what makes it nice are the efforts of his low- and middle-income neighbors to keep it orderly, safe, quiet, and clean. It all depends on behavior. He knows what Moynihan pointed out in *The Negro*

Family: that a "tangle of pathology" has ensnared many black Americans, that black rates of illegitimacy, criminality, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, and non-work are much higher than white rates—that blacks, 22% of the Chicago population, accounted for three quarters of those arrested for crimes of violence in his own city in 1963, for example. That's what he doesn't want in his neighborhood. He wants neighbors who obey the law and practice civility, who teach their kids manners, who mow their lawns, pick up their trash, and paint their houses, who go to work and who *earned* their way into the neighborhood, just like him. As he says, he's willing to work with those who work. Finally, he knows just how precarious the niceness of a working-class neighborhood is. It depends on the content of everyone's character.

King's tragedy—and America's—is that he forgot this. He forgot, as he had said in 1962, that "something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right." He forgot that as a clergyman, it was his special calling to touch those hearts and souls, one by one, not only to make white America see the injustice of segregation but also to make all black America, not only his godly followers, embrace the individual virtues that nurture community, to remember that God commands every man of every race to cultivate and practice goodness. Suffering evil patiently—the core of the non-violent creed—isn't enough.

Of course, at that moment, to preach what the 1960s dismissed as the bourgeois virtues was a tough countercultural path. We might say, with Carlyle, that the times were calling forth their great man—King—but this time he fell short. It was the era of if-it-feels-good-do-it transgressiveness, when the sexual revolution destigmatized promiscuity and out-of-wedlock pregnancy and devalued the bourgeois family, when it was fashionable to tune in, turn on, and drop out. According to the spirit of that age, by what right did the Moynihans of the world condemn "alternative lifestyles" as "pathology?" And in the special case of black Americans, when both Moynihan and MLK believed that past slavery and racism had *caused* so much present-day self-destructive and antisocial behavior, what was the place of individual agency and personal responsibility? Here too the personal shortcomings of a great leader shaped history. "MLK has not worked at self-purification," a young friend remarked of him in 1959. He "accepts himself and finds no tendency so outrageous that he must wrestle with it.... He does not seem capable of dramatic self-criticism." With such complacency about his own moral flaws, little wonder that he flinched from preaching against the promiscuity of others, with all its destructive consequences for the black family and black progress.

By the mid-'60s, as other black voices clamored not for civil rights but for Black Power, and as peaceful protesters gave way to violent mobs, beginning with the Harlem and Philadelphia Riots in 1964, Watts in 1965, and 76 urban riots in the first nine months of 1967 (by Congress's count), it was all King could do to keep his own followers non-violent. Even he, at the end of his life, had planned a 1968 Poor People's Campaign in Washington, aimed at disrupting the operation of the government until it agreed to a radical redistribution of wealth. It would be "the last non-violent approach," he warned. "God only knows what will happen if there is no response." As he said more than once at that time, he had seen his "dream... turn into a nightmare"—one part of which, as he did not live to see, was that blacks' passive resistance turned increasingly into mere passivity, and as black Americans waited for the world to become more just to them, the passivity devolved, in turn, into resentment, grievance, and an excuse for not trying.

Eig's account of King's post-JFK years is slightly sketchy, partly because he uncritically endorses MLK's growing radicalism but mainly because he seems overexcited to have a newly released cache of FBI materials to disclose, thousands of pages of reports and transcripts of the agency's bugs and wiretaps of King's hotel rooms and, later, his home and office, which Eig relates in burdensome detail. Director J. Edgar Hoover, obsessed by the threat of Communism and remembering the American Communist Party's backing of black causes in the 1930s, took for granted that this new civil rights leader must be a Communist tool. Fanning his suspicion was King's friendship with Levison, a former top party financier who had been under FBI surveillance since 1952. "Stan, as a strategist, was the single most influential force in Dr. King's life," judged MLK's good friend, singer Harry Belafonte. But there is zero evidence that Levison was a party plant, aimed at injecting Communism into the civil rights movement, as Hoover believed.

Nevertheless, for the FBI director, King became an obsession. LBJ attorney general Ramsey Clark recalled that no conversation with Hoover went without a mention of him—"and it would be derogatory." Eig shows how relentlessly the Bureau—as rogue then as it is now—bugged and persecuted and disparaged King, not with suspicions of Communism but with his indefatigable adultery. The Bureau's lab made a composite tape of some of King's steamier trysts and mailed it to his office, along with an anonymous letter, purportedly from an ill-educated, disaffected black, threatening to make the tape public and urging King to forestall exposure by suicide. King was on his way to receive the Nobel Peace Prize when the package arrived in 1964. It was Coretta who opened it and listened to the tape.

To discredit him, G-men showered reporters with tales of his amours, but journalists refused to print the stories, instead informing King—but not their readers—of the FBI's machinations. When King in turn disparaged the FBI as indifferent to tracking down white killers of blacks, Hoover told reporters that MLK was "the most notorious liar in the country." The director dished dirt to both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, sowing doubts about King's character and noticeably cooling LBJ's friendliness toward the civil rights leader, though it was King's increasingly strident opposition to the Vietnam War that turned that friendship to ice.

Addressing his followers in a Memphis church on the evening of April 3, 1968, King gave thanks that God had allowed him to reach the mountaintop and see the Promised Land in the distance. "I may not get there with you," he said, presciently. "But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!" The next evening, as he stood on the balcony of his motel, James Earl Ray put a bullet through his head. King was 39. The martyrdom he had prophesied had come to pass. And he left America the legacy of a prophet.

Myron Magnet, a National Humanities Medalist, is the author of Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution *(Encounter Books) and* The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass *(Encounter Books), among other books.*