King's Last March: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dramatic Final Year

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Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an *American RadioWorks* documentary.

Martin Luther King Jr.: I talked in Washington in 1963 about my dream, and we stood there in those high moments with high hopes, and over and over again, I've seen this dream turn into a nightmare!

Four decades after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he remains one of the most vivid symbols of hope for racial unity in America. But that's not the way he was viewed the last year of his life.

Reporter: He has deserted the march. Martin Luther King has left the march.

I'm Stephen Smith. Over the coming hour, King's Last March, produced in cooperation with the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. First, this news.

This is Riverside Church in New York City. It's a classic, Gothic cathedral, with light spilling down from stained glass windows and pointed arches reaching up into a vaulted ceiling. It's a formal, elegant place. It was here at Riverside Church four decades ago that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. gave one of the most radical and controversial speeches of his life. He called for an end to the Vietnam War.

King: Now it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam.

These words placed King well to the left of the American mainstream at the time. The anti-war movement was just gathering steam. Most Americans still supported fighting on to victory. King spoke here at Riverside Church on April 4th, 1967. Exactly one year later, he was assassinated.

You're listening to King's Last March, an *American RadioWorks* documentary from American Public Media. I'm Stephen Smith.

Now if the somber-sounding Martin Luther King who spoke at Riverside Church isn't the towering orator you're used to hearing, stay with me. In the last year of his life, King was, in many ways, not the figure that both his followers and his opponents had come to know. He could still thunder from the pulpit, for sure, but his message grew more challenging, and more pessimistic. Back in 1963, King stirred the nation with his "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In 1967, he lamented what had become of that dream.

King: I talked in Washington in 1963 about my dream. And we stood there on those high moments with high hopes. And over and over again I've seen this dream turn into a nightmare! I've seen promising, young, black boys, who are already facing discrimination at home, going away and dying in disproportionate numbers in Vietnam. We are 11 percent of the population here, and we are 22 and 4/10 percent of the dying force in Vietnam!

Over the coming hour we'll trace the final year of King's life. It was a time when a hostile U.S. government spied on King, and neglected to warn him about death threats being made against him; a time when King followed his moral compass to an increasingly isolated and lonely place; and a time when his deep convictions about nonviolence and the need to help poor people led him to say things many Americans found threatening. But King said being morally wise sometimes meant being politically un-wise.

King: On some positions, cowardice asks the question "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question "Is it politic?" Vanity asks the question "Is it popular?" But conscience asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when a man must take the position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because it is right. And that's where I stand today!

There were a lot of hard questions facing America in 1967. The country was beginning to feel the rumblings of a cultural earthquake. Anti-war movements, social justice movements, counter-culture movements - they were all converging to assault the status-quo. War power met flower power.

News: For weeks, U.S. planes, ships and artillery have hammered the enemy emplacements attempting to knock out the powerful communist guns.

Jerry Garcia: What we're thinking about is a peaceful planet. We're not thinking about anything else. We're not thinking about any kind of power. We're not thinking about any of those kings of struggles. We're not thinking about revolution, or war, or any of that.

Rally: The whole black nation has to be put together as a black army. And we're going to walk on this nation. We're going to walk on this racist power structure. And we're going to say to the whole damn government, "Stick 'em up, Mother*[beep]*! This is a hold up! We come for what's ours."

News: The Rung Sat in past few months has been bombed, shelled and napalmed.

In the spring of 1967, more than 400,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Vietnam. At least a hundred American soldiers were dying each week in combat.

Lyndon Johnson: I wish I could report to you that the conflict is almost over. This I cannot do. We face more cost, more loss, and more agony.

President Lyndon Johnson had been escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam since 1965. Martin Luther King had always opposed the war. But he'd been careful not to criticize it too sharply because Johnson had been a crucial ally on civil rights and on efforts to fight poverty. But as Johnson poured more troops into Vietnam, King felt compelled to speak out.

King: Negroes and whites are forced to fight in brutal solidarity on the battle fields of Vietnam. And yet those same fighting pals probably won't be able to live on the same block when they get back to Chicago and Detroit.

Martin Luther King's speeches against the Vietnam War drew swift public reaction, much of it damning. Newspaper editorials chastised King for stepping outside his field of expertise: Civil Rights.

Michael Honey: You have to remember, in 1967, public opinion had not yet turned against the Vietnam War.

Historian Michael Honey wrote a book about King's last year of life, called *Going Down Jericho Road*.

Michael Honey: The New York Times, for instance, virtually called him a traitor, saying he had undercut his usefulness to his people and his country by making that speech. ... So he was roundly condemned, and within the black community too, by many black leaders.

Bernard LaFayette: One of the things that people were concerned about was that Martin Luther King was taking away from the domestic issues by taking a stand against Vietnam and getting involved in the "Peace Movement."

Bernard LaFayette worked closely with King at the civil rights organization King led, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference - the SCLC.

Lafayette: But Martin Luther King came to the conclusion that you could not really get our country to focus on domestic issues as long as Vietnam was capturing the headlines, and that's where all our resources were going and people were all caught up in the war.

King: We spend approximately $500,000 to kill every enemy soldier in Vietnam, while we spend only $53 per person in the so-called "War Against Poverty."

In spring of '67, King spoke on a radio chat show in New York.

King: If we spend approximately $35 billion to fight what I consider an unjust, ill-considered war in Vietnam, and about $20 billion to put man on the moon, then our nation has the resources to spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on Earth.

King came to another crucial conclusion: as one who urged nonviolence at home, he could not remain silent about American aggression abroad.

King: And I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettoes without first having spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.

Some of King's staffers at the SCLC doubted his decision to speak against the government and the war. Dorothy Cotton directed educational programs for the organization. She says King was pained by the criticism he got.

Dorothy Cotton: But I saw this pushing Martin into a kind of reflective mode, to really think about his own commitment, not in anyway doubting it, but if he doubted it, he came out of it saying, and this is a direct quote, "If I am the last, lone voice speaking for nonviolence, that I will do."

King: Now there are those who say, "You're a Civil Rights leader. What are you doing speaking out? You should stay in your field." Well I wish you would go back and tell them for me that before I became a Civil Rights leader, I was a preacher of the Gospel. And when my father and others put their hands on my head and ordained me to the Christian ministry, it was a commission and something said to me that the fire of truth is shut up in my bones, and when it burns me, I must tell it!

When King spoke that "fire of truth" about Vietnam, it drew criticism, but also admiration, especially from people in the blossoming peace movement. In May 1967, King spoke to a crowd of 7,000 people on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley.

Student: Dr. King, will you be our candidate in 1968?

King: Well I must say, it's very kind of you to express such concern and make such a request. Now I do not feel that I'm presidential timber. I am committed to trying to do this job of civil rights and this job of building, wherever we can, more opposition to the war in Vietnam, and this would certainly take all of my time. And I would rather think of myself as one trying desperately to be the conscience of all of the political parties rather than being a political candidate.

Whether or not King could actually win the 1968 election, such speculation was deeply threatening to the incumbent Democrat, President Lyndon Johnson. LBJ was furious that King had broken ranks with him over the war. King's long-time nemesis, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, encouraged the president's anger. Hoover's FBI began spying on King and the SCLC back in 1962. Journalist Nick Kotz wrote a book about LBJ and King called *Judgment Days*. He says the bureau suspected that King and his organization were influenced by communists.

Nick Kotz: J. Edgar Hoover was sending Johnson virtually a message a day telling him that King was a communist; that King's personal life was a mess; he had all kings of extramarital affairs. And up until the Riverside speech, in April of '67, Johnson never did anything to strike out at King. With that speech, Johnson began to lash out at King, but privately. He never, ever did it publicly. And he was listening to Hoover's poison with a more attentive ear.

J. Edgar Hoover: I just got word that Martin Luther King will give a press conference at 11:00 this morning in Atlanta.

In this telephone call between Hoover and Johnson, which the president secretly recorded, the FBI director passed along intelligence from the agency's wiretapping operation against King. Hoover said King was expecting racial violence to break out in Chicago.

Hoover: That's the substance of the information. We got that highly confidentially over the technicals.

LBJ: Mm hmm.

King's massive FBI file contains no credible evidence that he was influenced by communists. But Hoover was a racist, and he viewed King's growing activism on both Vietnam and poverty as a threat to the government. So the FBI continued tapping King's phones, bugging his house, and in many other ways, trailing and reporting on King. Andrew Young said King and his colleagues in the movement knew they were being followed.

Andrew Young: Whenever we checked into a hotel, we always saw the little cars with the guys. And they were always driving two-, three-year-old Plymouths. It was not hard to find them. Quite often, we found bugs in the hotel rooms. And we never moved them.

Young says they even found microphones hidden in church pulpits where King was scheduled to speak.

Young: I can remember Ralph Abernathy pulling one out and said, "Little doohickey, I don't know whether you playing in Lyndon Johnson's office, or J. Edgar Hoover's office, but I want the whole world to know that we're going to get the right to vote and we're going to be free." And then he put it on top of the pulpit, rather than under the bottom, because he said, "I want you to get this plain."

For years, Hoover's FBI had been running a smear campaign against King. The bureau circulated reports about communists in King's camp and rumors about King's sex life. By 1967, about all King could do was try to ignore the threatening cloud of Hoover's skullduggery. King had much more difficult things on his mind.

In July of '67, violence tore at black neighborhoods in several American cities including Newark, New Jersey.

News: The rioting began. Smalls gangs of Negroes roamed the streets, breaking into shops and liquor stores. Fourteen were arrested.

When the Newark rioting ended, 23 people were dead. More than a thousand were in jail. An even bigger riot engulfed Detroit weeks later. Black people in America's inner cities were fed up with poverty and police repression. Young, militant activists seemed to dismiss Martin Luther King's message of nonviolence.

Brown: The only politics in this country that's relevant to black people today is the politics of revolution.

Stokely Carmichael: As the racist police escalate the war in our communities against black people, we reserve the right to self-defense and maximum retaliation. Understand this concept!

King: These are evil times. In our own nation, we see the evilness of the times with a sickness all around. We see the riots in the streets. We see people being killed. We see communities being burned down. And we see the conditions that make people act in this misguided, desperate fashion.

Over the summer of '67, King's mood darkened as his pessimism about the nation's racial and economic problems grew deeper.

King: We see the great gulf between Negro society and white society. Negroes are shouting, "Get whitey." All too many whites are shouting, "Keep the niggers in their place." Negroes are shouting, "Black Power!" And white people are crying, "White Power!" And all around, we see the darkness of this day.

King had come to a depressing realization: the victories of a few years earlier, passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, had not done much to make economic conditions better for

most African Americans. In private conversations, King despaired that he lacked the ideas and the energy to lift America from its darkness.

Cotton: He was so tired.

Dorothy Cotton spent years working with King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Cotton: He was so tired. I mean spiritually tired, emotionally tired, physically tired.

Young: He had talked about taking a sabbatical.

Andrew Young says King had been offered a one-year pastorate at Riverside Church in New York City.

Young: I think that was the greatest temptation of his life. His conscience wouldn't let him. He saw that as an escape.

Instead of escaping, King took on a daunting challenge. In the last yea of his life, he called for a new phase to the civil rights movement - a campaign to finally wipe out poverty.

King: We aren't merely struggling to integrate a lunch counter now. We're struggling to get some money to be able to buy a hamburger or a steak when we get to the counter.

In a series of speeches, King said the fight against poverty would be a much harder battle than the movement for racial justice. The struggle for economic justice would require far greater sacrifice from white America.

King: It didn't cost the nation one penny to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation one penny to guarantee the right to vote. And the things that we are calling for now would mean that the nation will have to spend billions of dollars in order to solve these problems. In other words, we are in a period where there cannot be a solution to the problem without a radical redistribution of economic and political power.

It seemed to some people that King was becoming more radical. Certainly the FBI thought so. It cranked up its smear campaign against King by circulating bogus stories to news organizations about the civil rights leader. But historian Clayborne Carson says King wasn't more radical - he was returning to his ideological roots. Carson directs the King Papers Project at Stanford University. He says King saw himself first and foremost as a minister of the "social gospel," which meant:

Clayborne Carson: One has a duty to do justice to the poor, to the less fortunate. That's the consistent message going from the Old Testament prophets through Jesus and into the modern

world, and what Christians hope to bring to that world. So nothing could've been more central to his mission as a minister than to launch the Poor People's Campaign.

The Poor People's Campaign was King's audacious plan to lead waves of poor people to Washington to set up a shanty town on the National Mall to show people in power the faces of the poor.

King: This will be no mere one-day march in Washington but a trek to the nation's capital by suffering and outraged citizens who will go to stay until some definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor.

Vincent Harding: Martin was one of these "crazy" members of the Christian community who really took Jesus seriously.

Historian and activist, Vincent Harding.

Harding: And believed that the way you get closest to the divine is by getting closer and closer to the most outcast members of the society. And that's a hard path, but once you have chosen it, you know that there's no easy alternative.

United Press International: Negro leader Martin Luther King Jr., at a news conference today in Atlanta, said his massive civil disobedience campaign in Washington, D.C. would begin during the first week in April. King told newsmen the campaign would be headed by a core of 3,000 trained demonstrators.

King: We feel that the time is now. Our summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay.

UPI: Dr. King said his demonstrations would initially employ educational methods, among them the erection of numerous "tent cities" in Washington to be occupied by thousands of poor Americans.

King: We're going to take some shacks up to Washington and we're going to present them as gifts to the various departments of government.

UPI: King refused to disclose specific targets or march routes in the Washington campaign. Said King, and we quote, "This campaign will be nonviolently conceived and nonviolently executed. We are going to the seat of government not begging but demanding. We are willing, if necessary, to fill up the jails of Washington and surrounding communities."

King: I Want to know tonight if you're going to Washington!

Crowd: Yes Sir! Alright

King: I want to know tonight if you're going to Washington! *[Applause]*

In the winter of 1968, King traveled the country gathering support for the Poor People's Campaign. He tried to inspire hope and a sense of power in the people who attended his rallies. But privately, King was still battling despair.

David Garrow: Because King did suffer. King suffered tremendously.

Historian David Garrow wrote a book about King called, *Bearing the Cross*.

Garrow: And he suffered almost entirely in private. But in some of those sermons, particularly sermons at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, from that last year, one can hear, one can really hear the degree of emotional pain and privation that Martin Luther King is undergoing because of the political courage and political choices he was willing to make.

King: And in every one of us this morning, there's a war going on. It's a civil war.

King delivered this sermon at Ebenezer one month before he was killed. The sermon is called "Unfulfilled Dreams."

King: I don't care who you are, I don't care where you live, there is a civil war going on in your life.. And every time you set out to be good, there's something pulling on you, telling you to be evil. It's going on in your life. Every time you set out to love, something keeps pulling on you, trying to get you to hate! Every time you set out to be kind and say nice things about people, something is pulling on you to be jealous and envious and to spread evil gossip about them. There's a civil war going on. Every time you say that "I'm not going to let this evil habit destroy me," something keeps pulling on you, saying "Keep on doing it."

It would seem King was speaking about his own inner battles with sin, including his history of adultery. But historian Clayborne Carson says King was also trying to come to terms with the larger struggle between good and evil that he'd been fighting in society. Carson says, with death threats in the air, King was trying to accept that he might not live to see that struggle through.

Carson: Once he gets to this period in 1967, 1968, he knows what's at stake. And he knows it's going to be a very difficult struggle. And he knows he may fail.

King: The question I want to raise this morning with you: Is your heart right? If your heart isn't right, fix it up today. Get God to fix it up. Get somebody to be able to say about you, "He may not have reached the highest height, he may not have realized all of his dreams, but he tried." Isn't that a wonderful thing for somebody to say about you? "He tried to be a good man. He tried to be a just man. He tried to be an honest man. His heart was in the right place." And I can hear a voice saying, crying out through the eternities, "I accept you. You are the recipient of my grace because it was in your heart! And it is so well that it was within thine heart."

I don't know this morning about you, but I can make a testimony. You don't need to go out this morning saying that Martin Luther King is a saint. Oh, no. I want you to know this morning that I'm a sinner like all of God's children! But I want to be a good man! And I want to hear a voice saying to me one day, "I take you in and I bless you, because you try. It is well that it was within thine heart." What's in your heart this morning? If you get your heart right.

In that sermon from spring of '68, Martin Luther King told his congregation at Ebenezer that life is a series of shattered dreams. Even so, he pushed on towards the Poor People's Campaign in Washington. But his commitment to society's outcasts led him to make a detour to Memphis, Tennessee.

You're listening to King's Last March, a documentary from *American RadioWorks* in cooperation with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. Coming up:

News: Was that Martin Luther King? He has - he has deserted the march. He has left the march.

You can listen to extended excepts from many of the speeches and sermons King gave in the last year of his life at our web site, americanradioworks.org. You'll also find slide shows, essays and secret documents from King's FBI file - all at americanradioworks.org. Major funding for *American RadioWorks* comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. King's Llast March will continue in just a moment, from American Public Media.

PART TWO

This is King's Last March, an *American RadioWorks* documentary from American Public Media. I'm Stephen Smith.

In spring 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. got diverted from his work on the Poor People's Campaign by a garbage strike in Tennessee.

Archival news: One thousand striking sanitation workers marched on Memphis city hall this afternoon and demanded Mayor Henry Loeb hear their grievances. The workers are striking for higher pay. Many receive only the federal minimum wage.

Black sanitation workers were protesting against miserable working conditions. For years they carried garbage from backyard trash cans in round, steel tubs on their heads. Many tubs leaked. The men drank water from a cooler on the truck because they weren't allowed to stop for refreshment. Sometimes they found maggots in their drinking cups.

Lawson: They were persistently mistreated.

The Reverend James Lawson led a local civil rights movement that supported the striking trash collectors.

Lawson: They were persistently called racist names by their white supervisors. They were often called "boy." They had no way to work for promotion.

Michael Honey: And they were treated as disposable laborers. They had no pensions, no vacations. They had nothing and if they got hurt, they were just out of a job.

Historian Michael Honey says the garbage workers put up with the wretched conditions until 1968, when two of their own suffered a gruesome accident. In Memphis, black trash haulers were not allowed to ride in the truck's cab with white workers. So when it rained, they often climbed in the back where the garbage cans got emptied. In back was also where the trash got crushed by a powerful blade.

Honey: On February 1, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, 36 and 30 years old, were riding in the back and the mechanism went off and went into action. The driver stopped the truck, but by the time he got out of the truck, the packing mechanism had grabbed them and mashed them just like garbage and they were killed instantly.

Black workers decided to strike. But city officials refused to bargain with the workers. And when peaceful demonstrators marched to city hall, police attacked them with tear gas and billy clubs. A month into the strike, James Lawson asked King to come to Memphis to boost morale. King arrived on March 18, 1968 and spoke to a massive crowd at the Mason Temple, a Pentecostal church.

King: Now let me say to those of you who are on strike. You've been out now for a number of days but don't despair.

King told the workers to hold on even though the white residents of Memphis seemed to be ignoring their struggle. King said it was like a Bible story.

King: Jesus reminded us in a magnificent parable one day that a man went to hell because he didn't see the poor. His name was Dives.

Dives went to hell for ignoring a beggar named Lazarus.

King: And I come to say that America too is going to hell if she doesn't use her wealth!. *[If]* America does not use her resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to hell.

At first, King didn't plan to do more in Memphis than give this speech. In fact, his staff at the SCLC didn't want him to go at all. Andrew Young ran the organization's daily operations. Young

feared that Memphis would be a troublesome detour on the road to the SCLC's poor people's march in Washington.

Young: We were stretched awful thin and we were doing an awful lot. And yet people wanted him to be everywhere and to do everything. But we had very little money and very little trained staff to help do it.

Clayborne Carson: King understood from the beginning that it was kind of like the story of the Good Samaritan.

Historian Clayborne Carson.

Carson: If he failed to stop and help this campaign of sanitation workers in Memphis, then he would be like the priest who walked by the person on the roadside who needed help. Instead, he wanted to be like the Good Samaritan, who went to Memphis and helped those who were desperately in need of outside help and attention.

King: The thing for you to do is stay together and say to everybody in this community that you're going to stick it out until the end and until every demand is met, and that you're going to say, "We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around!"

King's visit to Memphis lifted morale among the strikers and their supporters. But it was also a tonic for King. At the time, King was struggling to recruit people for the Washington march. And his popularity seemed to be ebbing. But the Mason Temple was one of the largest gathering places for black people in the South, and as many as 14,000 packed the place to hear King speak.

King: Now, you know what? You may have to escalate the struggle a bit.

Historian Michael Honey.

Honey: At the end of this speech, King is trying to find an ending to his speech. He hesitates for a moment, and then he says:

King: I'll tell you what you ought to do and you're together enough here to do it. In a few days, you ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis.

Honey: You hear then, Bedlam. Just people shouting and yelling and it goes on for several minutes, like he'd hit a home run. And the reason for this is that black people in Memphis had always done most of the labor. The maids, the people on the waterfront, the railroads. And they knew that if they all stopped work on a given day, they could close the city down.

King: And you let that day come, not a Negro in this city will go to any job downtown.

Honey: And there haven't been that many general strikes American labor history, and none in the Civil Rights Movement-era. So this would've been a tremendous high-water mark for the movement.

King promised the strikers in Memphis he would come back soon and help reach that high-water mark. Instead, when he returned, King would endure one of the lowest days of his civil rights career.

Reporter 1: Dr. Martin Luther King's massive downtown march on Memphis is now under way. Several thousand Negroes are marching towards city hall at this time.

March 28, 1968. King is back in Memphis. This time, he's accompanied by just two of his staffers from the SCLC.

Reporter 1: Many of the demonstrators carry the sign "I am a Man." They stretch out for several blocks. Police are on hand with about 600 officers. Almost the entire force is standing by here in case any trouble might break out.

Though King steps up to lead the protest march, he's counting on local organizers to keep the demonstration orderly. Michael Honey says King is obviously uneasy as he's pushed along by the crowd.

Honey: You can see in the photography of the march that Dr. King is visibly exhausted. His head is falling from side to side; he looks dazed. He looks apprehensive. He's not feeling like he's really in control of the situation, and he really isn't.

[Sounds of riot]

Reporter 1: Chaos has broken out downtown. Chaos has just broken out downtown. Negro youths are smashing windows.

[Crowd yelling]

The violence begins in the crowd behind King as he and the march leaders turn a corner onto Memphis' main street. Local organizer, James Lawson, was with King.

Lawson: I see appear, on Main street, a phalanx of police in riot gear across the street.

[Sound of small explosion]

Reporter 1: That sound you just heard was the sound of a tear gas fired by a police officer in an attempt to thwart this unruly demonstration.

Lawson says he saw a dozen or so young people breaking store front windows. But the riot police weren't interested in them.

Lawson: And I point up the street, and I say, "They're going to break the march up."

Reporter 1: Police have formed a cordon across Main Street at this time in an attempt to at least calm the demonstration, which has gotten completely out of hand. The Negro youths are shouting at this time, "Go! Go! Go!"

Honey: James Lawson's response was, "Martin, they're coming for you, the police. Secondly, you can't be in the position of leading a march that leads to violence." So Lawson got him out of the march. And King protested. Because he knew that people would say he ran, and so forth, which the news media did say.

Reporter 2: Was that Martin Luther King? He has deserted the march? He has left the march? And Martin Luther King has left the march. We're waiting on the rest of our crew here.

The violence continued for hours as peaceful marchers got caught up in the same police counterattack as looters. One teenager was shot to death. Dozens of protestors were injured, and nearly 300 black people arrested. Stores in the black section of town got looted and burned.

Martin Luther King was despondent. He crawled into bed at his Memphis hotel with his clothes on, trying to sort out what had gone wrong and what to do next. He spent the evening with SCLC staff who had hurried to Memphis.

Ralph Abernathy: Never had I seen him so upset and disturbed.

Ralph Abernathy was King's second-in-command at the SCLC. Abernathy was interviewed in the late 1980s.

Abernathy: Dr. King was heartbroken because he didn't want to lead a violent march. He wanted his record to be clear. And he said to me, "Why don't we just step aside and let the violent forces run their course. Because they will soon run out." And I said to him, "No Martin, we will remain nonviolent and we will be actively engaged in nonviolent activities because violence is not the way. We can not ever be free with violence."

King talked and fretted late into the night. The next morning he held a press conference, hoping to control the damage to his reputation and to his plans for the Poor People's Campaign. Reporters challenged King on whether he could keep the Washington demonstration peaceful.

King: This gentleman.

Reporter: How do you turn this on and off? You suggest people of a violent nature can be made nonviolent?

King: Well, you must remember that most Negroes have never accepted philosophical credo nonviolence. But most Negroes are willing to follow tactical nonviolence. I saw this in Chicago when we were working there. We had Black Stone Rangers marching with us, the worst gang in Chicago. They never retaliated with violence. Now certainly, they believed in violence, but they at least accepted tactical nonviolence for particular demonstrations and an organized thrust.

King said that at the Memphis march, local organizers had failed to make sure that young, black militants accepted tactical nonviolence. But King's critics leapt on the disastrous march as a sign of his fading authority.

Honey: The worst part of it was that King had never led a demonstration in which violence broke out among his followers.

Michael Honey.

Honey: And he knew also that the FBI and the news media would now go on the attack against him as a leader and against the Poor People's Campaign. All the national news media, Releases by the FBI began to say King "ran like a rabbit," and "was scared," and "he set up the situation; everywhere he goes, violence happens, then he claims to be a nonviolent leader." His ability to lead a march on Washington is clearly threatened.

When he got home to Atlanta, King told his staff at the SCLC there was no choice: he would have to return to Memphis. King said he had to prove he could lead a nonviolent demonstration in Memphis before moving on to Washington. Again, some on the staff objected. But King was adamant. And six days later he was back in Memphis, this time with a full team of SCLC organizers. It was April 3, 1968.

News report: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says a federal court order will not prevent him from holding a second mass march in Memphis. U.S. District Court Judge Bailey Brown issued the temporary restraining order shortly after King returned to Memphis with plans announced for a huge mass march next Monday. King said in these words, "We're not going to be stopped by mace or injunctions or any other method the city plans to use." He termed the injunction "a basic denial of First Amendment privileges."

A mass meeting was planned that night at the Mason Temple. A heavy storm rumbled into Memphis and threatened to keep people home. King didn't feel well but was talked into speaking. The storm rattled windows and rain beat down on the church's metal roof. Without notes, King talked about the history of civil rights, about the power of the poor to rise up, and about how grateful he was to have lived in the freedom struggle.

King: Now, it doesn't matter, now. It really doesn't matter what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us. The pilot said over the public address system, "We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with on the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night."

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers. Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land *[Cheers]*. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

King spent the next day, April 4th, 1968, in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel. Andrew Young was down at the federal courthouse fighting the injunction. King huddled with other SCLC officials to plan strategy. He shared a plate of fried catfish with Ralph Abernathy. He talked with his brother and parents on the phone. In the late afternoon, Young returned from court. The march could go forward. King pretended to be sore that Young had failed to call him all day.

Young: And he picked up a pillow off the bed and he threw it at me. You know, I just threw it back playfully. And all of a sudden, everybody picked up pillows. And it didn't take long before, with the two double beds in this motel, they put me down between the two beds and piled pillows on top of me. And here we were, middle aged men almost, and we were having a pillow fight like children.

When the rumpus subsided, King and the others got ready to go to dinner. King stood on the motel balcony and called down to a young musician who would be playing saxophone at a mass meeting that night. King asked him to play his favorite gospel song, Precious Lord, Take My Hand. Ralph Abernathy was in the hotel room putting on cologne. Andrew Young urged King to go back in and get a topcoat.

Young: He was sort of standing there, thinking aloud, "I'm not sure I need a coat."

Abernathy: And I heard what sounded like a firecracker.

Young: My first reaction was that he'd been so playful, and he was clowning again. That he had staggered back into the room. And that this was a firecracker or car backfiring.

Abernathy: I saw only his feet, laying on the balcony.

Young: The bullet had hit him and knocked him out of his shoes.

Abernathy: And I kneeled down and took his head into my hands.

Young: And by the time we climbed up the steps to where he was.

Abernathy: And I started patting his cheek.

Young: And he was laying there in his own blood.

Abernathy: Saying, "Martin! Martin! Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid."

Young: It was obvious that this was the end.

Abernathy: "It will be alright."

Young: I don't think he ever heard the shot.

Abernathy: And at that time, he relaxed.

Young: It pierced the tip of his chin and cut his spinal cord in half.

Abernathy: He became very, very calm.

Young: And the bullet probably got there before the sound. And that was it.

Abernathy: His eyes softly closed. And he heard me. And he believed me. That it would be alright.

Lyndon Johnson: The heart of America grieves today.

President Lyndon Johnson spoke to the nation.

Johnson: A leader of his people and teacher of all people has fallen. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been struck down by the violence against which he preached and worked. Yet the cause for which he struggled has not fallen.

In retrospect, some of King's closest friends believed that in the last year of his life, King knew that an assassin of some kind was creeping closer. But historian Clayborne Carson says King was more worried by violence in the nation's ghettos than the threat against himself.

Carson: There was a real sense in King's mind that the end might be near, but he was beyond worrying about that. He truly believed that it was necessary to take whatever risk, to see it through, to try, to the best you can, to head off what he felt would be a bloodbath in United States.

News: Nationwide, slum rioting, unleashed by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, has claimed more than 30 lives and damage is running into countless millions.

More than 100 American cities exploded in violence when King was assassinated. In a way King would never have wanted, his death forced America to see the fury of its poor people, however briefly and however from a distance.

News 1: Negroes out of the windows in the projects blasting and jeering.

News 2: Three-thousand national guardsmen are on the streets of Chicago tonight. At least three persons are dead.

News 3: Florida A & M students, enraged by the sniper killing of Martin Luther King, went on a shooting and burning rampage here in Tallahassee early this morning. One white teenager was killed and at least 14 others were injured.

In the end, most of the bullets and firebombs fell in urban black neighborhoods. Two months later, an escaped convict, a white man named James Earl Ray, was arrested. Ray was a small-time robber who confessed to shooting King but then recanted. His motives and guilt remain controversial.

Young: We had been trained not to worry about who killed Martin Luther King. We knew that that was irrelevant.

Andrew Young.

Young: The question was, "What is it about our society that makes it necessary to take the life of a man of peace, a man of honor and integrity, a man who's only trying to make America a better place?"

King's colleagues pressed on with a poor people's march on Washington in May of 1968. But the event was a disaster. Relentless rains turned their shantytown on the National Mall into a muddy sinkhole. The protest was largely ignored by Congress and the news media. And the American Civil Rights Movement was already in deep disarray before King was killed. Vincent Harding, King's friend and advisor, says King knew the movement was faltering. So in the last year of his life, King chose the path of deeper difficulty and greater risk.

Harding: King chose to be one with the poor. And you cannot, in a materialistic society, be one with the poor unless you're turning your face against the mainstream of the society. That's what we mean by becoming more radical, that you become someone who Mr. J. Edgar Hoover can call "the most dangerous Negro in America."

Martin Luther King Jr. was buried in his Atlanta neighborhood near Ebenezer Baptist Church. To symbolize King's dedication to the lives and the rights of poor people, a wooden farm wagon, pulled by mules, carried his casket to the grave.

King's Last March was produced by Kate Ellis and me, Stephen Smith. The editor was Catherine Winter. Coordinating producer, Ellen Guettler. Web producer, Ochen Kaylan. The RadioWorks team includes Emily Torgrimson, Suzanne Pekow, and Nancy Rosenbaum. At American Public Media: Catherine Stine and Amy Hyatt-Blatt.

There's a lot more to hear, see and learn about the last year of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life at our Web site: americanradioworks.org. We've collected extended excerpts from some of his most compelling speeches and posted a large selection of documents from King's FBI file. You can hear this program again and find all of our other documentaries at americanradioworks.org.

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