

Parting The Waters
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cluding Jo Ann Robinson, a professor of English at Alabama State.

She was among the leaders of the women's group who served on the Rev. Martin Luther King's new political affairs committee at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Robinson called her closest friends on the Women's Political Council. All of them responded like firefighters to an alarm. This was it.

Robinson and her friends met about midnight at their offices at Alabama State, each under the pretext of grading exams. They drafted a letter of protest. They revised the letter repeatedly, as ideas occurred to them. "Until we do something to stop these arrests, they will continue," the women wrote. "The next time it may be you, or you or you. This woman's case will come up Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses on Monday in protest of the arrest and trial."

Robinson decided to call E.D. Nixon to let him know what they were doing. He instantly approved Robinson's idea of the one-day bus boycott, saying that he had something like that in mind himself. He told her that he planned to summon Montgomery's leading Negroes to a planning meeting the very next day, at which both



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the legal defense and the boycott would be organized. Robinson was the first to know.

About 50 of the Negro leaders assembled in the basement of King's church where after a protracted and often disorderly argument about whether or not to allow debate, they approved the plans more or less as Nixon had laid them out in advance. All undertook to spread the word.

Nixon was up before dawn on Monday morning. So were the Kings, M.L. drinking coffee and his wife, Coretta, keeping watch at the front window, nervously waiting to see the first morning bus. When she saw the headlights cutting through the darkness, she called out to her husband and they watched it roll by together. The bus was empty!

The early morning special on the South Jackson line, which was normally full of Negro maids on their way to work, still had its groaning engine and squeaky brakes, but it was an empty shell. So was the next bus, and the next.

In spite of the bitter morning cold, their fear of white people and their desperate need for wages, Montgomery Negroes were turning the City Bus Lines into a ghost fleet. King, astonished and overjoyed, jumped into his car to see whether the response was the same elsewhere in the city. It was. He drove around for several hours, watching buses pass by carrying handfuls of white passengers.

After Rosa Parks was convicted that morning, E.D. Nixon walked out of the courtroom to post bond for her release. The sight that greeted him in the courthouse hallway shocked him almost as much as the empty buses at dawn: a crowd of some 500 Negroes jammed the corridor, spilling back through doors and down the steps into the street. Nixon, who was accustomed to find there only a few relatives of the accused, knew that the empty buses had been no fluke.

The jostling, and the sight of still more worried-looking policemen with shotguns, rattled even Nixon temporarily. He tried to disperse the crowd, promising to bring Rosa Parks outside unharmed as soon as the bond was signed. Some voices shouted back that the crowd would storm the courthouse to rescue both Parks and Nixon if they did not emerge within a few minutes. Something was new in Montgomery.

All the Negro leaders knew it long before they reassembled that afternoon to plan a mass meeting. That evening at Holt Street Baptist Church they formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, elected King its president, and decided to extend the bus boycott indefinitely.

That evening a crowd of about 15,000 people surrounded the packed Holt Street Baptist Church as King took the pulpit.

He stood silently for a moment. When he greeted the enormous crowd of strangers, who were packed in the balconies and aisles, peering in through the windows and upward from seats on the floor, he spoke in a deep voice, stressing his diction in a slow introductory cadence.

"We are here this evening—for serious business," he said, in even pulses, rising and then falling in pitch. When he paused, only one or two "yes" responses came up from the crowd, and they were quiet ones. It was a throng of shouters, he could see, but they were waiting to see where he would take them.

"You know, my friends, there comes a time," he cried, "when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." A flock of "yesses" were coming back at him when suddenly the individual responses dissolved into a rising cheer and applause exploded beneath the cheer—all within the space of a second.

That startling noise rolled on and on, like a wave that refused to break, and just when it seemed that the roar must finally weaken, a wall of sound came in from the enormous crowd outdoors to push the volume still higher.

Thunder seemed to be added to the lower register—the sound of feet stomping on the wooden floor—until the loudness became something that was not so much heard as it was sensed by vibrations in the lungs. The giant cloud of noise shook the building and refused to go away. One sentence had set it loose somehow, pushing the call-and-response of the Negro church service past the din of a political rally and on to something else that King had never known before.

As the noise finally fell back, King's voice rose above it to fire again. "There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being thrown across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair," he declared. "There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. There ..."

King was making a new run, but the crowd drowned him out. No one could tell whether the roar came in response to the nerve he had touched, or simply out of pride in a speaker from whose tongue such rhetoric rolled so easily.

The noise swelled until King cut through it to move past a point of unbearable tension. "If we are wrong—Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth! If we are wrong—justice is a lie."

This was too much. He had to wait some time before delivering his soaring conclusion, in a flight of anger mixed with rapture: "And we are determined here in Montgomery—to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream!"

The audience all but smothered this passage from Amos, the lowly herdsman prophet of Israel, who, along with the priestly Isaiah, was King's favorite biblical authority on justice.

The applause continued as King made his way out of the church, with people reaching to touch him. Dexter members marveled.

The boycott was on. King would work on his timing, but his oratory had just made him forever a public person. In the few short minutes of his first political address, a power of communion emerged from him that would speak inexorably to strangers who would both love and revile him, like all prophets. He was 26, and had not quite 12 years and four months to live.

The bus boycott lasted more than a year. It was not until Dec. 21, 1956, the day after the U.S. Supreme Court notified Montgomery officials that their bus segregation law was unconstitutional, that Negroes would again ride.

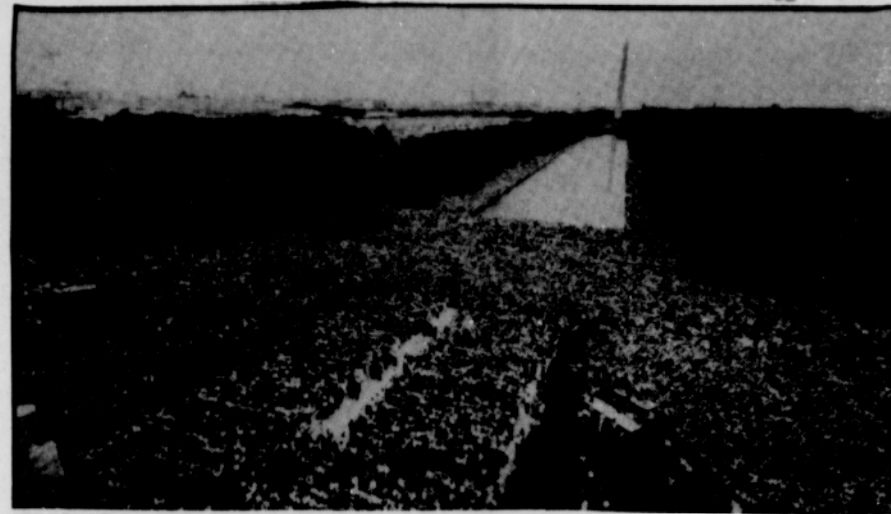
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Dr. Martin Luther King's Chronology
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1961 January 30: Dexter Scott, the Kings' third child, is born. **May 4:** The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organizes the first group of Freedom Riders. The Freedom Riders, intent on integrating interstate buses, leaves Washington, D.C., by Greyhound bus shortly

after the Supreme Court has outlawed segregation in interstate transportation terminals.

1962 September 20: James Meredith makes his first attempt to enroll at the University of Mississippi.



THOUSANDS GATHERED TO HEAR Dr. King Deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

He is actually enrolled by Supreme Court order and is escorted onto the Oxford, Mississippi campus by U.S. marshals on October 1. **October 16:** Dr. King meets with President Kennedy at the White House for a one-hour conference.

1963 March 28: Bernice Albertine, the Kings' fourth child, is born. **March-April:** Sit-in demonstrations are held in Birmingham to protest segregation of eating facilities. Dr. King is arrested during the demonstration. **April 16:** Dr. King writes "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" while imprisoned for demonstrating. **May 3, 4, 5:** Eugene "Bull" Connor, director of public safety of Birmingham, orders the use of police dogs and fire hoses on the marching protesters. **May 20:** The Supreme Court of the United States rules Birmingham's segregation ordinances unconstitutional. **June:** Dr.

King's book "Strength to Love" is published. **June 11:** Governor George C. Wallace tries to stop the court-ordered integration of the University of Alabama by "standing in the schoolhouse door" and personally refusing entrance to black students. **June 12:** Medgar Evers is assassinated in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi. **August 28:** In Washington, D.C., the March on Washington is held. Dr. King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. **November 22:** President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

1964 March 7: Bloody Sunday. About 650 marchers in Selma were attacked by police wielding tear gas, clubs and bullwhips. The assault, recorded by the national

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"I have a dream..."



Martin Luther King was with us from 1929 to 1968. In that time he inspired America—and the world—with his vision and his dream. We're proud to honor this extraordinary man, and do everything we can to help keep the dream alive.

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