

Three White Presidents and One Black Man

An inside look at how Martin Luther King worked with the White House

BY RON WEBER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Three years into his first of two terms in the White House, Dwight David Eisenhower was informed of a situation in Montgomery, Ala., known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It involved Rosa Parks, a young minister named Martin Luther King Jr., and a host of others.

King, who had just taken to the pulpit as the leader of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery was selected to lead the boycott. At first he appeared to be just another preacher on a mission. However, Eisenhower had a deeper feeling about this man. There was something different about him. He was not to be taken lightly and the President knew it.

After a bombing at the house of a King follower, the civil rights leader wrote his first letter of protest to President Eisenhower. Later, on Jan. 10, 1957, the home of Rev. Ralph Abernathy was bombed in the middle of the night. Four black churches and two homes had been bombed also that night and the next day.

King raced to Atlanta where he attended the first Negro Leaders Conference on Nonviolent Integration. After several name changes, the organization took a permanent name, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Dr. King was elected president and immediately started sending telegrams to President Eisenhower, Attorney General Brownell and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon. Eisenhower declined King's invitation to give a speech in the South against segregationist violence. Instead, his office informed King that the Justice Department would "look into the bombings."

The next month, Dr. King wired the president again, insisting on him to speak against the racist bombings. King explained to Eisenhower that if he did not comply, a march would take place. Thousands of people would march in a "pilgrimage of prayer," to the White House front door. Eisenhower's response was "You can't legislate morality." He continued to duck the issue and avoid King until June 13, 1957 when he finally allowed Nixon to give King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy an audience at the Formal Room in the White House.

After a two-hour interview with the vice president,



Martin Luther King Jr. (left) joins other civil rights leaders in a meeting with President John Kennedy (far right) after the March on Washington.

Eisenhower was skeptical at first, but eventually warmed up to this black leader who was an advocate for peaceful solutions and nonviolence in regards to social change.

King referred to Nixon as "the most dangerous man in America," because of his convincing someone he is on his or her side with false sincerity. King stated that the vice president was "magnetic" and "full of enthusiasm" on the surface only. MLK said Nixon would pat a person on the back, pretend to be supportive, and then drop the matter as soon as he left.

However, as King and Abernathy were moving

forward on the voting rights bill, Nixon told the president that he would enjoy talking to King because the young minister from Alabama was an advocate for nonviolent reform. Eisenhower was skeptical at first, but eventually warmed up to this black leader who was an advocate for peaceful solutions and nonviolence in regards to social change.

On June 23, 1958 King had a face-to-face discussion with Eisenhower. Although the president favored a deliberate and orderly end to racial discrimination, it would be an uphill battle. Just nine months earlier the governor of Arkansas defied a federal court order to integrate Little Rock High School. Eisenhower would face many such trials until his second term ended.

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the nation's 35th president, demands for civil rights was the central issue facing him. During his first year in office a group of Freedom Riders began traveling through the South testing segregation and anti-segregation laws. Riots broke out in Montgomery and Kennedy's brother Robert, who was the attorney general at the time sent in U.S. Marshals to restore order. Alabama Gov. John Patterson refused any help, claiming he could manage the problem himself. Dr. King followed suit by calling both the president and Bobby Kennedy numerous times demanding help. King continued pressuring both of them and finally they called Patterson, ordering him to protect the Freedom Riders and allow U.S. Marshals in to quell the situation. As King and the Kennedy's kept the pressure on, Patterson finally relented.

continued ▼ on page B7

We celebrate

those who see our community not as it is,
but as it could be.

Change begins with vision. Someone who sees possibilities in the impossible. These visionaries are here in our community and in communities across America. We're honored to share in their dreams and do our part to help achieve them.

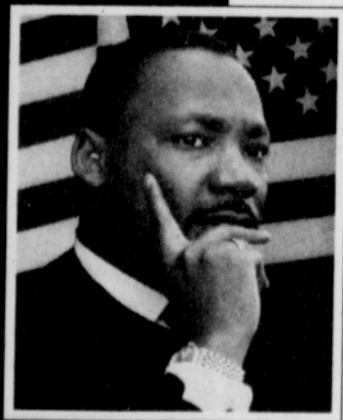
Bank of America is proud to support Black History Month.

Visit us at bankofamerica.com.

Bank of America



Bank of America, N.A. Member FDIC. ©2002 Bank of America Corporation. NBR-57-1P-05850500-AD



Live the dream.

We must protect
our legacy.



PORTLAND PARKS & RECREATION
www.PortlandParks.org
Jim Francesconi Commissioner • Charles Jordan Director

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daylight of peace and brotherhood can never become reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Portland General Electric