

# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: MARTIN LUTHER KING

*a candid conversation with the nobel prize-winning leader of the civil rights movement*

On December 5, 1955, to the amused annoyance of the white citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, an obscure young Baptist minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., called a city-wide Negro boycott of its segregated bus system. To their consternation, however, it was almost 100 percent successful; it lasted for 381 days and nearly bankrupted the bus line. When King's home was bombed during the siege, thousands of enraged Negroes were ready to riot, but the soft-spoken clergyman prevailed on them to channel their anger into nonviolent protest—and became world-renowned as a champion of Gandhi's philosophy of passive resistance. Within a year the Supreme Court had ruled Jim Crow seating unlawful on Montgomery's buses, and King found himself, at 27, on the front lines of a nonviolent Negro revolution against racial injustice.

Moving to Atlanta, he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an alliance of church-affiliated civil rights organizations which joined such activist groups as CORE and SNCC in a widening campaign of sit-in demonstrations and freedom rides throughout the South. Dissatisfied with the slow pace of the protest movement, King decided to create a crisis in 1963 that would "dramatize the Negro plight and galvanize the national conscience." He was abundantly successful, for his mass nonviolent demonstration in arch-segregationist Birmingham resulted in the arrest of more than 3300 Negroes, including King

himself; and millions were outraged by front-page pictures of Negro demonstrators being brutalized by the billy sticks, police dogs and fire hoses of police chief Bull Connor.

In the months that followed, mass sit-ins and demonstrations erupted in 800 Southern cities; President Kennedy proposed a Civil Rights Bill aimed at the enforcement of voting rights, equal employment opportunities, and the desegregation of public facilities; and the now-famous march on Washington, 200,000 strong, was eloquently addressed by King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. By the end of that "long hot summer," America's Negroes had won more tangible gains than in any year since 1865—and Martin Luther King had become their acknowledged leader and most respected spokesman.

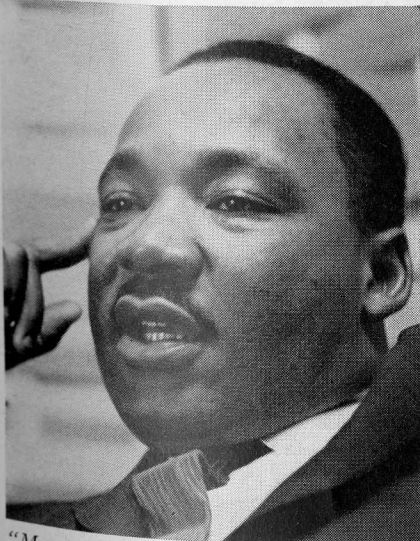
He earned it the hard way: In the course of his civil rights work he has been jailed 14 times and stabbed once in the chest; his home has been bombed three times; and his daily mail brings a steady flow of death threats and obscenities. Undeterred, he works 20 hours a day, travels 325,000 miles and makes 450 speeches a year throughout the country on behalf of the Negro cause. Inundated by calls, callers and correspondence at his S. C. L. C. office in Atlanta, he also finds time somehow to preach, visit the sick and help the poor among his congregation at the city's Ebenezer Baptist Church, of which he and his father are the pastors.

So heavy, in fact, were his commitments when we called him last summer for an interview, that two months elapsed before he was able to accept our request for an appointment. We kept it—only to spend a week in Atlanta waiting vainly for him to find a moment for more than an apology and a hurried handshake. A bit less pressed when we returned for a second visit, King was finally able to sandwich in a series of hour and half-hour conversations with us among the other demands of a grueling week. The resultant interview is the longest he has ever granted to any publication.

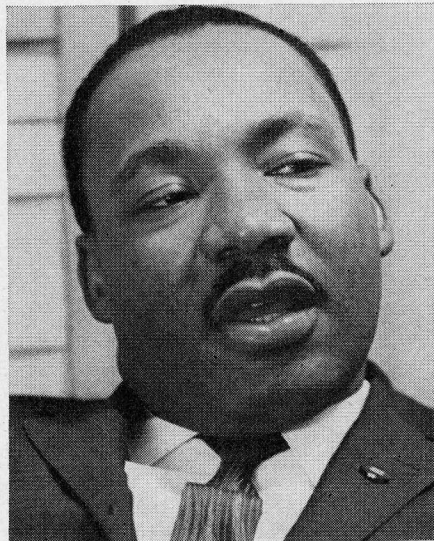
Though he spoke with heartfelt and often eloquent sincerity, his tone was one of businesslike detachment. And his mood, except for one or two flickering smiles of irony, was gravely serious—never more so than the moment, during a rare evening with his family on our first night in town, when his four children chided him affectionately for "not being home enough." After dinner, we began the interview on this personal note.

**PLAYBOY:** Dr. King, are your children old enough to be aware of the issues at stake in the civil rights movement, and of your role in it?

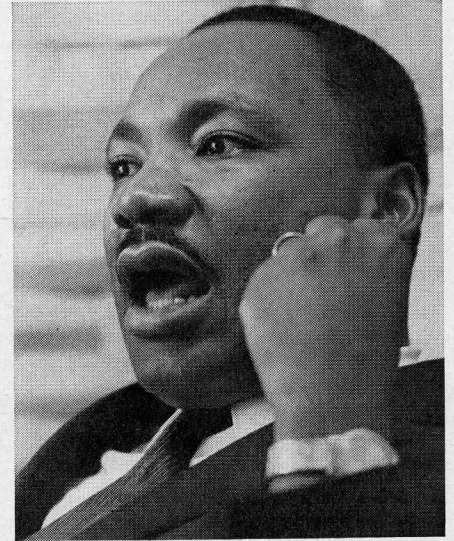
**KING:** Yes, they are—especially my oldest child, Yolanda. Two years ago, I remember, I returned home after serving one of my terms in the Albany, Georgia, jail, and she asked me, "Daddy, why do



"Measures must be taken at the Federal level to curb the reign of terror in the South. It's getting so anybody can kill a Negro and get away with it, as long as they go through the motions of a trial."



"I'm getting sick and tired of people saying that this movement has been infiltrated by Communists. There are as many Communists in this freedom movement as there are Eskimos in Florida."



"The Nobel award recognizes the amazing discipline of the Negro. Though we have had riots, the bloodshed we would have known without the discipline of non-violence would have been frightening."

you have to go to jail so much?" I told her that I was involved in a struggle to make conditions better for the colored people, and thus for *all* people. I explained that because things are as they are, someone has to take a stand, that it is necessary for someone to go to jail, because many Southern officials seek to maintain the barriers that have historically been erected to exclude the colored people. I tried to make her understand that someone had to do this to make the world better—for *all* children. She was only six at that time, but she was already aware of segregation because of an experience that we had had.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you mind telling us about it?

**KING:** Not at all. The family often used to ride with me to the Atlanta airport, and on our way, we always passed Funtown, a sort of miniature Disneyland with mechanical rides and that sort of thing. Yolanda would inevitably say, "I want to go to Funtown," and I would always evade a direct reply. I really didn't know how to explain to her why she couldn't go. Then one day at home, she ran downstairs exclaiming that a TV commercial was urging people to come to Funtown. Then my wife and I had to sit down with her between us and try to explain it. I have won some applause as a speaker, but my tongue twisted and my speech stammered seeking to explain to my six-year-old daughter why the public invitation on television didn't include her, and others like her. One of the most painful experiences I have ever faced was to see her tears when I told her that Funtown was *closed* to colored children, for I realized that at that moment the first dark cloud of inferiority had floated into her little mental sky, that at that moment her personality had begun to warp with that first unconscious bitterness toward white people. It was the first time that prejudice based upon skin color had been explained to her. But it was of paramount importance to me that she not grow up bitter. So I told her that although many white people were against her going to Funtown, there were many others who *did* want colored children to go. It helped somewhat. Pleasantly, word came to me later that Funtown had quietly desegregated, so I took Yolanda. A number of white persons there asked, "Aren't you Dr. King, and isn't this your daughter?" I said we were, and she heard them say how glad they were to see us there.

**PLAYBOY:** As one who grew up in the economically comfortable, socially insulated environment of a middle-income home in Atlanta, can you recall when it was that you yourself first became painfully and personally aware of racial prejudice?

**KING:** Very clearly. When I was 14, I had traveled from Atlanta to Dublin, Georgia, with a dear teacher of mine,

Mrs. Bradley; she's dead now. I had participated there in an oratorical contest sponsored by the Negro Elks. It turned out to be a memorable day, for I had succeeded in winning the contest. My subject, I recall, ironically enough, was "The Negro and the Constitution." Anyway, that night, Mrs. Bradley and I were on a bus returning to Atlanta, and at a small town along the way, some white passengers boarded the bus, and the white driver ordered us to get up and give the whites our seats. We didn't move quickly enough to suit him, so he began cursing us, calling us "black sons of bitches." I intended to stay right in that seat, but Mrs. Bradley finally urged me up, saying we had to obey the law. And so we stood up in the aisle for the 90 miles to Atlanta. That night will never leave my memory. It was the angriest I have ever been in my life.

**PLAYBOY:** Wasn't it another such incident on a bus, years later, that thrust you into your present role as a civil rights leader?

**KING:** Yes, it was—in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. E. D. Nixon, a Pullman porter long identified with the NAACP, telephoned me late one night to tell me that Mrs. Rosa Parks had been arrested around seven-thirty that evening when a bus driver demanded that she give up her seat, and she refused—because her feet hurt. Nixon had already bonded Mrs. Parks out of prison. He said, "It's time this stops; we ought to boycott the buses." I agreed and said, "Now." The next night we called a meeting of Negro community leaders to discuss it, and on Saturday and Sunday we appealed to the Negro community, with leaflets and from the pulpits, to boycott the buses on Monday. We had in mind a one-day boycott, and we were banking on 60-percent success. But the boycott saw instantaneous 99-percent success. We were so pleasantly surprised and impressed that we continued, and for the next 381 days the boycott of Montgomery's buses by Negroes was 99 $\frac{9}{10}$  successful.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you sure you'd win?

**KING:** There was one dark moment when we doubted it. We had been struggling to make the boycott a success when the city of Montgomery successfully obtained an injunction from the court to stop our car pool. I didn't know what to say to our people. They had backed us up, and we had let them down. It was a desolate moment. I saw, all of us saw, that the court was leaning against us. I remember telling a group of those working closest with me to spread in the Negro community the message, "We must have the faith that things will work out somehow, that God will make a way for us when there seems no way." It was about noontime, I remember, when Rex Thomas of the Associated Press rushed over to where I was sitting and told me of the news flash that the

U. S. Supreme Court had declared that bus segregation in Montgomery was unconstitutional. It had literally been the darkest hour before the dawn.

**PLAYBOY:** You and your followers were criticized, after your arrest for participating in the boycott, for accepting bail and leaving jail. Do you feel, in retrospect, that you did the right thing?

**KING:** No; I think it was a mistake, a tactical error for me to have left jail, by accepting bail, after being indicted along with 125 others, mainly drivers of our car pool, under an old law of doubtful constitutionality, an "antiboycott" ordinance. I should have stayed in prison. It would have nationally dramatized and deepened our movement even earlier, and it would have more quickly aroused and keened America's conscience.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel you've been guilty of any comparable errors in judgment since then?

**KING:** Yes, I do—in Albany, Georgia, in 1962. If I had that to do again, I would guide that community's Negro leadership differently than I did. The mistake I made there was to protest against segregation generally rather than against a single and distinct facet of it. Our protest was so vague that we got nothing, and the people were left very depressed and in despair. It would have been much better to have concentrated upon integrating the buses or the lunch counters. One victory of this kind would have been symbolic, would have galvanized support and boosted morale. But I don't mean that our work in Albany ended in failure. The Negro people there straightened up their bent backs; you can't ride a man's back unless it's bent. Also, thousands of Negroes registered to vote who never had voted before, and because of the expanded Negro vote in the next election for governor of Georgia—which pitted a moderate candidate against a rabid segregationist—Georgia elected its first governor who had pledged to respect and enforce the law impartially. And what we learned from our mistakes in Albany helped our later campaigns in other cities to be more effective. We have never since scattered our efforts in a general attack on segregation, but have focused upon specific, symbolic objectives.

**PLAYBOY:** Can you recall any other mistakes you've made in leading the movement?

**KING:** Well, the most pervasive mistake I have made was in believing that because our cause was just, we could be sure that the white ministers of the South, once their Christian consciences were challenged, would rise to our aid. I felt that white ministers would take our cause to the white power structures. I ended up, of course, chastened and disillusioned. As our movement unfolded, and direct appeals were made to white

ministers, most folded their hands—and some even took stands *against* us.

**PLAYBOY:** Their stated reason for refusing to help was that it was not the proper role of the church to "intervene in secular affairs." Do you disagree with this view?

**KING:** Most emphatically. The essence of the Epistles of Paul is that Christians should *rejoice* at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believe. The projection of a social gospel, in my opinion, is the true witness of a Christian life. This is the meaning of the true *ekklesia*—the inner, spiritual church. The church once changed society. It was then a thermostat of society. But today I feel that too much of the church is merely a thermometer, which measures rather than molds popular opinion.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you speaking of the church in general—or the white church in particular?

**KING:** The white church, I'm sorry to say. Its leadership has greatly disappointed me. Let me hasten to say there are some outstanding exceptions. As one whose Christian roots go back through three generations of ministers—my father, grandfather and great-grandfather—I will remain true to the church as long as I live. But the laxity of the white church collectively has caused me to weep tears of love. There cannot be deep disappointment without deep love. Time and again in my travels, as I have seen the outward beauty of white churches, I have had to ask myself, "What kind of people worship there? Who is their God? Is their God the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and is their Savior the Savior who hung on the cross at Golgotha? Where were their voices when a black race took upon itself the cross of protest against man's injustice to man? Where were their voices when defiance and hatred were called for by white men who sat in these very churches?"

As the Negro struggles against grave injustice, most white churchmen offer pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. As you say, they claim that the gospel of Christ should have no concern with social issues. Yet white churchgoers, who insist that they are Christians, practice segregation as rigidly in the house of God as they do in movie-houses. Too much of the white church is timid and ineffectual, and some of it is shrill in its defense of bigotry and prejudice. In most communities, the spirit of *status quo* is endorsed by the churches.

My personal disillusionment with the church began when I was thrust into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery. I was confident that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would prove strong allies in our just cause. But some became open adversaries, some cautiously shrank from the issue, and others hid behind silence. My

optimism about help from the white church was shattered; and on too many occasions since, my hopes for the white church have been dashed. There are many signs that the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. Unless the early sacrificial spirit is recaptured, I am very much afraid that today's Christian church will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and we will see the Christian church dismissed as a social club with no meaning or effectiveness for our time, as a form without substance, as salt without savor. The real tragedy, though, is not Martin Luther King's disillusionment with the church—for I am sustained by its spiritual blessings as a minister of the gospel with a lifelong commitment; the tragedy is that in my travels, I meet young people of all races whose disenchantment with the church has soured into outright disgust.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel that the Negro church has come any closer to "the projection of a social gospel" in its commitment to the cause?

**KING:** I must say that when my Southern Christian Leadership Conference began its work in Birmingham, we encountered numerous Negro church reactions that had to be overcome. Negro ministers were among other Negro leaders who felt they were being pulled into something that they had not helped to organize. This is almost always a problem. Negro community unity was the first requisite if our goals were to be realized. I talked with many groups, including one group of 200 ministers, my theme to them being that a minister cannot preach the glories of heaven while ignoring social conditions in his own community that cause men an earthly hell. I stressed that the Negro minister had particular freedom and independence to provide strong, firm leadership, and I asked how the Negro would ever gain freedom without his minister's guidance, support and inspiration. These ministers finally decided to entrust our movement with their support, and as a result, the role of the Negro church today, by and large, is a glorious example in the history of Christendom. For never in Christian history, within a Christian country, have Christian churches been on the receiving end of such naked brutality and violence as we are witnessing here in America today. Not since the days of the Christians in the catacombs has God's house, as a symbol, weathered such attack as the Negro churches.

I shall never forget the grief and bitterness I felt on that terrible September morning when a bomb blew out the lives of those four little, innocent girls sitting in their Sunday-school class in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. I think of how a woman cried out, crunching through broken glass, "My God, we're not even safe in church!" I

think of how that explosion blew the face of Jesus Christ from a stained-glass window. It was symbolic of how sin and evil had blotted out the life of Christ. I can remember thinking that if men were this bestial, was it all worth it? Was there any hope? Was there any way out?

**PLAYBOY:** Do you still feel this way?

**KING:** No, time has healed the wounds—and buoyed me with the inspiration of another moment which I shall never forget: when I saw with my own eyes over 3000 young Negro boys and girls, totally unarmed, leave Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church to march to a prayer meeting—ready to pit nothing but the power of their bodies and souls against Bull Connor's police dogs, clubs and fire hoses. When they refused Connor's belted order to turn back, he whirled and shouted to his men to turn on the hoses. It was one of the most fantastic events of the Birmingham story that these Negroes, many of them on their knees, stared, unafraid and unmoving, at Connor's men with the hose nozzles in their hands. Then, slowly the Negroes stood up and advanced, and Connor's men fell back as though hypnotized, as the Negroes marched on past to hold their prayer meeting. I saw there, I felt there, for the first time, the pride and the *power* of nonviolence.

Another time I will never forget was one Saturday night, late, when my brother telephoned me in Atlanta from Birmingham—that city which some call "Bombingham"—which I had just left. He told me that a bomb had wrecked his home, and that another bomb, positioned to exert its maximum force upon the motel room in which I had been staying, had injured several people. My brother described the terror in the streets as Negroes, furious at the bombings, fought whites. Then, behind his voice, I heard a rising chorus of beautiful singing: "We shall overcome." Tears came into my eyes that at such a tragic moment, my race still could sing its hope and faith.

**PLAYBOY:** *We Shall Overcome* has become the unofficial song and slogan of the civil rights movement. Do you consider such inspirational anthems important to morale?

**KING:** In a sense, songs are the *soul* of a movement. Consider, in World War Two, *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*, and in World War One, *Over There* and *Tipperary*, and during the Civil War, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *John Brown's Body*. A Negro song anthology would include sorrow songs, shouts for joy, battle hymns, anthems. Since slavery, the Negro has sung throughout his struggle in America. *Steal Away* and *Go Down, Moses* were the songs of faith and inspiration which were sung on the plantations. For the same reasons the slaves sang, Negroes today sing freedom songs,

for we, too, are in bondage. We sing out our determination that "We shall overcome, black and white together, we shall overcome someday." I should also mention a song parody that I enjoyed very much which the Negroes sang during our campaign in Albany, Georgia. It goes: "I'm comin', I'm comin' / And my head *ain't* bendin' low / I'm walkin' tall, I'm talkin' strong / I'm America's New Black Joe."

**PLAYBOY:** Your detractors in the Negro community often refer to you snidely as "De Lawd" and "Booker T. King." What's your reaction to this sort of Uncle Tom label?

**KING:** I hear some of those names, but my reaction to them is never emotional. I don't think you can be in public life without being called bad names. As Lincoln said, "If I answered all criticism, I'd have time for nothing else." But with regard to both of the names you mentioned, I've always tried to be what I call militantly nonviolent. I don't believe that anyone could seriously accuse me of not being totally committed to the breakdown of segregation.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you mean by "militantly nonviolent"?

**KING:** I mean to say that a strong man must be militant as well as moderate. He must be a realist as well as an idealist. If I am to merit the trust invested in me by some of my race, I must be both of these things. This is why nonviolence is a powerful as well as a *just* weapon. If you confront a man who has long been cruelly misusing you, and say, "Punish me, if you will; I do not deserve it, but I will accept it, so that the world will know I am right and you are wrong," then you wield a powerful and a just weapon. This man, your oppressor, is automatically morally defeated, and if he has any conscience, he is ashamed. Wherever this weapon is used in a manner that stirs a community's, or a nation's, anguished conscience, then the pressure of public opinion becomes an ally in your just cause.

Another of the major strengths of the nonviolent weapon is its strange power to transform and transmute the individuals who subordinate themselves to its disciplines, investing them with a cause that is larger than themselves. They become, for the first time, *somebody*, and they have, for the first time, the courage to be free. When the Negro finds the courage to be free, he faces dogs and guns and clubs and fire hoses totally unafraid, and the white men with those dogs, guns, clubs and fire hoses see that the Negro they have traditionally called "boy" has become a man.

We should not forget that, although nonviolent direct action did not originate in America, it found a natural home where it has been a revered tradition to rebel against injustice. This great weapon, which we first tried out in

Montgomery during the bus boycott, has been further developed throughout the South over the past decade, until by today it has become instrumental in the greatest mass-action crusade for freedom that has occurred in America since the Revolutionary War. The effectiveness of this weapon's ability to dramatize, in the world's eyes, an oppressed peoples' struggle for justice is evident in the fact that of 1963's top ten news stories after the assassination of President Kennedy and the events immediately connected with it, nine stories dealt with one aspect or another of the Negro struggle.

**PLAYBOY:** Several of those stories dealt with your own nonviolent campaigns against segregation in various Southern cities, where you and your followers have been branded "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators." Do you feel you've earned these labels?

**KING:** Wherever the early Christians appeared, spreading Christ's doctrine of love, the resident power structure accused them of being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the small Christian band continued to teach and exemplify love, convinced that they were "a colony of heaven" on this earth who were missioned to obey not man but God. If those of us who employ nonviolent direct action today are dismissed by our white brothers as "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators," if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts and goals, we can be assured that the summer of 1965 will be no less long and hot than the summer of 1964.

Our white brothers must be made to understand that nonviolence is a weapon fabricated of love. It is a sword that heals. Our nonviolent direct-action program has as its objective not the creation of tensions, but the *surfacing* of tensions already present. We set out to precipitate a crisis situation that must open the door to negotiation. I am not afraid of the words "crisis" and "tension." I deeply oppose violence, but constructive crisis and tension are necessary for growth. Innate in all life, and all growth, is tension. Only in death is there an absence of tension. To cure injustices, you must expose them before the light of human conscience and the bar of public opinion, regardless of whatever tensions that exposure generates. Injustices to the Negro must be brought out into the open where they cannot be evaded.

**PLAYBOY:** Is this the sole aim of your Southern Christian Leadership Conference?

**KING:** We have five aims: first, to stimulate nonviolent, direct, mass action to expose and remove the barriers of segregation and discrimination; second, to disseminate the creative philosophy and techniques of nonviolence through local and area workshops; third, to secure the right and unhampered use of the ballot for every citizen; fourth, to achieve full

citizenship rights, and the total integration of the Negro into American life; and fifth, to reduce the cultural lag through our citizenship training program.

**PLAYBOY:** How does S. C. L. C. select the cities where nonviolent campaigns and demonstrations are to be staged?

**KING:** The operational area of S. C. L. C. is the entire South, where we have affiliated organizations in some 85 cities. Our major campaigns have been conducted only in cities where a request for our help comes from one of these affiliate organizations, and only when we feel that intolerable conditions in that community might be ameliorated with our help. I will give you an example. In Birmingham, one of our affiliate organizations is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which was organized by the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a most energetic and indomitable man. It was he who set out to end Birmingham's racism, challenging the terrorist reign of Bull Connor. S. C. L. C. watched admiringly as the small Shuttlesworth-led organization fought in the Birmingham courts and with boycotts. Shuttlesworth was jailed several times, his home and church were bombed, and still he did not back down. His defiance of Birmingham's racism inspired and encouraged Negroes throughout the South. Then, at a May 1962 board meeting of the S. C. L. C. in Chattanooga, the first discussions began that later led to our joining Shuttlesworth's organization in a massive direct-action campaign to attack Birmingham's segregation.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the highlights of that campaign was your celebrated "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"—written during one of your jail terms for civil disobedience—an eloquent reply to eight Protestant, Catholic and Jewish clergymen who had criticized your activities in Birmingham. Do you feel that subsequent events have justified the sentiments expressed in your letter?

**KING:** I would say yes. Two or three important and constructive things have happened which can be at least partially attributed to that letter. By now, nearly a million copies of the letter have been widely circulated in churches of most of the major denominations. It helped to focus greater international attention upon what was happening in Birmingham. And I am sure that without Birmingham, the march on Washington wouldn't have been called—which in my mind was one of the most creative steps the Negro struggle has taken. The march on Washington spurred and galvanized the consciences of millions. It gave the American Negro a new national and international stature. The press of the world recorded the story as nearly a quarter of a million Americans, white and black, assembled in grandeur as a testimonial to the Negro's determination

in terms of the Negro masses. What little progress has been made—and that includes the Civil Rights Act—has applied primarily to the middle-class Negro. Among the masses, especially in the Northern ghettos, the situation remains about the same, and for some it is worse.

**PLAYBOY:** It would seem that much could be done at the local, state and Federal levels to remedy these inequities. In your own contact with them, have you found Government officials—in the North, if not in the South—to be generally sympathetic, understanding, and receptive to appeals for reform?

**KING:** On the contrary, I have been dismayed at the degree to which abysmal ignorance seems to prevail among many state, city and even Federal officials on the whole question of racial justice and injustice. Particularly, I have found that these men seriously—and dangerously—underestimate the explosive mood of the Negro and the gravity of the crisis. Even among those whom I would consider to be both sympathetic and sincerely intellectually committed, there is a lamentable lack of understanding. But this white failure to comprehend the depth and dimension of the Negro problem is far from being peculiar to Government officials. Apart from bigots and backslashers, it seems to be a malady even among those whites who like to regard themselves as “enlightened.” I would especially refer to those who counsel, “Wait!” and to those who say that they sympathize with our goals but cannot condone our methods of direct-action pursuit of those goals. I wonder at men who dare to feel that they have some paternalistic right to set the timetable for another man’s liberation. Over the past several years, I must say, I have been gravely disappointed with such white “moderates.” I am often inclined to think that they are more of a stumbling block to the Negro’s progress than the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner.

**PLAYBOY:** Haven’t both of these segregationist societies been implicated in connection with plots against your life?

**KING:** It’s difficult to trace the authorship of these death threats. I seldom go through a day without one. Some are telephoned anonymously to my office; others are sent—unsigned, of course—through the mails. Drew Pearson wrote not long ago about one group of unknown affiliation that was committed to assassinate not only me but also Chief Justice Warren and President Johnson. And not long ago, when I was about to visit in Mississippi, I received some very urgent calls from Negro leaders in Mobile, who had been told by a very reliable source that a sort of guerrilla group led by a retired major in the area of Lucysville, Mississippi, was plotting to take my life during the visit. I was strongly urged to cancel the trip, but when I thought about it, I decided that I had no

alternative but to go on into Mississippi.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**KING:** Because I have a job to do. If I were constantly worried about death, I couldn’t function. After a while, if your life is more or less constantly in peril, you come to a point where you accept the possibility philosophically. I must face the fact, as all others in positions of leadership must do, that America today is an extremely sick nation, and that something could well happen to me at any time. I feel, though, that my cause is so right, so moral, that if I should lose my life, in some way it would aid the cause.

**PLAYBOY:** That statement exemplifies the total dedication to the civil rights movement for which you are so widely admired—but also denounced as an “extremist” by such segregationist spokesmen as Alabama’s Governor Wallace. Do you accept this identification?

**KING:** It disturbed me when I first heard it. But when I began to consider the true meaning of the word, I decided that perhaps I would *like* to think of myself as an extremist—in the light of the spirit which made Jesus an extremist for love. If it sounds as though I am comparing myself to the Savior, let me remind you that all who honor themselves with the claim of being “Christians” *should* compare themselves to Jesus. Thus I consider myself an extremist for that brotherhood of man which Paul so nobly expressed: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Love is the only force on earth that can be dispensed or received in an extreme manner, without any qualifications, without any harm to the giver or to the receiver.

**PLAYBOY:** Perhaps. But the kind of extremism for which you’ve been criticized has to do not with love, but with your advocacy of willful disobedience of what you consider to be “unjust laws.” Do you feel you have the right to pass judgment on and defy the law—nonviolently or otherwise?

**KING:** Yes—morally, if not legally. For there are two kinds of laws: man’s and God’s. A man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God, is a just law. But a man-made code that is inharmonious with the moral law is an unjust law. And an unjust law, as St. Augustine said, is no law at all. Thus a law that is unjust is morally null and void, and must be defied until it is legally null and void as well. Let us not forget, in the memories of 6,000,000 who died, that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal,” and that everything the Freedom Fighters in Hungary did was “illegal.” In spite of that, I am sure that I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers if I had lived in Germany during Hitler’s reign, as some Christian

priests and ministers did do, often at the cost of their lives. And if I lived now in a Communist country where principles dear to the Christian’s faith are suppressed, I know that I would openly advocate defiance of that country’s anti-religious laws—again, just as some Christian priests and ministers are doing today behind the Iron Curtain. Right here in America today there are white ministers, priests and rabbis who have shed blood in the support of our struggle against a web of human injustice, much of which is supported by immoral man-made laws.

**PLAYBOY:** Segregation laws?

**KING:** Specifically, court injunctions. Though the rights of the First Amendment guarantee that any citizen or group of citizens may engage in peaceable assembly, the South has seized upon the device of invoking injunctions to block our direct-action civil rights demonstrations. When you get set to stage a nonviolent demonstration, the city simply secures an injunction to cease and desist. Southern courts are well known for “sitting on” this type of case; conceivably a two- or three-year delay could be incurred. At first we found this to be a highly effective subterfuge against us. We first experienced it in Montgomery when, during the bus boycott, our car pool was outlawed by an injunction. An injunction also destroyed the protest movement in Talladega, Alabama. Another injunction outlawed the oldest civil rights organization, the NAACP, from the whole state of Alabama. Still another injunction thwarted our organization’s efforts in Albany, Georgia. Then in Birmingham, we felt that we had to take a stand and disobey a court injunction against demonstrations, knowing the consequences and being prepared to meet them—or the unjust law would break our movement.

We did not take this step hastily or rashly. We gave the matter intense thought and prayer before deciding that the right thing was being done. And when we made our decision, I announced our plan to the press, making it clear that we were not anarchists advocating lawlessness, but that in good conscience we could not comply with a misuse of the judicial process in order to perpetuate injustice and segregation. When our plan was made known, it bewildered and immobilized our segregationist opponents. We felt that our decision had been morally as well as tactically right—in keeping with God’s law as well as with the spirit of our nonviolent direct-action program.

**PLAYBOY:** If it’s morally right for supporters of civil rights to violate segregation laws which they consider unjust, why is it wrong for segregationists to resist the enforcement of integration laws which *they* consider unjust?

**KING:** Because segregation, as even the segregationists know in their hearts, is

to achieve freedom in this generation.

It was also the image of Birmingham which, to a great extent, helped to bring the Civil Rights Bill into being in 1963. Previously, President Kennedy had decided not to propose it that year, feeling that it would so arouse the South that it would meet a bottleneck. But Birmingham, and subsequent developments, caused him to reorder his legislative priorities.

One of these decisive developments was our last major campaign before the enactment of the Civil Rights Act—in St. Augustine, Florida. We received a plea for help from Dr. Robert Hayling, the leader of the St. Augustine movement. St. Augustine, America's oldest city, and one of the most segregated cities in America, was a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society. Such things had happened as Klansmen abducting four Negroes and beating them unconscious with clubs, brass knuckles, ax handles and pistol butts. Dr. Hayling's home had been shot up with buckshot, three Negro homes had been bombed and several Negro night clubs shotgunned. A Negro's car had been destroyed by fire because his child was one of the six Negro children permitted to attend white schools. And the homes of two of the Negro children in the white schools had been burned down. Many Negroes had been fired from jobs that some had worked on for 28 years because they were somehow connected with the demonstrations. Police had beaten and arrested Negroes for picketing, marching and singing freedom songs. Many Negroes had served up to 90 days in jail for demonstrating against segregation, and four teenagers had spent six months in jail for picketing. Then, on February seventh of last year, Dr. Hayling's home was shot-gunned a second time, with his pregnant wife and two children barely escaping death; the family dog was killed while standing behind the living-room door. So S. C. L. C. decided to join in last year's celebration of St. Augustine's gala 400th birthday as America's oldest city—by converting it into a nonviolent battleground. This is just what we did.

**PLAYBOY:** But isn't it true, Dr. King, that during this and other "nonviolent" demonstrations, violence has occurred—sometimes resulting in hundreds of casualties on both sides?

**KING:** Yes, in part that is true. But what is always overlooked is how few people, in ratio to the numbers involved, have been casualties. An army on maneuvers, against no enemy, suffers casualties, even fatalities. A minimum of whites have been casualties in demonstrations solely because our teaching of nonviolence disciplines our followers not to fight even if attacked. A minimum of Negroes are casualties for two reasons: Their white oppressors know that the world watches their actions, and for the first time they

are being faced by Negroes who display no fear.

**PLAYBOY:** It was shortly after your St. Augustine campaign last summer, as you mentioned, that the Civil Rights Bill was passed—outlawing many of the injustices against which you had been demonstrating. Throughout the South, predictably, it was promptly anathematized as unconstitutional and excessive in its concessions to Negro demands. How do you feel about it?

**KING:** I don't feel that the Civil Rights Act has gone far *enough* in some of its coverage. In the first place, it needs a stronger voting section. You will never have a true democracy until you can eliminate *all* restrictions. We need to do away with restrictive literacy tests. I've seen too much of native intelligence to accept the validity of these tests as a criterion for voting qualifications. Our nation needs a universal method of voter registration—one man, one vote, literally. Second, there is a pressing, urgent need to give the attorney general the right to initiate Federal suits in any area of civil rights denial. Third, we need a strong and strongly enforced fair-housing section such as many states already have. President Kennedy initiated the present housing law, but it is not broad enough. Fourth, we need an extension of FEPC to grapple more effectively with the problems of poverty. Not only are millions of Negroes caught in the clutches of poverty, but millions of poor whites as well. And fifth, conclusive and effective measures must be taken immediately at the Federal level to curb the worsening reign of terror in the South—which is aided and abetted, as everyone knows, by state and local law-enforcement agencies. It's getting so that anybody can kill a Negro and get away with it in the South, as long as they go through the motions of a jury trial. There is very little chance of conviction from lily-white Southern jurors. It must be fixed so that in the case of interracial murder, the Federal Government can prosecute.

**PLAYBOY:** Your dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights Act reflects that of most other Negro spokesmen. According to recent polls, however, many whites resent this attitude, calling the Negro "ungrateful" and "unrealistic" to press his demands for more.

**KING:** This is a litany to those of us in this field. "What more will the Negro want?" "What will it take to make these demonstrations end?" Well, I would like to reply with another rhetorical question: Why do white people seem to find it so difficult to understand that the Negro is sick and tired of having reluctantly parceled out to him those rights and privileges which all others receive upon birth or entry in America? I never cease to wonder at the amazing presumption of much of white society, assuming that

they have the right to bargain with the Negro for his freedom. This continued arrogant laddling out of pieces of the rights of citizenship has begun to generate a *fury* in the Negro. Even so, he is not pressing for revenge, or for conquest, or to gain spoils, or to enslave, or even to marry the sisters of those who have injured him. What the Negro wants—and will not stop until he gets—is absolute and unqualified freedom and equality here in this land of his birth, and not in Africa or in some imaginary state. The Negro no longer will be tolerant of anything less than his due right and heritage. He is pursuing only that which he knows is honorably his. He knows that he is right.

But every Negro leader since the turn of the century has been saying this in one form or another. It is because we have been so long and so conscientiously ignored by the dominant white society that the situation has now reached such crisis proportions. Few white people, even today, will face the clear fact that the very future and destiny of this country are tied up in what answer will be given to the Negro. And that answer must be given soon.

**PLAYBOY:** Relatively few dispute the justice of the struggle to eradicate racial injustice, but many whites feel that the Negro should be more patient, that only the passage of time—perhaps generations—will bring about the sweeping changes he demands in traditional attitudes and customs. Do you think this is true?

**KING:** No, I do not. I feel that the time is always right to do what is right. Where progress for the Negro in America is concerned, there is a tragic misconception of time among whites. They seem to cherish a strange, irrational notion that something in the very flow of time will cure all ills. In truth, time itself is only neutral. Increasingly, I feel that time has been used destructively by people of ill will much more than it has been used *constructively* by those of *good* will.

If I were to select a timetable for the equalization of human rights, it would be the *intent* of the "all deliberate speed" specified in the historic 1954 Supreme Court decision. But what has happened? A Supreme Court decision was met, and balked, with utter defiance. Ten years later, in most areas of the South, less than one percent of the Negro children have been integrated in schools, and in some of the deepest South, not even one tenth of one percent. Approximately 25 percent of employable Negro youth, for another example, are presently unemployed. Though many would prefer not to, we must face the fact that progress for the Negro—to which white "moderates" like to point in justifying gradualism—has been relatively insignificant, particularly

morally wrong and sinful. If it weren't, the white South would not be haunted as it is by a deep sense of guilt for what it has done to the Negro—guilt for patronizing him, degrading him, brutalizing him, depersonalizing him, thingifying him; guilt for lying to itself. This is the source of the schizophrenia that the South will suffer until it goes through its crisis of conscience.

**PLAYBOY:** Is this crisis imminent?

**KING:** It may not come next week or next year, but it is certainly more imminent in the South than in the North. If the South is honest with itself, it may well outdistance the North in the improvement of race relations.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**KING:** Well, the Northern white, having had little actual contact with the Negro, is devoted to an abstract principle of cordial interracial relations. The North has long considered, in a theoretical way, that it supported brotherhood and the equality of man, but the truth is that deep prejudices and discriminations exist in hidden and subtle and covert disguises. The South's prejudice and discrimination, on the other hand, has been applied against the Negro in obvious, open, overt and glaring forms—which make the problem easier to get at. The Southern white man has the advantage of far more actual contact with Negroes than the Northerner. A major problem is that this contact has been paternalistic and poisoned by the myth of racial superiority.

**PLAYBOY:** Many Southern whites, supported by the "research" of several Southern anthropologists, vow that white racial superiority—and Negro inferiority—are a biological fact.

**KING:** You may remember that during the rise of Nazi Germany, a rash of books by respected German scientists appeared, supporting the master-race theory. This utterly ignorant fallacy has been so thoroughly refuted by the social scientists, as well as by medical science, that any individual who goes on believing it is standing in an absolutely misguided and diminishing circle. The American Anthropological Association has unanimously adopted a resolution repudiating statements that Negroes are biologically, in innate mental ability or in any other way inferior to whites. The collective weight and authority of world scientists are embodied in a Unesco report on races which flatly refutes the theory of innate superiority among any ethnic group. And as far as Negro "blood" is concerned, medical science finds the same four blood types in all race groups.

When the Southern white finally accepts this simple fact—as he eventually must—beautiful results will follow, for we will have come a long way toward transforming his master-servant perspective into a person-to-person perspective.

The Southern white man, discovering the "nonmyth" Negro, exhibits all the passion of the new convert, seeing the black man as a man among men for the first time. The South, if it is to survive economically, must make dramatic changes, and these must include the Negro. People of good will in the South, who are the vast majority, have the challenge to be open and honest, and to turn a deaf ear to the shrill cries of the irresponsible few on the lunatic fringe. I think and pray they will.

**PLAYBOY:** Whom do you include among "the irresponsible few"?

**KING:** I include those who preach racism and commit violence; and those who, in various cities where we have sought to peacefully demonstrate, have sought to goad Negroes into violence as an excuse for violent mass reprisal. In Birmingham, for example, on the day it was flashed about the world that a "peace pact" had been signed between the moderate whites and the Negroes, Birmingham's segregationist forces reacted with fury, swearing vengeance against the white businessmen who had "betrayed" them by negotiating with Negroes. On Saturday night, just outside of Birmingham, a Ku Klux Klan meeting was held, and that same night, as I mentioned earlier, a bomb ripped the home of my brother, the Reverend A. D. King, and another bomb was planted where it would have killed or seriously wounded anyone in the motel room which I had been occupying. Both bombings had been timed just as Birmingham's bars closed on Saturday midnight, as the streets filled with thousands of Negroes who were not trained in non-violence, and who had been drinking. Just as whoever planted the bombs had wanted to happen, fighting began, policemen were stoned by Negroes, cars were overturned and fires started.

**PLAYBOY:** Were none of your S. C. L. C. workers involved?

**KING:** If they had been, there would have been no riot, for we believe that only just means may be used in seeking a just end. We believe that lasting gains can be made—and they *have* been made—only by practicing what we preach: a policy of nonviolent, peaceful protest. The riots, North and South, have involved mobs—not the disciplined, nonviolent, direct-action demonstrators with whom I identify. We do not condone lawlessness, looting and violence committed by the racist or the reckless of any color.

I must say, however, that riots such as have occurred do achieve at least one partially positive effect: They dramatically focus national attention upon the Negro's discontent. Unfortunately, they also give the white majority an excuse, a provocation, to look away from the cause of the riots—the poverty and the deprivation and the degradation of

the Negro, especially in the slums and ghettos where the riots occur—and to talk instead of looting, and of the breakdown of law and order. It is never circulated that some of the looters have been white people, similarly motivated by their own poverty. In one riot in a Northern city, aside from the Negroes and Puerto Ricans who were arrested, there were also 158 white people—including mothers stealing food, children's shoes and other necessity items. The poor, white and black, were rebelling together against the establishment.

**PLAYBOY:** Whom do you mean by "the establishment"?

**KING:** I mean the white leadership—which I hold as responsible as anyone for the riots, for not removing the conditions that cause them. The deep frustration, the seething desperation of the Negro today is a product of slum housing, chronic poverty, woefully inadequate education and substandard schools. The Negro is trapped in a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign, caught in a vicious socioeconomic vise. And he is ostracized as is no other minority group in America by the evil of oppressive and constricting prejudice based solely upon his color. A righteous man has no alternative but to resist such an evil system. If he does not have the courage to resist nonviolently, then he runs the risk of a violent emotional explosion. As much as I deplore violence, there is one evil that is *worse* than violence, and that's cowardice. It is still my basic article of faith that social justice can be achieved and democracy advanced only to the degree that there is firm adherence to *nonviolent* action and resistance in the pursuit of social justice. But America will be faced with the ever-present threat of violence, rioting and senseless crime as long as Negroes by the hundreds of thousands are packed into malodorous, rat-plagued ghettos; as long as Negroes remain smothered by poverty in the midst of an affluent society; as long as Negroes are made to feel like exiles in their own land; as long as Negroes continue to be dehumanized; as long as Negroes see their freedom endlessly delayed and diminished by the head winds of tokenism and small handouts from the white power structure. No nation can suffer any greater tragedy than to cause millions of its citizens to feel that they have no stake in their own society.

Understand that I am trying only to explain the *reasons* for violence and the threat of violence. Let me say again that by no means and under no circumstance do I condone outbreaks of looting and lawlessness. I feel that every responsible Negro leader must point out, with all possible vigor, that anyone who perpetrates and participates in a riot is immoral as well as impractical—that the use of immoral means will not achieve the moral end of racial justice.

**PLAYBOY:** Whom do you consider the most responsible Negro leaders?

**KING:** Well, I would say that Roy Wilkins of the NAACP has proved time and again to be a very articulate spokesman for the rights of Negroes. He is a most able administrator and a dedicated organization man with personal resources that have helped the whole struggle. Another outstanding man is Whitney Young Jr. of the National Urban League, an extremely able social scientist. He has developed a meaningful balance between militancy and moderation. James Farmer of CORE is another courageous, dedicated and thoughtful civil rights spokesman. I have always been impressed by how he maintains a freshness in his awareness of the meaning of the whole quest for freedom. And John Lewis of SNCC symbolizes the kind of strong militancy, courage and creativity that our youth have brought to the civil rights struggle. But I feel that the greatest leader of these times that the Negro has produced is A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, whose total integrity, depth of dedication and caliber of statesmanship set an example for us all.

**PLAYBOY:** Many whites feel that last summer's riots occurred because leadership is no longer being offered by the men you named.

**KING:** The riots we have had are *minute* compared to what would have happened *without* their effective and restraining leadership. I am convinced that unless the nonviolent philosophy had emerged and taken hold among Negroes, North and South, by today the streets of dozens of American communities would have flowed with blood. Hundreds of cities might now be mourning countless dead, of both races, were it not for the nonviolent influence which has given political surgeons the time and opportunity to boldly and safely excise some aspects of the peril of violence that faced this nation in the summers of 1963 and 1964. The whole world has seen what happened in communities such as Harlem, Brooklyn, Rochester, Philadelphia, Newark, St. Petersburg and Birmingham, where this emergency operation was either botched or not performed at all.

**PLAYBOY:** Still, doesn't the very fact that riots have occurred tend to indicate that many Negroes are no longer heeding the counsels of nonviolence?

**KING:** Not the majority, by any means. But it is true that some Negroes subscribe to a deep feeling that the tactic of nonviolence is not producing enough concrete victories. We have seen, in our experience, that nonviolence thrives best in a climate of justice. Violence grows to the degree that injustice prevails; the more injustice in a given community, the more violence, or potential violence, smolders in that community. I can give you a clear example. If you will notice,

there have been fewer riots in the South. The reason for this is that the Negro in the South can see some visible, concrete victories in civil rights. Last year, the police would have been called if he sat down at a community lunch counter. This year, if he chooses to sit at that counter, he is served. More riots have occurred in the North because the fellow in Harlem, to name one Northern ghetto, can't see any victories. He remains throttled, as he has always been, by vague, intangible economic and social deprivations. Until the concerned power structures begin to grapple creatively with these fundamental inequities, it will be difficult for violence to be eliminated. The longer our people see no progress, or halting progress, the easier it will be for them to yield to the counsels of hatred and demagoguery.

**PLAYBOY:** The literature of the John Birch Society, accusing you of just such counsels, has branded you "a conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy."

**KING:** As you know, they have sought to link many people with communism, including the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and a former President of the United States. So I'm in good company, at least. The Birchers thrive on sneer and smear, on the dissemination of half-truths and outright lies. It would be comfortable to dismiss them as the lunatic fringe—which, by and large, they are; but some priests and ministers have also shown themselves to be among them. They are a very dangerous group—and they could become even more dangerous if the public doesn't reject the un-American travesty of patriotism that they espouse.

**PLAYBOY:** Was there any basis in fact for the rumors, still circulating in some quarters, that last summer's riots were fomented and stage-directed by Communist agitators?

**KING:** I'm getting sick and tired of people saying that this movement has been infiltrated by Communists. There are as many Communists in this freedom movement as there are Eskimos in Florida. The FBI provided the best answer to this absurd rumor in its report to the President after a special investigation which he had requested. It stated that the riots were not caused or directed by any such groups, although they did try to capitalize upon and prolong the riots. All Negro leaders, including myself, were most happy with the publication of these findings, for the public whisperings had troubled us. We knew that it could prove vitally harmful to the Negro struggle if the riots had been catalyzed or manipulated by the Communists or some other extremist group. It would have sown the seed of doubt in the public's mind that the Negro revolution is a genuine revolution, born from the same womb that produces all massive social upheavals—the womb of intolerable con-

ditions and unendurable situations.

**PLAYBOY:** Is it destined to be a violent revolution?

**KING:** God willing, no. But white Americans must be made to understand the basic motives underlying Negro demonstrations. Many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations are boiling inside the Negro, and he must release them. It is not a threat but a fact of history that if an oppressed people's pent-up emotions are not nonviolently released, they will be violently released. So let the Negro march. Let him make pilgrimages to city hall. Let him go on freedom rides. And above all, make an effort to understand why he must do this. For if his frustration and despair are allowed to continue piling up, millions of Negroes will seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies. And this, inevitably, would lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

**PLAYBOY:** Among whites, the best-known and most feared of these militantly racist Negro sects is the Black Muslims. What is your estimation of its power and influence among the Negro masses?

**KING:** Except in a few metropolitan ghettos, my experience has been that few Negroes have any interest at all in this organization, much less give any allegiance to its pessimistic doctrines. The Black Muslims are a quasi-religious, sociopolitical movement that has appealed to some Negroes who formerly were Christians. For the first time, the Negro was presented with a choice of a religion other than Christianity. What this appeal actually represented was an indictment of Christian failures to live up to Christianity's precepts; for there is nothing in Christianity, nor in the Bible, that justifies racial segregation. But when the Negroes' genuine fighting spirit rose during 1963, the appeal of the Muslims began to diminish.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the basic precepts of black nationalism has been the attempt to engender a sense of communion between the American Negro and his African "brother," a sense of identity between the emergence of black Africa and the Negro's struggle for freedom in America. Do you feel that this is a constructive effort?

**KING:** Yes, I do, in many ways. There is a distinct, significant and inevitable correlation. The Negro across America, looking at his television set, sees black statesmen voting in the United Nations on vital world issues, knowing that in many of America's cities, he himself is not yet permitted to place his ballot. The Negro hears of black kings and potentates ruling in palaces, while he remains ghettoized in urban slums. It is only natural that Negroes would react to this extreme irony. Consciously or unconsciously, the American Negro has been caught up by the black *Zeitgeist*. He feels a deepening sense of iden-

tification with his black African brothers, and with his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean. With them he is moving with a sense of increasing urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel that the African nations, in turn, should involve themselves more actively in American Negro affairs?

**KING:** I do indeed. The world is now so small in terms of geographic proximity and mutual problems that no nation should stand idly by and watch another's plight. I think that in every possible instance Africans should use the influence of their governments to make it clear that the struggle of their brothers in the U.S. is part of a world-wide struggle. In short, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, for we are tied together in a garment of mutuality. What happens in Johannesburg affects Birmingham, however indirectly. We are descendants of the Africans. Our heritage is Africa. We should never seek to break the ties, nor should the Africans.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the most articulate champions of black Afro-American brotherhood has been Malcolm X, the former Black Muslim leader who recently renounced his racist past and converted to orthodox Mohammedanism. What is your opinion of him and his career?

**KING:** I met Malcolm X once in Washington, but circumstances didn't enable me to talk with him for more than a minute. He is very articulate, as you say, but I totally disagree with many of his political and philosophical views—at least insofar as I understand where he now stands. I don't want to seem to sound self-righteous, or absolutist, or that I think I have the only truth, the only way. Maybe he *does* have some of the answer. I don't know how he feels now, but I know that I have often wished that he would talk less of violence, because violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. Fiery, demagogic oratory in the black ghettos, urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.

**PLAYBOY:** For them or for whites?

**KING:** For everyone, but mostly for them. Even the extremist leaders who preach revolution are invariably unwilling to lead what they know would certainly end in bloody, chaotic and total defeat; for in the event of a violent revolution, we would be sorely outnumbered. And when it was all over, the Negro would face the same unchanged conditions, the same squalor and deprivation—the only difference being that his bitterness would be even more in-

tense, his disenchantment even more abject. Thus, in purely practical as well as moral terms, the American Negro has no rational alternative to nonviolence.

**PLAYBOY:** You categorically reject violence as a tactical technique for social change. Can it not be argued, however, that violence, historically, has effected massive and sometimes constructive social change in some countries?

**KING:** I'd be the first to say that some historical victories have been won by violence; the U.S. Revolution is certainly one of the foremost. But the Negro revolution is seeking integration, not independence. Those fighting for independence have the purpose to *drive out* the oppressors. But here in America, we've got to live together. We've got to find a way to reconcile ourselves to living in community, one group with the other. The struggle of the Negro in America, to be successful, must be waged with resolute efforts, but efforts that are kept strictly within the framework of our democratic society. This means reaching, educating and moving large enough groups of people of both races to stir the conscience of the nation.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you propose to go about it?

**KING:** Before we can make any progress, we must avoid retrogression—by doing everything in our power to avert further racial violence. To this end, there are three immediate steps that I would recommend. Firstly, it is mandatory that people of good will across America, particularly those who are in positions to wield influence and power, conduct honest, soul-searching analyses and evaluations of the environmental causes that spawn riots. All major industrial and ghetto areas should establish serious biracial discussions of community problems, and of ways to begin solving them. Instead of ambulance service, municipal leaders need to provide preventive medicine. Secondly, these communities should make serious efforts to provide work and training for unemployed youth, through job-and-training programs such as the HARYOU-ACT program in New York City. Thirdly, all cities concerned should make first-priority efforts to provide immediate quality education for Negro youth—instead of conducting studies for the next five years. Young boys and girls now in the ghettos must be enabled to feel that they count, that somebody cares about them; they must be able to feel *hope*. And on a longer-range basis, the physical ghetto itself must be eliminated, because these are the environmental conditions that germinate riots. It is both socially and morally suicidal to continue a pattern of deploring effects while failing to come to grips with the *causes*. Ultimately, law and order will be maintained only when justice and dignity are accorded impartially to all.

**PLAYBOY:** Along with the other civil rights leaders, you have often proposed a massive program of economic aid, financed by the Federal Government, to improve the lot of the nation's 20,000,000 Negroes. Just one of the projects you've mentioned, however—the HARYOU-ACT program to provide jobs for Negro youths—is expected to cost \$141,000,000 over the next ten years, and that includes only Harlem. A nationwide program such as you propose would undoubtedly run into the billions.

**KING:** About 50 billion, actually—which is less than one year of our present defense spending. It is my belief that with the expenditure of this amount, over a ten-year period, a genuine and dramatic transformation could be achieved in the conditions of Negro life in America. I am positive, moreover, that the money spent would be more than amply justified by the benefits that would accrue to the nation through a spectacular decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls, rioting and other social evils.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think it's realistic to hope that the Government would consider an appropriation of such magnitude other than for national defense?

**KING:** I certainly do. This country has the resources to solve *any* problem once that problem is accepted as national policy. An example is aid to Appalachia, which has been made a policy of the Federal Government's much-touted war on poverty; one billion was proposed for its relief—without making the slightest dent in the defense budget. Another example is the fact that after World War Two, during the years when it became policy to build and maintain the largest military machine the world has ever known, America also took upon itself, through the Marshall Plan and other measures, the financial relief and rehabilitation of millions of European people. If America can afford to underwrite its allies and ex-enemies, it can certainly afford—and has a much greater obligation, as I see it—to do at least as well by its own no-less-needy countrymen.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel it's fair to request a multibillion-dollar program of preferential treatment for the Negro, or for any other minority group?

**KING:** I do indeed. Can any fair-minded citizen deny that the Negro has been deprived? Few people reflect that for two centuries the Negro was enslaved, and robbed of *any* wages—potential accrued wealth which would have been the legacy of his descendants. *All* of America's wealth today could not adequately compensate its Negroes for his centuries of exploitation and humiliation. It is an economic fact that a program such as I propose would certainly cost far less than any computation of two centuries of unpaid wages plus accumulated inter-

est. In any case, I do not intend that this program of economic aid should apply only to the Negro; it should benefit the disadvantaged of *all* races.

Within common law, we have ample precedents for special compensatory programs, which are regarded as settlements. American Indians are still being paid for land in a settlement manner. Is not two centuries of labor, which helped to build this country, as real a commodity? Many other easily applicable precedents are readily at hand: our child labor laws, social security, unemployment compensation, man-power retraining programs. And you will remember that America adopted a policy of special treatment for her millions of veterans after the War—a program which cost far more than a policy of preferential treatment to rehabilitate the traditionally disadvantaged Negro would cost today.

The closest analogy is the GI Bill of Rights. Negro rehabilitation in America would require approximately the same breadth of program—which would not place an undue burden on our economy. Just as was the case with the returning soldier, such a bill for the disadvantaged and impoverished could enable them to buy homes without cash, at lower and easier repayment terms. They could negotiate loans from banks to launch businesses. They could receive, as did ex-GIs, special points to place them ahead in competition for civil service jobs. Under certain circumstances of physical disability, medical care and long-term financial grants could be made available. And together with these rights, a favorable social climate could be created to encourage the preferential *employment* of the disadvantaged, as was the case for so many years with veterans. During those years, it might be noted, there was no appreciable resentment of the preferential treatment being given to the special group. America was only compensating her veterans for their time lost from school or from business.

**PLAYBOY:** If a nationwide program of preferential employment for Negroes were to be adopted, how would you propose to assuage the resentment of whites who already feel that their jobs are being jeopardized by the influx of Negroes resulting from desegregation?

**KING:** We must develop a Federal program of public works, retraining and jobs for all—so that none, white or black, will have cause to feel threatened. At the present time, thousands of jobs a week are disappearing in the wake of automation and other production efficiency techniques. Black and white, we will *all* be harmed unless something grand and imaginative is done. The unemployed, poverty-stricken white man must be made to realize that he is in the very same boat with the Negro. Together, they could exert massive pressure on the Government to get jobs for all. Together,

they could form a grand alliance. Together, they could merge all people for the good of all.

**PLAYBOY:** If Negroes are also granted preferential treatment in housing, as you propose, how would you allay the alarm with which many white homeowners, fearing property devaluation, greet the arrival of Negroes in hitherto all-white neighborhoods?

**KING:** We must expunge from our society the myths and half-truths that engender such groundless fears as these. In the first place, there is no truth to the myth that Negroes depreciate property. The fact is that most Negroes are kept out of residential neighborhoods so long that when one of us is finally sold a home, it's *already* depreciated. In the second place, we must dispel the negative and harmful atmosphere that has been created by avaricious and unprincipled realtors who engage in "blockbusting." If we had in America really serious efforts to break down discrimination in housing, and at the same time a concerted program of Government aid to improve housing for Negroes, I think that many white people would be surprised at how many Negroes would choose to live among themselves, exactly as Poles and Jews and other ethnic groups do.

**PLAYBOY:** The B'nai B'rith, a prominent social-action organization which undertakes on behalf of the Jewish people many of the activities that you ask the Government to perform for Negroes, is generously financed by Jewish charities and private donations. All of the Negro civil rights groups, on the other hand—including your own—are perennially in financial straits and must rely heavily on white philanthropy in order to remain solvent. Why do they receive so little support from Negroes?

**KING:** We have to face and live with the fact that the Negro has not developed a sense of stewardship. Slavery was so divisive and brutal, so molded to break up unity, that we never developed a sense of oneness, as in Judaism. Starting with the individual family unit, the Jewish people are closely knit into what is, in effect, one big family. But with the Negro, slavery separated families from families, and the pattern of disunity that we see among Negroes today derives directly from this cruel fact of history. It is also a cruel fact that the Negro, generally speaking, has not developed a responsible sense of financial values. The best economists say that your automobile shouldn't cost more than half of your annual income, but we see many Negroes earning \$7000 a year paying \$5000 for a car. The home, it is said, should not cost more than twice the annual income, but we see many Negroes earning, say, \$8000 a year living in a \$30,000 home. Negroes, who amount to about 11 percent of the American

population, are reported to consume over 40 percent of the Scotch whisky imported into the U. S., and to spend over \$72,000,000 a year in jewelry stores. So when we come asking for civil rights donations, or help for the United Negro College Fund, most Negroes are trying to make ends meet.

**PLAYBOY:** The widespread looting that took place during last summer's riots would seem to prove your point. Do you agree with those who feel that this looting—much of which was directed against Jewish-owned stores—was anti-Semitic in motivation?

**KING:** No, I do not believe that the riots could in any way be considered expressions of anti-Semitism. It's true, as I was particularly pained to learn, that a large percentage of the looted stores were owned by our Jewish friends, but I do not feel that anti-Semitism was involved. A high percentage of the merchants serving most Negro communities simply happen to be Jewish. How could there be anti-Semitism among Negroes when our Jewish friends have demonstrated their commitment to the principle of tolerance and brotherhood not only in the form of sizable contributions, but in many other tangible ways, and often at great personal sacrifice? Can we ever express our appreciation to the rabbis who chose to give moral witness with us in St. Augustine during our recent protest against segregation in that unhappy city? Need I remind anyone of the awful beating suffered by Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland when he joined the civil rights workers there in Hattiesburg, Mississippi? And who can ever forget the sacrifice of two Jewish lives, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, in the swamps of Mississippi? It would be impossible to record the contribution that the Jewish people have made toward the Negro's struggle for freedom—it has been so great.

**PLAYBOY:** In conspicuous contrast, according to a recent poll conducted by *Ebony*, only one Negro in ten has ever participated physically in any form of social protest. Why?

**KING:** It is not always sheer numbers that are the measure of public support. As I see it, every Negro who does participate represents the sympathy and the moral backing of thousands of others. Let us never forget how one photograph, of those Birmingham policemen with their knees on that Negro woman on the ground, touched something emotionally deep in most Negroes in America, no matter who they were. In city after city, where S. C. L. C. has helped to achieve sweeping social changes, it has been not only because of the quality of its members' dedication and discipline, but because of the moral support of many Negroes who never took an active part. It's significant, I think, that during each of our city struggles, the usual aver-

age of crimes committed by Negroes has dropped to almost nothing.

But it is true, undeniably, that there are many Negroes who will *never* fight for freedom—yet who will be eager enough to accept it when it comes. And there are millions of Negroes who have never known anything but oppression, who are so devoid of pride and self-respect that they have resigned themselves to segregation. Other Negroes, comfortable and complacent, consider that they are *above* the struggle of the masses. And still others seek personal profit from segregation.

**PLAYBOY:** Many Southern whites have accused you of being among those who exploit the race problem for private gain. You are widely believed throughout the South, in fact, to have amassed a vast personal fortune in the course of your civil rights activities.

**KING:** *Me* wealthy? This is so utterly fallacious and erroneous that I often wonder where it got started. For the sixth straight year since I have been S. C. L. C.'s president, I have rejected our board's insistent recommendation that I accept some salary beyond the one dollar a year which I receive, which entitles me to participate in our employees' group insurance plan. I have rejected also our board's offer of financial gifts as a measure and expression of appreciation. My only salary is from my church, \$4000 a year, plus \$2000 more a year for what is known as "pastoral care." To earn a grand total of about \$10,000 a year, I keep about \$4000 to \$5000 a year for myself from the honorariums that I receive from various speaking engagements. About 90 percent of my speaking is for S. C. L. C., and it brings into our treasury something around \$200,000 a year. Additionally, I get a fairly sizable but fluctuating income in the form of royalties from my writings. But all of this, too, I give to my church, or to my alma mater, Morehouse College, here in Atlanta.

I believe as sincerely as I believe anything that the struggle for freedom in which S. C. L. C. is engaged is not one that should reward any participant with individual wealth and gain. I think I'd rise up in my grave if I died leaving two or three hundred thousand dollars. But people just don't seem to believe that this is the way I feel about it. If I have any weaknesses, they are not in the area of coveting wealth. My wife knows this well; in fact, she feels that I overdo it. But the Internal Revenue people, they stay on me; they feel sure that one day they are going to find a fortune stashed in a mattress. To give you some idea of my reputed affluence, just last week I came in from a trip and learned that a television program had announced I was going to purchase an expensive home in an all-white neighborhood here in Atlanta. It was news to me!

**PLAYBOY:** Your schedule of speaking en-

agements and civil rights commitments throughout the country is a punishing one—often 20 hours a day, seven days a week, according to reports. How much time do you get to spend at home?

**KING:** Very little, indeed. I've averaged not more than two days a week at home here in Atlanta over the past year—or since Birmingham, actually. I'm away two and three weeks at a time, mostly working in communities across the South. Wherever I am, I try to be in a pulpit as many Sundays as possible. But every day when I'm at home, I break from the office for dinner and try to spend a few hours with the children before I return to the office for some night work. And on Tuesdays when I'm not out of town, I don't go to the office. I keep this for my quiet day of reading and silence and meditation, and an entire evening with Mrs. King and the children.

**PLAYBOY:** If you could have a week's uninterrupted rest with no commitments whatever, how would you spend it?

**KING:** It's difficult to imagine such a thing, but if I had the luxury of an entire week, I would spend it meditating and reading, refreshing myself spiritually and intellectually. I have a deep nostalgia for the periods in the past that I was able to devote in this manner. Amidst the struggle, amidst the frustrations, amidst the endless work, I often reflect that I am forever *giving*—never pausing to take in. I feel urgently the need for even an hour of time to get away, to withdraw, to refuel. I need more time to think through what is being done, to take time out from the mechanics of the movement, to reflect on the *meaning* of the movement.

**PLAYBOY:** If you were marooned on the proverbial desert island, and could have with you only one book—apart from the Bible—what would it be?

**KING:** That's tough. Let me think about it—one book, not the Bible. Well, I think I would have to pick Plato's *Republic*. I feel that it brings together more of the insights of history than any other book. There is not a creative idea extant that is not discussed, in some way, in this work. Whatever realm of theology or philosophy is one's interest—and I am deeply interested in both—somewhere along the way, in this book, you will find the matter explored.

**PLAYBOY:** If you could send someone—anyone—to that desert island in your stead, who would it be?

**KING:** That's another tough one. Let me see, I guess I wouldn't mind seeing Mr. Goldwater dispatched to a desert island. I hope they'd *feed* him and everything, of course. I *am* nonviolent, you know. Politically, though, he's already on a desert island, so it may be unnecessary to send him there.

**PLAYBOY:** We take it you weren't over-

ly distressed by his defeat in the Presidential race.

**KING:** Until that defeat, Goldwater was the most dangerous man in America. He talked soft and nice, but he gave aid and comfort to the most vicious racists and the most extreme rightists in America. He gave respectability to views totally alien to the democratic process. Had he won, he would have led us down a fantastic path that would have totally destroyed America as we know it.

**PLAYBOY:** Until his withdrawal from the race following Goldwater's nomination, Alabama's Governor Wallace was another candidate for the Presidency. What's your opinion of *his* qualifications for that office?

**KING:** Governor Wallace is a demagog with a capital D. He symbolizes in this country many of the evils that were alive in Hitler's Germany. He is a merchant of racism, peddling hate under the guise of States' rights. He wants to turn back the clock, for his own personal aggrandizement, and he will do literally *anything* to accomplish this. He represents the misuse, the corruption, the destruction of leadership. I am not sure that he believes all the poison that he preaches, but he is artful enough to convince others that he does. Instead of guiding people to new peaks of reasonableness, he intensifies misunderstanding, deepens suspicion and prejudice. He is perhaps the most dangerous racist in America today.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the most controversial issues of the past year, apart from civil rights, was the question of school prayer, which has been ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court. Governor Wallace, among others, has denounced the decision. How do you feel about it?

**KING:** I endorse it. I think it was correct. Contrary to what many have said, it sought to outlaw neither prayer nor belief in God. In a pluralistic society such as ours, who is to determine what prayer shall be spoken, and by whom? Legally, constitutionally or otherwise, the state certainly has no such right. I am strongly opposed to the efforts that have been made to nullify the decision. They have been motivated, I think, by little more than the wish to embarrass the Supreme Court. When I saw Brother Wallace going up to Washington to testify against the decision at the Congressional hearings, it only strengthened my conviction that the decision was right.

**PLAYBOY:** Governor Wallace has intimated that President Johnson, in championing the cause of civil rights only since he became Vice-President, may be guilty of "insincerity."

**KING:** How President Johnson may or may not have felt about or voted on civil rights during his years in Congress is less relevant, at this point, than what he has said and done about it during his tenure as President of the United States. In my opinion, he has done a good job



up to now. He is an extremely keen political man, and he has demonstrated his wisdom and his commitment in forthrightly coming to grips with the problem. He does not tire of reminding the nation of the moral issues involved. My impression is that he will remain a strong President for civil rights.

**PLAYBOY:** Late in 1963, you wrote, "As I look toward 1964, one fact is unmistakably clear: The thrust of the Negro toward full emancipation will *increase* rather than decrease." As last summer's riots testified, these words were unhappily prophetic. Do you foresee more violence in the year ahead?

**KING:** To the degree that the Negro is not thwarted in his thrust forward, I believe that one can predict *less* violence. I am not saying that there will be no demonstrations. There assuredly will, for the Negro in America has not made one civil rights gain without tense legal and extralegal pressure. If the Constitution were today applied equally and impartially to all of America's citizens, in every section of the country, in every court and code of law, there would be no need for any group of citizens to seek extralegal redress.

Our task has been a difficult one, and will continue to be, for privileged groups, historically, have not volunteered to give up their privileges. As Reinhold Niebuhr has written, individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily abandon their unjust posture, but groups tend to be more immoral, and more intransigent, than individuals. Our nonviolent direct-action program, therefore—which has proved its strength and effectiveness in more than a thousand American cities where some baptism of fire has taken place—will continue to dramatize and demonstrate against local injustices to the Negro until the last of those who impose those injustices are forced to negotiate; until, finally, the Negro wins the protections of the Constitution that have been denied to him; until society, at long last, is stricken gloriously and incurably color-blind.

**PLAYBOY:** In well-earned recognition of your dedication to and leadership of the struggle to achieve these goals, you became, in October of last year, the youngest man ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. What was your reaction to the news?

**KING:** It made me feel very humble indeed. But I would like to think that the award is not a personal tribute, but a tribute to the entire freedom movement, and to the gallant people of both races who surround me in the drive for civil rights which will make the American dream a reality. I think that this internationally known award will call even more attention to our struggle, gain even greater sympathy and understanding for our cause, from people all over

the world. I like to think that the award recognizes symbolically the gallantry, the courage and the amazing discipline of the Negro in America, for these things are to his eternal credit. Though we have had riots, the bloodshed that we would have known without the discipline of nonviolence would have been truly frightening. I know that many whites feel the civil rights movement is getting out of hand; this may reassure them. It may let them see that basically this is a disciplined struggle, let them appreciate the *meaning* of our struggle, let them see that a great struggle for human freedom can occur within the framework of a democratic society.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel that this goal will be achieved within your lifetime?

**KING:** I confess that I do not believe this day is around the corner. The concept of supremacy is so imbedded in the white society that it will take many years for color to cease to be a judgmental factor. But it is certainly my hope and dream. Indeed, it is the keystone of my faith in the future that we will someday achieve a thoroughly integrated society. I believe that before the turn of the century, if trends continue to move and develop as presently, we will have moved a long, long way toward such a society.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you intend to dedicate the rest of your life, then, to the Negro cause?

**KING:** If need be, yes. But I dream of the day when the demands presently cast upon me will be greatly diminished. I would say that in the next five years, though, I can't hope for much letup—either in the South or in the North. After that time, it is my hope that things will taper off a bit.

**PLAYBOY:** If they do, what are your plans?

**KING:** Well, at one time I dreamed of pastoring for a few years, and then of going to a university to teach theology. But I gave that up when I became deeply involved in the civil rights struggle. Perhaps, in five years or so, if the demands on me have lightened, I will have the chance to make that dream come true.

**PLAYBOY:** In the meanwhile, you are now the universally acknowledged leader of the American civil rights movement, and chief spokesman for the nation's 20,000,000 Negroes. Are there ever moments when you feel awed by this burden of responsibility, or inadequate to its demands?

**KING:** One cannot be in my position, looked to by some for guidance, without being constantly reminded of the awesomeness of its responsibility. I live with one deep concern: Am I making the right decisions? Sometimes I am uncertain, and I must look to God for guidance. There was one morning I recall, when I was in the Birmingham jail, in solitary, with not even my lawyers per-

mitted to visit, and I was in a nightmare of despair. The very future of our movement hung in the balance, depending upon capricious turns of events over which I could have no control there, incommunicado, in an utterly dark dungeon. This was about ten days after our Birmingham demonstrations began. Over 400 of our followers had gone to jail; some had been bailed out, but we had used up all of our money for bail, and about 300 remained in jail, and I felt personally responsible. It was then that President Kennedy telephoned my wife, Coretta. After that, my jail conditions were relaxed, and the following Sunday afternoon—it was Easter Sunday—two S.C.L.C. attorneys were permitted to visit me. The next day, word came to me from New York that Harry Belafonte had raised \$50,000 that was available immediately for bail bonds, and if more was needed, he would raise that. I cannot express what I felt, but I knew at that moment that God's presence had never left me, that He had been with me there in solitary.

I subject myself to self-purification and to endless self-analysis; I question and soul-search constantly into myself to be as certain as I can that I am fulfilling the true meaning of my work, that I am maintaining my sense of purpose, that I am holding fast to my ideals, that I am guiding my people in the right direction. But whatever my doubts, however heavy the burden, I feel that I must accept the task of helping to make this nation and this world a better place to live in—for *all* men, black and white alike.

I never will forget a moment in Birmingham when a white policeman accosted a little Negro girl, seven or eight years old, who was walking in a demonstration with her mother. "What do you want?" the policeman asked her gruffly, and the little girl looked him straight in the eye and answered, "Fee-dom." She couldn't even pronounce it, but she knew. It was beautiful! Many times when I have been in sorely trying situations, the memory of that little one has come into my mind, and has buoyed me.

Similarly, not long ago, I toured in eight communities of the state of Mississippi. And I have carried with me ever since a visual image of the penniless and the unlettered, and of the expressions on their faces—of deep and courageous determination to cast off the imprint of the past and become free people. I welcome the opportunity to be a part of this great drama, for it is a drama that will determine America's destiny. If the problem is not solved, America will be on the road to its self-destruction. But if it is solved, America will just as surely be on the high road to the fulfillment of the founding fathers' dream, when they wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."

