

PILLAR OF FIRE

**America
in the
King Years
1963-65**

**TAYLOR
BRANCH**

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SIMON & SCHUSTER
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Branch, Taylor.
Pillar of fire: America in the King years, 1963-65/
Taylor Branch.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Afro-Americans—Civil rights. 2. Civil rights
movements—United States—History—20th century.
3. King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968. 4. United States—
History—1961-1969. I. Title.
E185.61.B7915 1998
323.1'196073—dc21 97-46076 CIP

ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-5870-5
ISBN-10: 1-4165-5870-5

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Preface to *Pillar of Fire*

THERE WAS NO historical precedent for Birmingham, Alabama, in April and May of 1963, when the power balance of a great nation turned not on clashing armies or global commerce but on the youngest student demonstrators of African descent, down to first- and second-graders. Only the literature of Passover ascribes such impact to the fate of minors, and never before was a country transformed, arguably redeemed, by the active moral witness of schoolchildren.

The miracle of Birmingham might have stood alone as the culmination of a freedom movement grown slowly out of Southern black churches. Yet it was merely the strongest of many tides that crested in the movement's peak years, 1963-65. They challenged, inspired, and confounded America over the meaning of simple words: dignity, equal votes, equal souls. They gripped Malcolm X along with President Johnson, buffeted the watchwords "integration" and "nonviolence," broke bodies and spirits, enlarged freedom.

This is a continuing work, which follows *Parting the Waters*, an account of the King years from 1954 to 1963. To introduce impending elements as well as continuing ones, it begins with five chapters that approach Birmingham from afar, sometimes unconsciously. The characters include Orthodox rabbis, sharecroppers, Muslim prisoners, and a dispirited Vice President, in settings from North America's oldest Christian settlement of St. Augustine, Florida, to its western frontier in Los Angeles. All had reached points of crisis by Birmingham spring, when the young marchers released collateral forces that drew them together. Seekers of the black vote in rural Mississippi, who literally could not move in 1963, rose to dominate the pivotal year of 1964.

I try to employ nomenclature authentic to the historical period. People of African descent are "Negroes" until the prevailing term of self-reference changed, or when characters at the time spoke differently. Muslim mosques appear as "temples" when the members called them so. My mission statement for the trilogy, the last volume of which will be *At Canaan's Edge*, remains expressed by the following words from the preface to *Parting the Waters*.

Almost as color defines vision itself, race shapes the cultural eye—what we do and do not notice, the reach of empathy and the alignment of response. This subliminal force recommends care in choosing a point of view for a history grounded in race. Strictly speaking, this book is not a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., though he is at its heart.

I have tried to make biography and history reinforce each other by knitting together a number of personal stories along the main seam of an American epoch. Like King himself, this book attempts to rise from an isolated culture into a larger history by speaking more than one language.

My purpose is to write a narrative history of the civil rights movement out of the conviction from which it was made, namely that truth requires a maximum effort to see through the eyes of strangers, foreigners, and enemies. I hope to sustain my thesis that King's life is the best and most important metaphor for American history in the watershed postwar years.

Baltimore, Maryland

November 1997

Birmingham Tides

Islam in Los Angeles

ON APRIL 27, 1962, Muslims gathered for the Friday evening prayer service at Muhammad's Temple No. 27 in South-Central Los Angeles, east of Culver City and west of Watts. Some two hundred followers of Elijah Muhammad sat in folding metal chairs, separated by sex—the women wearing head coverings and floor-length dresses, generally white, and the men in distinctive dark suits with suspenders and bow ties, their heads closely shaved. Facing them from the podium, a blackboard posed in large letters the thematic question of the Nation of Islam: “WHICH ONE WILL SURVIVE THE WAR OF ARMAGEDDON?” To the left, framed by a cross, an American flag, and a silhouette of a hanging lynch victim, the blackboard offered a grim choice labeled “Christianity, Slavery, Suffering, Death,” in pointed contrast to the alternative proclaimed on the right: “Islam, Freedom, Justice, Equality.” Thus, explained the quick-witted Minister John X Morris, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad answered one of the central puzzles of all religion—how to reconcile unmerited suffering with the existence of a benevolent God. Allah had permitted the Christian nations to bring Africans into slavery—“chewing on men’s bones for three hundred years,” as Muhammad put it—to test the will of the victims to reestablish their religious dignity.

Muhammad’s Nation of Islam demanded that followers assume full responsibility for their own rehabilitation, and give whites due respect for enterprise if not for morals. “You are the man that is asleep,” Elijah Muhammad scolded through his new newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. “The white man is wide awake. He is not a dummy by any means. He has built a world. His knowledge and wisdom is now reaching out through space.” Even Assistant Minister Arthur X Coleman, who spoke that night acknowledged the human cost of following the Nation’s exacting discipline. His own wife had left him for home back in Tennessee not long after he had thrown all the sweet potatoes and pork products out of their refrigerator to follow the Muslim diet. Although Coleman scoffed at some teachings from the beginning—he told his grandfather he doubted claims that Mr. Muhammad had conversations direct with God—he struggled toward a new identity through an eclectic regimen that included Dale Carnegie public speaking courses, military-style fitness exercises, a program of readings on ancient civilizations, and what amounted to a second job selling Muslim newspapers and “fishing” for prospects on the streets.

The typically rough, streetwise membership of Temple No. 27 included few with any higher education. Among these, Delores X Stokes was a minor celebrity as a lifelong Muslim who had actually seen and talked with Elijah Muhammad himself. Her father, though far too old to serve in World War II, had entered federal prison voluntarily with Muhammad to protest the white man's wars, and then in 1945, when Delores was a girl of ten, had gone to Michigan to establish one of the Nation's first farms, always sending a portion of the crops to feed the membership in the cities. Delores remained frail after a severe case of childhood rickets, with a small soft voice and tentative movements, but she excelled first as a student and then as a strong-willed teacher, married to one of the first college-trained men in the Nation of Islam, Ronald X Stokes of Boston. After their wedding in August of 1960, they had come west to help shore up the Nation's outpost in Los Angeles, both of them working days for the county government but spending many of their off-duty hours at the temple, where Ronald served as secretary. Within the tiny colony of Muslims, the young couple were admired for serene, spiritual qualities that transcended the hard fixation upon vengeance more common among the regular members. Ronald Stokes was taking lessons in Arabic, the better to appreciate the poetry of the Q'uran in its original tongue.

The prayer service went past ten o'clock that Friday, after which fiscal "Lieutenant" William Rogers, a parking lot attendant who aspired to become an accountant, counted cash donations that ran to some \$500, mostly in small bills. Men were required to bring cars around to the door as a protective courtesy for women, who supervised children during temple events. Mabel Zeno wondered what was taking her husband, Charles, and their three grade-school children so long. Not knowing they had stopped to buy gasoline for their Ford station wagon, she left Delores Stokes at the women's waiting area and walked to the front entrance, scanning the Broadway traffic. Although most of the congregation had dispersed, Monroe X Jones stayed on to complete a clothing sale. As a delivery driver for S&M Dry Cleaners, he had occasional access to abandoned or discarded items, for which the temple was a good resale outlet because even the poorest Muslim had to dress formally in public. About eleven o'clock that night, he invited Fred X Jingles, who shined shoes at Ward's Shoe Shine Stand in Long Beach, two inspect an old suit with a hole in the pants. Jones had obtained two repair estimates: one for a cheap patch, another for a reweaving job that might cost a few dollars more than the suit itself.

Officers Frank Tomlinson and Stanley Kensic were driving south on Broadway when they passed two Negro males standing behind the opened trunk of a 1954 Buick Special, examining what appeared to be a plastic garment bag. Their first night together as partners was special for both young policemen—the eve of Kensic's wedding and Tomlinson's last shift of the one-year rookie probation. Given their good moods, only an afterthought prompted Kensic to suggest that Tomlinson back up for a burglary sweep. Tomlinson double-parked, turning on the cruiser's flashing lights, and as they exited Kensic asked the two men if they were Black Muslims. "Yes, sir," came the clipped, businesslike response, which matched the intelligence reports passed along lately at roll call about the dangerous new cult. The officers frisked the two suspects for weapons and compared the Buick's tag number with those on the stolen car hot sheet, coming up negative. Before calling in their names to check for outstanding warrants, they asked where the clothes came from. The two Muslims had only begun to tell of the reweave-or-patch choice on the suit when Kensic decided to split them up for individual accounts. According to subsequent conflicting testimony, his approximate words to Jingles were either "Come with me" or "Let's separate these niggers."

The commotion was attracting a small crowd. Roosevelt X Walker, a city garbage worker and

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