

Year Negroes Fought Back

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1957:

Year Negroes Fought Back

By JAMES L. HICKS

The year 1957 will go down in history as the year in which the Negro took a look into his mirror and said to himself, "I am somebody."

And history will record that it was a year in which the Negro, after saying that he was somebody, went out and began acting as if he was somebody. It was a year in which Negroes walked endless miles on tired feet and never grew weary.

It was a year which saw Negroes pressure through Congress the first civil rights bill passed in 82 years.

It was a year in which the Negro found himself the unwilling star of the biggest news stories of the day—a year in which the Negro problem at Little Rock, Ark., was as highly publicized in Europe and abroad as the launching of the Sputnik in Russia.

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1957 — The Year When the Negro Said "I AM Somebody"

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It was a year of bitter racial strife—but unlike other years, it was a year in which the Negro involved in such strife began to emerge as the winner.

In 1957, the Negro found himself standing up and slugging it out with racial bigotry in the bayous of Mississippi; on the streets of Chicago; in the Quaker lands of Pennsylvania; the citrus areas of Florida; the schoolrooms of Little Rock, Ark., and on the sidewalks of New York City.

Meets Challenge

There was scarcely a place in the 48 states where some attempt was not made to check the rising progress of the Negro race and there was no place in the United States where the Negro did not rise to the challenge and show his willingness and determination to fight it out no matter what the odds.

The Negro began the year 1957 under the spell of an eloquent and dynamic Negro from Montgomery, Ala., by the name of Martin Luther King, who, prior to 1956, had scarcely been heard of on the national scene. Fired by King's amazing and successful leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott they rallied around his ideas from Maine to Florida.

"Give Us Leaders"

King himself set the tone at the beginning of the year when, in a speech calling for new leadership among Negroes, he uttered this prayer:

"God give us leaders. A time like this demands strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands. Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill; leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy; leaders who possess opinions and a will; leaders who have honor; leaders who will not lie; leaders who can stand before a demagogue and damn his treacherous flatteries without winking; tall leaders, sun crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and private thinking."

At the same time King called on the Negro to adjust himself to a new way of life—to make himself ready to enter the new doors which would be opened to him as a result of the fight in which he was engaged. He warned that in the new era into which the Negro was embarking that he would be forced to compete with "people of all races and nationalities instead of competing with, or as, a Negro."

In this connection King said: "We must not now aim merely to be good Negro teachers, good



LOWEST BLOW OF 1957 — This picture of Alex Wilson, a Negro editor, being kicked and beaten at Little Rock, inflamed the world in

September and did more than anything else to unify Negroes both North and South.

Negro doctors, good Negro ministers and good Negro skilled laborers, we must set out to do a job irrespective to race and do it so well that nobody could do it better."

Like Shakespeare Wrote Poetry

In this broad appeal to the Negro masses King urged that "if it falls the lot of a Negro to be a street sweeper, that Negro should sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, or like Beethoven composed music."

The Montgomery minister advised that a Negro street sweeper "should sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say 'here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.'"

What Martin Luther King preached to the Negro was nothing new.

What was new was the way the Negro listened to and abided by his teachings.

Violent Non-Violence

Possibly no other Negro since the advent of Marcus Garvey had been able to penetrate the mind and thinking of the Negro like King.

He preached non-violence in a violent sort of way. And at times it appeared difficult for the sharpest of mind to follow what appeared to be a paradox in his teachings.

But those who advocated violence (and there were many) did not find support for such violence in the preachings of Martin L. King.

For as he called on Negroes to face death rather than segregation, he also advised them against hating or doing violence to those who segregated against them. Instead King urged Negroes to rise to that lofty position in which they could love the people doing wrong deeds against them, while at the same time hating the deed which they were doing.

United Masses and Classes
So masterful was King's elo-

quence and so widespread was his appeal that soon he had done something which what few Negro leaders have been able to do and something which most white people hope none will ever be able to do—he had united the Negro masses with the Negro classes and united them around one rallying point—the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Members of the Negro Cadillac crowd found themselves rubbing shoulders with the Negro Subway Set in a common desire "to help those Negroes down there in Alabama." In churches, pool halls, at dinner meetings and in bars all one had to say was "This is for the bus boycotters and a good collection was assured."

The money began to pour into Alabama and each new desperate act of the White South only served to increase the efforts of the Negro to break the back of segregation.

Thus as the nation approached May 17, the birthday of the Supreme Court's famous school decision in 1954, the Negro race in America was a loosely tied but thoroughly angry mass of 17 million black people which had smelled the blood of victory.

Stays with NAACP

King, always an ardent NAACP member, wisely channelled the momentum of his drive among Negroes into the mainstream of the NAACP. This was a test of his true greatness for had he not done so he certainly could have led a southwide split right down through the middle of that great organization.

But King saw, as others did, that the fate of the Negro lay in his ability to move as one group whether it be in the North or South.

As wave after wave of violence began to break out all over the South, King teamed with Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph and Congressman Adam Powell and began to demand an audience with the President and to press for the passage of a strong civil rights bill in the Congress.

They urged the President to

them behind the grey stone curtain of Sherman Adams and the 17 million Negroes began the first faint rumblings of a "march on Washington."

The action of the US in welcoming to its shores thousands of oppressed Hungarians (some of them Communists) at a time when the white South was venting all its fury on Negroes, served only to antagonize Negroes and draw them closer together under the color banner.

Thus when it became known that the ancient African state of Ghana would be set up as a free independent black state Negroes suddenly began to speak of that distant land as if it were a new estate just purchased by their favorite country cousin.

100 to Ghana

And to the amazement of whites and even Negroes themselves, more than 100 of them hopped a plane and flew off to distant Africa to sip champagne with the Duchess of Kent and Vice President Nixon as they celebrated the independence of Ghana. It clearly showed the Negroes' interest in the black man's freedom.

Probably no other action of Martin Luther King captured the imagination of Negroes more than did his action in Ghana.

At a time when Negroes were raging about the bombs falling like stars on them in Alabama, and the US was flying Hungarians to this country by the thousands, King, who had been refused a White House meeting with Eisenhower, walked up to Nixon at a cocktail party in Ghana and asked him when the two of them could sit down and talk about the Negro problem in the South.

Standing there in a new black Negro state which, at the mo-

ment, was the showcase of democracy for the Western world, and with Communist diplomats looking him right down his throat, Nixon had no choice but to say

that he would be happy to meet King when they returned to the States. And he said just that.

March on Washington

On April 6, 1957, the Amsterdam

News hit the streets with this headline—"King sets May 18 for date to march on Washington"—the only headline of its kind in the United States.

The headline was in error—that King when they returned to the States to say one small part of it was in error—the date should have

been May 17 instead of May 18.

It was an honest error for the reporter who broke the story had been told by one of the leaders of the March that the date would be May 18 because May 17 the anniversary of the Supreme Court School decision came on a Friday and since this was a work day it

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was not a suitable day to stage a nationwide rally.

In a subsequent meeting after the Amsterdam News broke the story, however, the date was changed to the 17th. This newspaper was therefore first to break the story of the biggest demonstration by Negroes ever held in this country in modern times—the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage.

Williams, King and Randolph called it. No one will ever know how many Negroes answered the call. No one will ever be able to say how much painstaking pain, how much sacrifice, how much blood, sweat and tears was required for a Jim Crowed race to muster 35,000 people at the foot of Lincoln's Tomb in the nation's capital.

New York Leads

With the Rev. Thomas Kilgore coming as moderator to the 17th, New York showed the way. Printing presses, linotype plants and 250 motor car loads of abused Negroes and white segregationists left Washington. An estimated 10,000 New Yorkers attended including the entire Amsterdam News editorial staff.

One aroused minister, the Rev. Milton Perry walked the 228 miles from New York to Washington and collapsed on the steps of the monument at the foot of Lincoln.

Ike Flies Away

At the height of the demonstration President Eisenhower sent his already waning prestige into a nose dive by climbing into a helicopter and flying off to a golf course but Ike could not dim the lustre of the Prayer Pilgrimage even if he had flown off and landed on the moon.

It would have been a safe bet to say that on the day of the Prayer Pilgrimage in Washington the Negro's reappraisal of himself had reached a staggering new peak. He was truly beginning to realize that he was somebody!

The Wrong Things

As early as 1956 King had stated that Negroes could always count on some white people in the South to do "the wrong thing at the right time" and during 1957 it appeared that the South set out to make his statement true. Among the many wrong things which came at the right time and which only served to draw Negroes closer together was the placing of a load of dynamite on King's porch which failed to explode, the cancellation of an invitation to five Negroes by the Governor of Virginia to help observe the first settlement of whites in America.

(In this last case the Governor's staff invited an " distinguished" Virginian listed in "Who's Who" to the celebration and then cancelled five invitations when they were found to have been sent to Negroes. Dr. C. B. Powell, publisher of the Amsterdam News, was a recipient of one of the invitations and the subsequent whipping which he gave to Virginia made international headlines and served only to draw Negroes closer to each other.)

South's Answer

The South's answer to this new Negro "togetherness" was typical of the old white South. It reacted brutally and violently.

The March 30 issue of the Amsterdam News headlined the "Arresting of a Negro in Hawkinsville, Ga." in which the Circuit Judge before whom the case was heard said that the Negro had been "slashed, stabbed, gouted, and hogtied like an animal."

Throughout the Spring and into the Summer the violence in the South continued. As Fall approached and the school semesters loomed on the horizon the battle lines between Negroes and whites had already been tightly drawn.

Then on September 7 this headline appeared in the Amsterdam News: "ARKANSAS DEFTES U. S."

Little Rock

Few people, certainly not those in official places, apparently realized what lay behind the headline. It was a headline that was repeated over and over again around the entire world.

The school board of Little Rock, prodded by the NAACP state president, Daisy Bates, made preparations to integrate the Little Rock Central High school. On the day the Negro children showed up for school, Arkansas Governor Faubus turned out the state national guard to block them from entering.

The nine Negro children who tried to enter were stoned and abused by the mob of whites who gathered before the school. They left only to return with an order from a Federal judge stating their right to enter.

It was a time for action. Faubus met with Eisenhower at the Little White House in Newport, R. I. The Amsterdam News was there. Nothing came of the meeting but an increased stature for Faubus.

Reporters Beaten

On September 23 the kids tried again. This time four Negro reporters including one from the

Amsterdam News were beaten and mangled by a mob of 1,000. The kids got into the school but a mob forced them out after three hours.

Then Ike acted. He sent in Federal troops and Federalized the national guard of Arkansas. Included among the Federal troops were some Negro troops. The story was front page all over the world.

As the Negro children went to school under the protection of Federal bayonets the bigots of the South stepped up their pressure on the NAACP. The organization was banned in several Southern states. Its membership lists were demanded and when they were refused its leaders were thrown in jail.

But as Southern NAACP chapters were forced underground or out of the fight, Northern branches of the NAACP boosted their memberships.

\$100 Dinner

New York again took the lead. The New York branch of the NAACP which for years had floundered with a 2,000 membership suddenly soared up to 12,000 paid-up members. In turn, New York threw a \$100 a couple dinner for the NAACP Freedom Fund which netted about \$65,000 and set up a potential of about \$135,000 more through Life memberships.

The big story was that the Negroes did it themselves. It was their answer to Little Rock. They were saying with money "We are somebody too."

In the heat of the struggle at Little Rock and with Daisy Bates, sterling NAACP state leader in Arkansas emerging as great a leader as Martin Luther King in a crisis, Congress took a good look at the growing Negro unity and passed the first civil rights legislation it has passed in 82 years.

Negroes were not satisfied with the bill but they clearly saw what they could do if they showed unity—if they would act like they "were somebody."

Housing Bill

Thus when the City Council of New York began shilly shallying with the Brown-Sharkey-Isaacs bill to end bias in private housing, Negroes were in no mood for such trifling.

They fully realized that Councilman Brown's bill was the most important single piece of legislation in the century. Brown is a columnist for the Amsterdam News and has strong Harlem backing.

Mayor Wagner joined Brown in support of the bill and Governor Harriman spoke out for it.

But in Queens where pressure was mounting against Negroes, Democrats bucked the bill. A deal was finally struck. The Democrats openly pleaded that if Negroes would hold back pressure until after the election they would pass the controversial legislation.

Negroes lifted the heat and Mayor Wagner proved as good as his word. The bill, certainly the most far-reaching in recent New York history will become a law next Spring and once more the Negro will view it as an example of what he can do when he decides that he too is "somebody."

Toward 1960

Tired but unwearied of the 1957 fight, Negroes are looking to 1958. In that year they will serve as key forces in the all important gubernatorial races and therefore will have much to say about who does what when the presidential campaigns roll around in 1960.

The year must go down in history as the year the Negro acted as if he was really "somebody."