

"Even

in the face of Death"

BAYARD RUSTIN



"NOT ONE HAIR of one head of one white person shall be harmed in the campaign for integration."

At first this sounds like the defensive slogan of a Southern White Citizens' Council. Instead it is the motto adopted unanimously by 60 Negro leaders to serve as a rallying point for a South-wide campaign for non-violent integration.

At the close of the meeting in Atlanta, on January 11, at which this slogan was adopted, a press conference was held. The *New York Times* correspondent asked: "Do you mean that all of you accept this motto?"

"We do," came the answer.

Turning to Martin Luther King, chairman of the conference, the correspondent continued—"Do you mean it *even if others start the violence?*"

"Individuals had better speak for themselves on that", said King. "But *I* mean it."

The correspondent queried the others. One by one, all sixty said "yes", or nodded their heads in assent.

The Setting

IN NOVEMBER, the Supreme Court confirmed its earlier ruling that segregation in bus transportation is illegal. The Negro people of Montgomery, Alabama, were jubilant. After several prayer meetings, much planning, and a week of rededication to non-violence, they returned to the buses on December 24 for the first time in over a year. For the first time in Montgomery history they "rode like men."

Within a few days protests similar to the one in Montgomery swept the South. In Atlanta, Birmingham, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Norfolk, Tallahassee, and many other cities, Negroes "moved up front". Most Southern white persons accepted integration; there were only a few acts of violence on the part of a tiny minority. But by the beginning of January, the occasional beating or shooting had grown into organized terror. The terror was supported by legal subterfuge. It became clear that the opposition was planning to frustrate the court decision by organized violence and "a century of hopeless litigation".

At this point, Rev. M. L. King of Montgomery, Rev.

S. L. Shuttleworth of Birmingham, and Rev. C. K. Steele of Tallahassee, leaders of the three major protests, began consultations. They came to several conclusions:

None of the other protests were apt to succeed if the one at Montgomery was defeated. For whites and Negroes alike, Montgomery had become a symbol.

Integration might not win at Montgomery unless the protests continued to spread throughout other areas of the South.

The increasing violence was being carefully planned and organized on the theory that the Negroes would back down when faced with such incidents. *Therefore* Negroes had no alternative but to extend and intensify this struggle.

The majority of white persons were "teetering" between a desire to cling to the pattern they had always known and a feeling that integration must take place. Any hesitation or temporary retreat on the part of Negroes would confuse white persons and drive them back to the old pattern.

The time had come for Negro leaders to gather from all over the South to "share thinking, discuss common problems, plan common strategy, and explore mutual economic assistance."

King, Steele, and Shuttleworth issued a call on January 5th for a 2-day Conference to be held in Atlanta, beginning five days later.

Despite the daily emergencies that each of the leaders had to face, the conference was well planned. It was not to be a matter of coming together simply to exchange details about the bombings and shootings most of them had undergone. Papers were prepared in advance, not only on the practical problems of coordination and planning but on such underlying questions as the relationship of the major economic groups to the struggle for integration; how to encourage and maintain a non-violent attitude amongst all Negroes; and the relationship between state power and a nonviolent movement. As violence has mounted, the leaders have been under pressure to call for FBI investigations, for the use of the National Guard or other other Army units to main-

tain order. Is this compatible with the spirit of a non-violent movement?

Bombings in Montgomery

KING and Abernathy arrived at Atlanta the night before the conference was scheduled to open. But neither was present when the first session began. At 5:30 in the morning they had been roused from their beds with notice that 4 churches and 2 ministers' homes had been bombed in Montgomery during the night. Taking the next plane for Montgomery, they had left word that they would return as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, as the hour approached for opening the conference, the streets adjacent to Ebenezer Baptist Church, site for the meeting, bristled with city police and plainclothesmen. Five minutes before the scheduled beginning, Detective Clarence M. Nelms gave me an urgent message at the door of the church, then rushed away to supervise the deployment of two carloads of newly arrived detectives. As the men disappeared within a few seconds into sidestreets, and alleys, I stood for a moment in the doorway and pondered the words he had just spoken:

"Be careful. We got word that a carload of white men has started up from Florida to break up your meeting and raise hell in general. If you see anything suspicious, call this number and be damn quick about it."

By 2:30 that afternoon, no hell had been raised, but something of greater significance had happened. Sixty Negro leaders had come from 29 localities of 10 Southern states for the first session of the Negro Leaders Conference on Nonviolent Integration.

Every major protest leader was present. Leaders struggling with economic boycotts and reprisals in South Carolina were standing in a corner exchanging views with the "strong men" from the Mississippi delta, who are forced to carry on their work at night, underground. The first person to take the floor was a man who had been shot because he had dared to vote. Some had come for technical advice, others to find out more about the spirit and practice of non-violence. But all of them were determined to respond to the call "to delve deeper into the struggle".

The next day, King returned. He reported that there had been great damage in the six bombings at Montgomery but that no one had been hurt. He told how at a sympathetic white minister's home, twelve sticks of dynamite had failed to go off and had been found on the lawn near a window, in the morning. Then he said:

"Let this be a sign unto you. God is truly our protector. He permits men the freedom to do evil, He also has His way to protect His children."

For a time there was a great silence. Then a minister began to pray. At the end of the prayer, King spoke movingly on the power of nonviolence. After this the session broke up in silence.

A Historic Decision

THE FINAL MEETING of the conference may go down in history as one of the most important meetings that has taken place in the United States. Sixty beleaguered Negro leaders from across the South voted to establish a permanent Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Nonviolent Integration. This was the beginning of a South-wide nonviolent resistance campaign against all segregation.

The leaders indicated the price they themselves might have to pay:

We must continue to stand firm, for our right to be first class citizens. Even in the face of death, we have no other choice. If in carrying out this obligation, we are killed, others more resolute will rise to continue.

They then made the following appeal to Negroes in both North and South:

We call upon all Negroes. . . to assert their human dignity . . . We know that such an assertion may cause them persecution; yet no matter how great the obstacles and suffering, we urge all Negroes to reject all segregation.

They expressed their realization that "equality" is not enough if it merely means Negroes' fighting for equality of opportunity within a corrupt and competitive social order. Time and again speakers had said that they must struggle against the things in their own hearts that might breed future violence and inequality.

We ask them to seek justice and to reject all injustice *especially that in themselves*. We pray that they will refuse further cooperation with the evil elements which invite them to collude against themselves in return for bits of patronage.

Perhaps the most moving part of the statement is that which urged the Negro people to adhere to nonviolence "in word, thought and deed".

We call upon them to accept Christian Love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil. . . Non-violence is not a symbol of weakness or cowardice but as Jesus and Gandhi demonstrated, nonviolent resistance transforms weakness into strength and breeds courage in face of danger.

It was at this point that the conference voted to accept as the slogan of the broader movement the motto:

Not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed.

Gandhi's Prophecy

AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE that followed, representatives of all the press services and many of the major papers raised questions for more than an hour. The Negro leaders explained how they had called upon white Southerners to realize that the treatment of Negroes is a basic spiritual problem, and how they

had urged Southern Christians to speak out with conviction. They reminded the South that the major choice may no longer be between segregation and integration, but between chaos and law.

People control their destinies only when order prevails. Disorder places all major decisions in the hands of state or federal police. We do not prefer this, for our ultimate aim is to win understanding with our neighbors.

King read a telegram that the conference had sent to President Eisenhower asking him "to come South immediately to make a major speech in a major Southern city urging all Southerners to accept and to abide by the Supreme Court's decisions as the law of the land." He referred to another telegram sent to Vice President Nixon urging him "to make a tour of the South similar to the one he made on behalf of Hungarian refugees."

Every major paper in the country carried references to these telegrams, but did not point up the real significance of the conference. The press did not seem to realize that this conference, which solidified the Southern Negroes on the twin platform of freedom and non-violence, gave impetus to a movement which will help change the economic and social structure of Southern culture.

As King and I left, we discussed a prophetic statement made by Gandhi. In 1935, Dr. Howard Thurman of Howard University had asked him to come to America—not for white America, he said, but to help the American Negro, in his fight for civil rights.

"How I wish I could," Gandhi said, "but I must make good the message here before I bring it to you.

"It may be that through the American Negro the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."