

The Promise and the Dream: The Untold Story of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy

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Foreward by Douglass Brinkley

In a sense, the Sixties — with all of its promise, turbulence, and tragedy — began with a pair of telephone calls from Jack and Bobby Kennedy two weeks before the 1960 presidential election. The civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been arrested in Georgia on a trumped-up traffic violation, and a judge had sentenced him to four months of hard labor alongside hardened white criminals, putting his life in danger. From a Chicago hotel room, Jack, the Democratic presidential nominee, dialed King's wife, Coretta, to offer sympathy and comfort. Almost simultaneously, the tenacious Bobby called the Georgia judge from a pay phone in Long Island, urging him to release King on bail. Within hours, King was free.

Throughout white America, the bold telephone calls were low-bar news. But in the African-American community the word spread like heat lightning: the Kennedy brothers had aligned with King in a showdown with the segregated South, and had sprung the reverend free. By contrast, the sitting vice president and Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, had remained silent as King was arrested, sentenced, and jailed...Had Nixon chosen to defend King, he very well could have bagged those seventy-four electoral votes, and with them the election. Instead, as the reeling Sixties began, the Kennedy brothers and King began their march to the mountaintop, linked forever as the animating spirits of the burgeoning civil rights movement.

Looking back five decades later, it is easy to see the parallels with that fractured decade, and to understand why half a century hasn't dimmed Dr. King's relevance. Then as now, racial, cultural, and political fault lines were etched in fire. The Vietnam War was ripping the country into two camps, hawks versus doves, and giving birth to a massive, youth-led protest movement. Against this backdrop, the hippie movement, the sexual revolution, the nascent environmental movement, and the struggle for women's rights tore daily at the fabric of conventional American life, even as the Cold War with the Soviet Union threatened to turn hot, risking nuclear annihilation. At a time of intractable division, the ongoing space program — itself a product of Cold War rivalry, but with the sheen of ennobling human destiny — seemed like the only thing that gave Americans a sense of shared purpose.

Through it all, with piety and bravery, Dr. King marched toward a more just future, and challenged all Americans to follow. Armed with unwavering moral clarity and dedication to nonviolent resistance — “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love” — King went to battle against the segregation laws and institutionalized racism that had replaced slavery as African Americans' daily lived experience. Over the thirteen years of his short life that he devoted to the cause, King walked a fine line, maintaining his laser focus on civil rights even as he was emboldened to speak out against the Vietnam War and raise his voice to demand jobs, fair wages, and educational opportunities for the nation's poor.

It was on this playing field, fighting for American equality, that King's story met that of Robert F. Kennedy, a hard-nosed lawyer and prosecutor who, over the course of the tumultuous 1960s, opened his heart and soul fully to the plight of Americans oppressed by poverty and discrimination. Just four years older than King, Bobby Kennedy came from one of America's wealthiest families and had enjoyed the ultimate insider experience, helping his older brother rise to the Senate, serving as a Senate counsel, then managing his brother's winning campaign for the White House. Appointed attorney general in the new administration, he underwent a rapid education in the realities of segregated America, quickly turning his deeply held sense of moral justice to the fight for equality. Despite their sometimes-tense relationship, King himself sensed Bobby's potential as an ally, telling confidants soon after the Kennedys entered office, “Somewhere in this man sits good. Our task is to find his moral center and win him to our cause.” Over the next seven years, as King staged the campaigns that would move the civil rights struggle to the center of the national consciousness, Bobby Kennedy staged his own, parallel crusade — not just for a change in America's discriminatory racial laws, but for a wholesale redemption of the nation's soul.

For Bobby Kennedy, the causes of racial equality and social justice became the concerns that propelled his public life, both as attorney general and then, after his brother's assassination, as a senator and 1968 presidential candidate. Scathingly criticized by fellow Democrats for his relatively low-key opposition to the Vietnam War (against which he eventually took a strong stand), he was best known during these years for speaking out on behalf of those unable to participate fully in American life. His full-tilt travels into the underbelly of the American Dream exposed him to the impoverished, desolate lives of grape pickers and day-laborers, seasonal workers and the down-and-out.

Just as Martin was spiritually motivated by Gandhi and Christ, Bobby took inspiration from Saint Francis of Assisi, the Catholic saint who venerated nature and preached compassion for the vulnerable, the poor, and the downtrodden.

As a senator and presidential candidate, Bobby took the side of those seeking safe low-income housing, of rural Americans who were starving in the "richest country on earth," of African Americans struggling for basic rights and equal opportunities, of Hispanic Americans who often lived as an invisible underclass, and of others who simply lived on the wrong side of the tracks or out of the mainstream.

Both Bobby and Dr. King, each from his own direction, were completely dedicated to smashing Jim Crow, showing a strength of purpose that made them the most relentless civil rights leaders of the freedom decade. Americans sensed that both men were grappling with a question at the core of the nation's sensibility, if not its soul: for whom does America exist? Is it for everyone, or only for those privileged by race, religion, ethnicity, or some other artificial signifier? That the cause of equality has progressed in the half-century since their deaths would no doubt please Dr. King and Senator Kennedy. But at the same time, neither would be surprised that race and equality remain uniquely divisive issues in twenty-first-century America, nor that rising income inequality has created a yawning chasm between the haves and have-nots.

Coming to prominence at a time of rapid transformation in the media landscape, King and Kennedy were adept at exploiting both word and image. King was one of the greatest orators in American history, speaking tirelessly, perspiration aplenty, before audiences large and small. Bobby Kennedy too, though sometimes awkward before a microphone, was able to summon transcendence when history demanded. But beyond their words, both men excelled at creating vivid, frozen imagery that burned itself into the retinas of a newly TV-centered nation. Think of King's protest marches and mass rallies, historic events that not only captured public attention but were also powerfully symbolic. The sight of Dr. King leading a march in the Heart of Dixie or speaking before a quarter-million people at Washington's National Mall was impossible to misunderstand. Full of self-assuredness, a true Christian believer, his voice and countenance seemed to encompass the entire earth.

Bobby's affect was less dramatic but no less powerful, following a model set by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1930s and early 1940s. Constrained from overt advocacy by White House politics, Roosevelt learned to cast an entirely new means of influence by simply showing up. By visiting D.C. slums and destitute West Virginia mining towns with the humble goal of learning about the people who lived there, she showed the nation sights it couldn't ignore.

When Bobby Kennedy toured the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1968, evening news programs carried extended reports showing him walking with the Oglala Lakotas who lived there, asking questions about the deplorable conditions he encountered. The image is well-remembered today, in part because in that era other presidential candidates shied away from the needy, eager instead to keep the pictures from their campaigns upbeat and pleasant. In contrast, Kennedy visited hungry children along the Mississippi and people living in rat-infested Harlem tenements, giving the nation images from which it could not turn away. It is these kinds of pictures, illuminating an uncompromising dedication to securing equality and opportunity for all, that keep both Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy ever-fresh in the national consciousness to this day.

On April 4, 1968, the day Dr. King was shot in Memphis, Kennedy was flying to Indianapolis, where he was scheduled to give a speech in anticipation of the upcoming state primary. Typically, he had planned the speech for an African-American neighborhood, an open-air event on a corner where anyone could come and see him. As soon as his plane landed, he was informed that Dr. King had died. The news had yet to be broadcast, but it was expected to ignite rioting, so advisers urged Kennedy to cancel his speech. He refused.

When he arrived at the site, Kennedy found a crowd later estimated at twenty-five hundred waiting for him. Few yet knew what had happened in Memphis. Destiny at hand, Kennedy climbed onto the back of a truck, looked out at the throngs, and improvised. "I have some very sad news," he began, sick with horror. "And that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in."

The rest of the speech came straight from Kennedy's heart, as he confided for the only time in public his inner pain at losing his brother Jack to an assassin's bullets. With a crusading yet self-controlled air, he answered his own question about the future of the United States by honoring the fervid hope that Dr. King had never lost: that homegrown violence and unendurable bigotry could be replaced with "an effort to understand with compassion and love."

That was the moral ideal embraced by the battle-hardened Martin and Bobby, both slayers of evildoers, and it remains a clarion call that has appealed anew to each succeeding generation of Americans, down to our own divided time. Facing a future perilous with uncertainty, it is illuminating to think that history gave us two such men, walking parallel paths and meeting parallel, tragic ends — martyrs for the uplifting of mankind. Though not colleagues, they were compatriots, bound by the clarity and righteousness of their vision and the immense and enduring sense of hope they each came to embody.