PDF | Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63

by Taylor Branch
In volume one of his *America in the King Years*, Pulitzer Prize winner Taylor Branch gives a masterly account of the American civil rights movement.

Hailed as the most masterful story ever told of the American civil rights movement *Parting the Waters* is destined to endure for generations.

Moving from the fiery political baptism of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the corridors of Camelot where the Kennedy brothers weighed demands for justice against the deceptions of J. Edgar Hoover, here is a vivid tapestry of America, torn and finally transformed by a revolutionary struggle unequaled since the Civil War.

Taylor Branch provides an unsurpassed portrait of King's rise to greatness and illuminates the stunning courage and private conflict, the deals, maneuvers, betrayals, and rivalries that determined history behind closed doors, at boycotts and sit-ins, on bloody freedom rides, and through siege and murder.

Epic in scope and impact, Branch's chronicle definitively captures one of the nation's most crucial passages.

**Amazon.com Review**

The first book of a formidable three-volume social history, *Parting the Waters* is more than just a biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during the decade preceding his emergence as a national figure. Branch's thousand-page
effort, which won the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction, profiles the key players and events that helped shape the American social landscape following World War II but before the civil-rights movement of the 1960s reached its climax. The author then goes a step further, endeavoring to explain how the struggles evolved as they did by probing the influences of the main actors while discussing the manner in which events conspired to create fertile ground for change.

## Timeline of a Trilogy

Taylor Branch’s America in the King Years series is both a biography of Martin Luther King and a history of his age. No timeline can do justice to its wide cast of characters and its intricate web of incident, but here are some of the highlights, which might be useful as a scorecard to the trilogy’s nearly 3,000 pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>The King Years</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>May:</strong> At age 25, King gives his first sermon as pastor designate of Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.</td>
<td><strong>1954</strong> French surrender to Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Unanimous Supreme Court decision in <em>Brown v. Board</em> outlaws segregated public education.</td>
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<td><strong>December:</strong> Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus, leading to the Montgomery bus boycott, which King is drafted to lead.</td>
<td><strong>1955</strong></td>
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<td><strong>October:</strong> King spends his first night in jail, following his participation in an Atlanta sit-in.</td>
<td><strong>1960</strong> February: Four students attempting to integrate a Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter spark a national sit-in movement. April: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is founded. November: Election of President John F. Kennedy</td>
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<td><strong>May:</strong> The Freedom Rides begin, drawing violent responses as they challenge segregation throughout the South. King supports the riders during an overnight siege in Montgomery.</td>
<td><strong>1961</strong> July: SNCC worker Bob Moses arrives for his first summer of voter registration in rural Mississippi. August: East German soldiers seal off West Berlin behind the Berlin Wall.</td>
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<td><strong>March:</strong> J. Edgar Hoover authorizes the bugging of Stanley Levinson, King’s closest white advisor.</td>
<td><strong>1962</strong> September: James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi under massive federal protection.</td>
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<td><strong>April:</strong> King, imprisoned for demonstrating in Birmingham, writes the &quot;Letter from Birmingham Jail.&quot;</td>
<td><strong>1963</strong> June: Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers assassinated. November: President Kennedy assassinated.</td>
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<td><strong>May:</strong> Images of police violence against marching children in Birmingham</td>
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rivet the country.

**August**: King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech before hundreds of thousands at the March on Washington.

**September**: The Ku Klux Klan bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church kills four young girls.

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**1964**

**March**: King meets Malcolm X for the only time during Senate filibuster of civil rights legislation.

**June**: King joins St. Augustine, Florida, movement after months of protests and Klan violence.

**October**: King awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and campaigns for Johnson’s reelection.

**November**: Hoover calls King "the most notorious liar in the country" and the FBI sends King an anonymous "suicide package" containing scandalous surveillance tapes.

**January**: Johnson announces his "War on Poverty."

**March**: Malcolm X leaves the Nation of Islam following conflict with its leader, Elijah Muhammad.

**June**: Hundreds of volunteers arrive in the South for SNCC’s Freedom Summer, three of whom are soon murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

**July**: Johnson signs Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

**August**: Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing military force in Vietnam.

Democratic National Convention rebuffs the request by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be seated in favor of all-white state delegation.

**November**: Johnson wins a landslide reelection.

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**1965**

**January**: King’s first visit to Selma, Alabama, where mass meetings and demonstrations will build through the winter.

**February**: Malcolm X speaks in Selma in support of movement, three weeks before his assassination in New York by Nation of Islam members.

**March**: First U.S. combat troops arrive in South Vietnam. Johnson’s "We Shall Overcome" speech makes his most direct embrace of the civil rights
Montgomery.

**August**: King rebuffed by Los Angeles officials when he attempts to advocate reforms after the Watts riots.

**January**: King moves his family into a Chicago slum apartment to mark his first sustained movement in a Northern city.

**June**: King and Stokely Carmichael continue James Meredith’s March Against Fear after Meredith is shot and wounded. Carmichael gives his first "black power" speech.

**July**: King’s marches for fair housing in Chicago face bombs, bricks, and "white power" shouts.

**April**: King’s speech against the Vietnam War at New York’s Riverside Church raises a storm of criticism.

**December**: King announces plans for major campaign against poverty in Washington, D.C., for 1968.

**March**: King joins strike of Memphis sanitation workers.

**April**: King gives his "Mountaintop" speech in Memphis. A day later, he is assassinated at the Lorraine Motel.

**January**: In Tet Offensive, Communist guerillas stage a surprise coordinated attack across South Vietnam.

**March**: Johnson cites divisions in the country over the war for his decision not to seek reelection in 1968.

**May**: Vietnam "teach-in" protest in Berkeley attracts 30,000.

**June**: Influential federal Moynihan Report describes the "pathologies" of black family structure.

**August**: Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act. Five days later, the Watts riots begin in Los Angeles.

**February**: Operation Rolling Thunder, massive U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, begins.

**May**: Stokely Carmichael wins the presidency of SNCC and quickly turns the organization away from nonviolence.

**October**: National Organization for Women founded, modeled after black civil rights groups.

**May**: Huey Newton leads Black Panthers in armed demonstration in California state assembly.

**June**: Johnson nominates former NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court.

**July**: Riots in Newark and Detroit.

**October**: Massive mobilization against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C.