

Teaching American History

Book Review

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The book I chose to read for our third assignment was "Hellhound on his Trail" by Hampton Sides, an historic novel about Martin Luther King and his assassin, James Earl Ray who relentlessly stalked and eventually shot Dr. King. Hampton Sides gives the reader a thrill a minute ride as he details two men's lives; one who is the leader of the civil rights struggles in America, and the other who lived a miserable and lonely life, consumed with hatred and bigotry and committed to the assassination of one of the most influential men in America's history. The author masterfully allows the reader a true look into who Martin Luther King was through historical documents, speeches, as well as the many FBI files kept on Dr. King, while captivating the reader with a true suspense/thriller of a novel, even though we all know how it will end.

The story of King in this novel begins in 1967, with his new vision- a return to the Washington Mall in the Spring of 1968- the site of his triumphant "I Have a Dream Speech", but this time with an army of poor people marching, sitting in, and generally occupying our nation's capital until demands are met. The Poor People's March will be King's finest glory as he believed America was becoming a country in need of a moral surgery, from the War in Vietnam, to the Cold War, to the love of material things, Dr. King believed that a " Reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values is in order. My own government has become the greatest purveyor of violence in the world

today" (p.21). With this philosophy, MLK's critics labeled him a communist, which was not accurate. He was, however, leaning towards a form of democratic socialism, or in his definition, a socially conscious democracy. The Poor People's March will demand the government attack poverty in the U.S. by creating jobs, a health care system for all, and better education for all.

This Poor People's March certainly got the attention of the FBI, and J Edgar Hoover. Hoover greatly disliked King and often plotted how he could neutralize, in his own words, this "burrhead." Hoover continually leaked, through his subordinates, intelligence about King that was anything but flattering. The FBI discovered MLK's weakness-women. In addition, they had tapes of King using very lewd language during sex, as well as drinking and partying. Although all of this was leaked to the press, the press never really took the bait.

On February 12, 1968, 1,300 Memphis sanitation workers went on strike after two workers died on the job. The strike's aims were to get better pay, better hours, safety precautions, as well as the right to organize. This event grabbed the attention of Martin Luther King, and he, along with the striker's slogan, "I am a Man," really united the workers. Mainly because this strike fit perfectly into his "Poor People's Campaign," in March of 1968, MLK visited the striking workers for the purpose of a march, and the crowd was wildly enthused. "I will lead you through the city of Memphis," King said. However, the march could hardly be considered a success. MLK, Ralph Abernathy, and other SCLC leaders headed the march, but chaos ensued behind them, from vandalism, to rock throwing, to fights. King and the SCLC leadership abandoned the march before the danger reached them. King and his leadership were embarrassed greatly with the events.

Many mocked him, like Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia saying, " King is an embarrassment. He is a man who gets others in trouble, then takes off like a scared rabbit." The St. Louis Globe Democrat wrote, "King is a Judas goat leading lambs to slaughter." Martin Luther King knew he had to go back to Memphis and march again. He believed his entire civil rights movement "lives or dies in Memphis."

While King set his sights on Memphis, so also did another man by the name of Eric Galt, one of the many aliases used by James Earl Ray, the hellhound on the hunt for Martin Luther King. Having escaped from prison one year earlier, James Earl Ray began his life on the run, from Mexico to Los Angeles, as well as many stops in the South. Author Hampton Sides paints Ray as a lonely drifter moving from room to room, flophouse to flophouse. Using money from a recent robbery with his brother, Ray was able to afford rent and food, as well as afford whorehouses wherever he stayed. He even had dreams of starting his own pornography movie business, but, of course, this never got off the ground. He settled for an International Bartending School diploma, but never worked a day.

A defining moment in James Earl Ray's year on the run from law enforcement was his stumbling into an "Elect George Wallace for President" campaign office in Los Angeles. After learning about Wallace and his thoughts on civil rights, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," James Earl Ray did his best to gather enough signatures to help Wallace get on the ballot in California. Ray began to focus his ire on Martin Luther King, just as Wallace did throughout the 1960's. Wallace labeled King the antichrist, a communist agitator, a phony and a fraud. He claimed King competed with other black ministers to see "who could go to bed with the most nigra women." Wallace

even named King as the most "dangerous racist in America." This type of rhetoric appealed to James Earl Ray, who often could be heard referring to Dr. King as "Martin Luther Coon." By March of 1968, Ray decided to leave Los Angeles and head due east, off on his deadly quest where his path and King's path would come to a deadly meeting in Memphis.

Martin Luther King's existence included death threats on a deadly basis. His response to these threats was a typical, "If someone wants to kill me, there's nothing I can do about it." (p 113) MLK traveled without security on this day of April 4, 1968. King was standing outside on the balcony outside his Lorraine Motel room, the usual hotel he stayed in while in Memphis. Ray had booked his room right behind the Lorraine and the bathroom gave him a perfect view of King's room and as soon as King came in sight of the rifle's scope, Martin Luther King was shot dead by James Earl Ray.

Hellhound on his Trail, by Hampton Sides, was a thriller to read. This book alternated between King and Ray in each coming chapter. This, I believe, added to the drama and the build-up to the assassination as the reader followed each of their lives from April of 1967 to their fateful meeting in Memphis in April of 1968, then onto the capture of Ray in London in June. Not only was this an enjoyable book to read, in addition it was filled with the characters and events of the tumultuous years of 1967 and 1968. It brought back to me in great clarity the great struggles of the civil rights movement during the 1960's. In addition, many other historical events intersected with Kings life, from the Vietnam War and LBJ's decision not to seek re-election, to Wallace's run for the presidency, to Bobby Kennedy's assassination, all documented and connected to the life and death of Martin Luther King.

As a high school teacher, I will be able to incorporate some of this book into my curriculum, especially the strong desire of King to lead this "Poor People's March" as well as the garbage strike in Memphis. I have already highlighted some pages to copy for the class to read describing the life and struggles of these sanitation workers. In addition, I will have my Honors/AP students read one or two of his speeches; "Where do we go from here " speech in 1967, and/or his "Beyond Vietnam" address in 1967. After reading, the students will answer the following questions:

1. What did you learn from this speech of King's views and ideas that you already knew?
2. Find a particular passage- one or two sentences, note it, and tell why this passage either appealed to you or moved you.
3. The media, and schools, for the most part, highlight his "I have a Dream" speech.

After reading these speeches what else have you learned about Martin Luther King's ideals?