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# Freedom Summer: Going South for Social Justice

Jesse Hinds

Most of American history has been a segregated history, but the tattered cords of racial oppression began to unravel during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Supreme Court decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case broke the cords of legal segregation and unleashed the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup> Chief Justice Earl Warren's majority opinion in the Supreme Court's decision declared that separate was not equal. The court ruling provided the legal framework necessary to begin dismantling the injustice of segregation in America.<sup>2</sup> Government-authorized racial injustices could no longer bind the lives of American minorities. The tension produced from being a nation that both affirmed and denied the equality of all its citizens finally reached a breaking point. Officially, separate was no longer equal; however, discrimination was still rampant. As a result, Americans took to the streets to ensure that they were "One Nation under God." Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights movement succeeded because average Americans united to fight for social justice.

African-American people wanted to have their voices heard, and brave men and women of all races risked their reputations, health, and lives to force America to live up to the noble ideas of liberty and equality for all. Sadly, a fourteen-year-old African-American boy became the first national martyr in the Civil Rights Movement. The young Emmett Till visited Money, Mississippi from Chicago, in August 1955. He allegedly whistled at a white woman in a store, which led to his kidnapping, beating, and murder.<sup>3</sup> Pictures of his disfigured body made national headlines leading to protests around the country.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the violent death of Emmett Till,

future Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairperson and U.S. congressman John Lewis said, “I was shaken to the core by the killing. ... I was fifteen, black [and] at the edge of my own manhood just like him. ... That could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead, at the bottom of a river.”<sup>5</sup> The death of Emmett Till inspired John Lewis and many other people to stand up for themselves, and against institutionalized racism.

Police arrested Rosa Parks before the national sensation over Till’s death could subside. On December 1, 1955, Parks refused to give up the important seat of human dignity on an otherwise unimportant bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her act of civil disobedience helped unite not only the African-American community of Montgomery, but the entire Southern United States. Activists quickly organized protests, rallies, and boycotts to battle segregation and racial injustice. A key development of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King as the movement’s spokesperson and leader.<sup>6</sup> His charisma, vision, and words inspired people, and gave them hope. King’s insistence on non-violent protests gave the Civil Rights movement the vehicle necessary to initiate change.<sup>7</sup>

African-American college students continued to drive American progress by deciding to sit at segregated lunch counters. In 1960 college students began to organize sit-ins to protest “Whites Only” lunch counters.<sup>8</sup> The sit-ins took the battle for desegregation out of African-American neighborhoods, beyond the Southern U.S., and to lunch counters and department stores across America.<sup>9</sup> The simple act of sitting at a lunch counter and demanding equality unleashed the collective of American resolve and a pent-up desire for freedom.

Freedom Riders soon made their way to the South to battle “discrimination in interstate travel terminals.”<sup>10</sup> They fought against the segregation of interstate buses. The national coverage of their southward drive for justice was extensive. The press reported on the arrests of

bloodied protestors, and newspapers printed images of destroyed buses. The Civil Rights Movement grew because of the press coverage. During the freedom rides, white clergy, college students, and college professors joined the Civil Rights Movement. From 1961 onward, civil rights activists struggled to fight the segregation of our nation's transportation systems, schools, housing sectors, and stores. As a result, they became increasingly bi-racial. The sit-ins and freedom rides opened the eyes of the American public to the struggle to integrate.<sup>11</sup>

In May of 1963, America fixed its eyes on Alabama. "Birmingham exploded into racial conflict, and the nation watched the police break up Negro protest marchers with police dogs, fire hoses, and electric cattle prods."<sup>12</sup> Journalists and photographers from *Life* magazine captured the violence in Birmingham, and soon pictures and articles from the protests and subsequent police brutality circulated across the nation and the world.<sup>13</sup> Birmingham's leaders could not stop the stories and pictures of police brutality from escaping their city, but they did arrest the leader of the opposition, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Police arrested Dr. King for parading without a permit. This was just one of many times authorities took him to jail. The fact that he was arrested is not nearly as important as the letter he wrote during his imprisonment. It was a response to an earlier statement made by white Alabama ministers, who referred to King as an outsider disturbing the peace.<sup>14</sup> In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King wrote, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."<sup>15</sup> He went on to say that he did not oppose the tension that the leaders deplored, and that nonviolent tension can open the doors for communication, progress, and change. He argued that the biggest stumbling block to progress was moderates who were more devoted to order than justice, and who preferred a "negative peace" with the absence of tension instead of a "positive peace" with the presence of justice.<sup>16</sup>

In August of 1963 Americans hungered for justice, and over 200,000 people joined Dr. King in a March on Washington. They assembled to show their disapproval of discrimination and segregation. It was here Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.<sup>17</sup> His greatest hope for America was still just a dream in 1963. The following year, however, the winds of change began to blow more forcefully than ever. The sounds of freedom began blowing in the wind. A great rush of spirit and people ascended on the southern states of America. These changes led to violent resistance in the State of Mississippi, in 1964. Despite that resistance, the people that united for change undermined the foundation of segregation in Mississippi, during the days of “Freedom Summer.”

Nowhere in America was segregation so clearly maintained and encouraged than in Mississippi. The ideas of segregation formed the social structure of Mississippi in 1964.<sup>18</sup> Most white Mississippians committed themselves to maintaining segregation. “With the largest proportional African American population among the states, white Mississippians maintained the deepest commitment to state-sanctioned segregation and white supremacy.”<sup>19</sup> To challenge and change the systemic discrimination of Mississippi, many civil rights leaders decided to register as many African-American voters as possible in the state. They undertook the largest “voter registration project in the history of the United States.”<sup>20</sup> The program registered many voters, but the greatest success was making Mississippi, and the rest of the nation, realize that nothing would stop social justice and the end of segregation.

The need for a voter registration drive in Mississippi in 1964 cannot be understated. Mississippi had an African-American population of 435,000, but only 22,000 African-Americans registered to vote, in 1964. To remedy this injustice, civil rights leaders sent approximately one thousand college students to “challenge the white power structure there” by registering voters.<sup>21</sup>

Registering thousands of voters required a large force of volunteers. One moving oration, or a prominent leader's approval, did not accomplish massive voter registration. Young Americans going door to door to recruit, assist, or even accompany people, on the other hand, did enable the massive voter registration of 1964.<sup>22</sup> The ability to vote and elect leaders gave American citizens a voice, and until the summer of 1964, the political voice of Mississippi's African-American population was nearly silent. Hundreds of mostly unknown volunteers made sure the political voices of thousands were silenced no longer.

We are very familiar with the life and legacy of key leaders within the Civil Rights Movement such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. However, they were only the figureheads of a larger social movement. The "Freedom Summer" campaign would have failed if ordinary people had not shown extraordinary resolve, courage, and passion. College students from Northern cities traveled to the South to educate and register black voters. Courageous African-Americans began to stand up in large numbers, band together, and fight systemic oppression. The individuals that many consider to be ordinary—not just those people that society deemed great—made the Civil Rights Movement and "Freedom Summer" a success.

American college students lent their voice, and sometimes their lives, to fight racial injustice. Charles Scattergood, a student at the University of Washington in Seattle, dropped out of school to join the civil rights movement. In a letter to his parents, he informed them that he was dropping out of college to join the Civil Rights Movement full time. He accepted a job with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He became a journalist that reported Civil Rights news to colleges in the Northwest, or in his words, "I am a journalist or more appropriately, a war correspondent."<sup>23</sup> The fact that he referred to the movement as a "war" highlighted the passion young Americans had to fight and die for liberty, in 1964. Those who

went south knew the risks that awaited them. That spring, Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson signed a law that gave him oversight of the state police. According to the *Student Voice*, the law also expanded the police force at his disposal by 200 men. SNCC Chairman John Lewis said, “Mississippi is now a bona fide police state and the governor has a private army to suppress civil rights efforts.”<sup>24</sup> Not only were the police and governor ready to stop civil rights progress, but many of the state's white citizens banding together with them. The opposition to change was large, organized, and increasingly violent.<sup>25</sup>

Civil rights workers knew what threats awaited them in Mississippi. Charles Scattergood said in a letter to his parents that “I couldn’t guess what the odds are but there is a good possibility that within the next year I may die.”<sup>26</sup> To prepare himself for the rigors of “Freedom Summer” he and hundreds of other volunteers attended training at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio.<sup>27</sup> The realities of the danger that awaited those courageous men and women like Charles Scattergood in Mississippi were soon imparted on the idealistic youth. In the *New York Times*, James Foreman said, “I may be killed, and you may be killed. . . . If you recognize that, the question of whether we’re put in jail will become very, very minute.”<sup>28</sup> The training at Oxford, Ohio provided a crash course to prepare the students for the hazards that awaited them in the South.<sup>29</sup> The training clarified the volunteer’s responsibilities, helped them build relationships with the other volunteers they would be working alongside, and taught them the goals of the summer campaign. Instructors guided students in the ideas of nonviolence while in Ohio, and even how to handle getting arrested. Instructors also taught them how to protect themselves when assaulted—without fighting back.

Volunteers signed over their power of attorney to the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) before going south.<sup>30</sup> They expected to encounter violence in Mississippi. Reverend

James Lawson, a civil rights veteran, told them, “Just you walking into Canton, Miss., or Ruleville or Shaw, just your being there could be the catalytic agent that evokes violence.”<sup>31</sup> It is very likely that Charles Scattergood was in the crowd to hear that speech. In a letter dated June 17, 1964, he told his parents that he would be going to Ruleville, Mississippi. In another letter dated June 19, 1964, he wrote, “Sunflower County, where I am going, is, unfortunately, one of the worst areas of the South. No white freedom worker had ever been there.”<sup>32</sup> His letters home show that he was aware of the dangers but not deterred by them. His resolve reflects the movement and the courage of its young men and women. The activists needed courage, as the threats of violence materialized into acts of violence and murder, even before most of the civil rights volunteers left for Mississippi.

According to the *New York Times*, just days before hundreds of college students left for Mississippi, three civil rights workers disappeared while investigating a church fire, in Philadelphia, Mississippi.<sup>33</sup> On June 22, 1964, the assembled students found out about the disappearance of Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney. The bodies of the three missing men were found months later. Each of them shot and buried in an earthen dam.<sup>34</sup> They gave up their lives for the Civil Rights Movement, or to echo Charles Scattergood, “the war.”<sup>35</sup>

Days before the murders, the men had been among the students and leaders in Oxford, Ohio. They traveled to Mississippi to investigate a fire that destroyed a church. The church would have been a meeting place for civil rights workers, and a site for a “Freedom School.” Their mission was to investigate the damage, and find a new location to meet and hold the freedom school. Their interest in the fire and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement led to their murders.<sup>36</sup> Many in the South viewed the young men and women as invaders, and not as



liberators. Going south put their lives at risk. Allen Dulles, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, went to Mississippi to speak with the governor. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, after meeting the governor and getting a feel for the atmosphere of Mississippi, he encouraged Civil Rights leaders to express the “the very, very, grave dangers” awaiting them in Mississippi.<sup>37</sup> However, his words only strengthened the resolve of those heading south in the summer of 1964, or “Freedom Summer.”

The disappearance of the three civil rights workers on the eve of the campaign confirmed the fears of many. Volunteer Barbara Mitnick said, “I expected things like that to happen, but this makes it real, knowing those young people were here last week.”<sup>38</sup> Mutnick and many other white middle-class college students left the comforts of homes, campus life, friends, and family for a cause greater than themselves. Many of them traveled south with the same questions Charles Scattergood had when he left: “Do we live in a world that lacks compassion and love? Time will tell.”<sup>39</sup> As a result of the grassroots efforts of people, like Scattergood, the nation began to realize that the times were changing in America.

The Civil Rights movement gained and kept national attention in 1964.<sup>40</sup> The fact that white college students left their comfort and security in the North to suffer alongside African-Americans in the segregated South created sensational news. The *New York Times* interviewed many middle to upper-class parents in New York who had children serving in Mississippi during “Freedom Summer.” Their responses provide excellent commentary on struggles of civil rights activist and their families. The anguish felt by African-American families resonated with white families. Many of the volunteers and their families suffered for doing what they felt was right. Neil Sheehan interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Woog of New York for a *New York Times* article. They tried to persuade their daughter to come home from Mississippi.<sup>41</sup> They were worried for her

safety. Sylvie, their daughter, was a teacher at a “Freedom School.” Mrs. Woog said of her daughter's sacrifice, “We did not flee Hitler for my daughter to become a martyr.” The Woogs were French immigrants that relocated to New York during World War II. They migrated to America so that they could live in freedom, but now they feared that their daughter would give up her life for the freedom of others. She went on to explain her daughter's motivations for going to Mississippi: “She says she has to do this to live in this country. I think she’s wonderful but she’s crazy. All the martyrs are wonderful and crazy.”<sup>42</sup> The juxtaposition of thoughts, “wonderful and crazy” provides an excellent summation of civil rights volunteers in Mississippi. Fortunately for America, many college students were wonderfully crazy, in 1964.

Dr. Robert E. Fullilove, from Newark, New Jersey had a son in Mississippi for the “Freedom Summer” campaign. He was much more affirming of his son’s decision to join the civil rights struggle. He said “I think it’s worth the risk. A lot of mothers and fathers have given up sons to war. My wife and I thought if there is a danger of death we would just as soon face that danger making Mississippi safe for democracy as France or Vietnam.”<sup>43</sup> His comments are almost prophetic in the retrospection that history provides us. In 1966, the U.S. would have half a million soldiers fighting for freedom in Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> There is an inherent tension between being a country that fought for freedom in other countries, but denied freedom in this country. Importantly, young men like Dr. Fullilove’s son Robert were willing to fight for freedom in the United States.

Robert Fullilove and Charles Scattergood joined many other activists to create change. Scattergood was willing to sacrifice his life to end segregation in America. He wrote that he “would give [his] life for [freedom] because, without this, America is not worth calling my country.”<sup>45</sup> Scattergood survived “Freedom Summer,” but not without incident. Police arrested

him,<sup>46</sup> and arsonists destroyed the church that he worked at in Mississippi.<sup>47</sup> Charles Scattergood contemplated his violent welcome to Mississippi when he wrote, “The only thing we have done is try to register voters.”<sup>48</sup> Scattergood, however, did much more than just register voters. In helping register voters, he gave African-Americans a political voice. He understood that, as did those that tried to stop him.

“Freedom Summer” proved that when people band together and sacrifice they can overcome racial injustice. The success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was successful due to average people taking control.<sup>49</sup> The summer rights campaign in 1964 united blacks and whites, and all social and economic classes of Americans in the fight for equality. That summer, people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds united to make “the Constitution of the United States real for all of the nation’s people.”<sup>50</sup>

The “Freedom Summer” project ended on August 19, 1964, in Mississippi. The college activists that invaded Mississippi that summer returned home and to their colleges. However, the influence of their volunteer efforts continued to create change. “[M]any Mississippians feel that the state has passed through a crisis and will never again be the same.” Most of all, Mississippians knew that their state was “no longer insulated from the Negro revolutions.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the best efforts of those who wanted to maintain segregation in Mississippi, freedom won. Our nation still suffers from the effects of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow Laws, and racism. Yet, “Freedom Summer” lived up to its name. The eyes and heart of our nation opened up to the struggles of our black brothers and sisters. As Bossie Mae Haring said, “Someone has opened our eyes to freedom, and we will walk in the light of freedom until we achieve victory.”<sup>52</sup> Once enough people pushed for desegregation and against discrimination, the United States government contributed to the movement by enacting policy.

At the height of “Freedom Summer” in July of 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law.<sup>53</sup> It officially ended legal discrimination in the United States. Yet, unofficial discrimination and infringements on voting rights continued in America. In 1965 protesters assembled in Selma, Alabama to advocate for voting rights for African-Americans.<sup>54</sup> Alabama state troopers attacked nonviolent protesters in Selma. Pictures taken by *Life* magazine caused national outrage over the police brutality.<sup>55</sup> From Selma, civil rights advocates marched on Chicago to demand fair housing.<sup>56</sup> Their efforts brought victory, and Congress passed the Fair Housing Act of 1968.<sup>57</sup>

Despite that victory, the battle for civil rights suffered a huge loss on April 3, 1968, when an assassin murdered Dr. King. Martin Luther King traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, taking part in the sanitation strikes, which demand equal pay and benefits for workers.<sup>58</sup> Before his death, he delivered his last speech. In his “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” speech Dr. King said:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!<sup>59</sup>

Almost fifty years later, Americans have not reached the “Promised Land.” Americans need to continue to climb the mountains of injustice. However, to overcome the social ills of racism, classism, and hate, the common man and woman need to stand up for the good of all people. “Freedom Summer” proved that those considered great did not make history, but that average people with above-average heart changed the country. “Freedom Summer” succeeded through the blood, sweat, and hard work of thousands of individuals who choose to unify to fight for social justice.

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 5-7.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>3</sup> Devery S. Anderson, "A Wallet, a White Woman, and a Whistle: Fact and Fiction in Emmett Till's Encounter in Money, Mississippi," *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Summer, 2008): 10-21.
- <sup>4</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement*, xxii.
- <sup>5</sup> John Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement*, 12.
- <sup>7</sup> Clifford M. Lytle, "The History of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964," *The Journal of Negro History* (1966): 275.
- <sup>8</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspective*, 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Lytle, "The History of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964," 282.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.
- <sup>12</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights: Movement: People and Perspective*, 20.
- <sup>12</sup> Lytle, "The History of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964."
- <sup>13</sup> David Johnson, "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 Birmingham Campaign as Image Event," *Rhetoric & Public Affair* vol. 10, no. 1 (2007): 1-25.
- <sup>14</sup> Alton Hornsby, "Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The Journal of Negro History* no. 71 (1986): 38.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>17</sup> Lytle, "The History of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964," 284.
- <sup>18</sup> Hayden Noel McDaniel, "Growing Up Civil Rights: Youth Voices from Mississippi's Freedom Summer," *Southern Quarterly* vol. 53, no. 2 (Winter, 2016): 94-107.
- <sup>19</sup> Louis M. Kyriakouides and Hayden Noel McDaniel, "Listening to Freedom's Voices: Forty-Four Years of Documenting the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," *Southern Quarterly* vol. 52, no. 1 (Fall, 2014): 64-78.
- <sup>20</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 69.
- <sup>21</sup> M.S. Handler, "Mississippi Faces Drive for Rights," *New York Times*, May 17, 1964.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," July 6, 1963 – July 28, 1964, VFM 24, Folder 1, SCRC, Southern Illinois University, January 20, 1964.
- <sup>24</sup> "Governor Controls Powerful Force," *The Student Voice*, May 26, 1964.
- <sup>25</sup> "The New Invasion of Mississippi," *Chicago Tribune*, Jun 25, 1964.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," January 20, 1964.
- <sup>27</sup> Homer Bigart, "Vote Drive Stirs Mississippi Anxiety," *New York Times*, Jun 15, 1964.
- <sup>28</sup> Claude Sitton, "Students Briefed on Peril in South," *New York Times*, Jun 17, 1964.
- <sup>29</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 101-103.
- <sup>30</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 103.
- <sup>31</sup> Claude Sitton, "Rights Campaigners Off for Mississippi," *New York Times*, Jun 21, 1964.
- <sup>32</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," January 20, 1964.
- <sup>33</sup> "Rights Volunteers Determined to Stay in Mississippi Unit," *New York Times*, Jun 25, 1964.
- <sup>34</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 105.
- <sup>35</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," January 20, 1964.
- <sup>36</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 105.
- <sup>37</sup> "The New Invasion of Mississippi," *Chicago Tribune*, Jun 25, 1964.
- <sup>38</sup> "Rights Volunteers Determined to Stay in Mississippi Unit," *New York Times*, June, 1964.
- <sup>39</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," June 17, 1964.
- <sup>40</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*, 28.
- <sup>41</sup> Neil Sheehan, "Volunteers' Parents Fearful but Proud," *New York Times*, Jul 11, 1964.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> Lynn Hunt, et al., *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures* (New York: Bedford St. Martin's: 2012).
- <sup>45</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," March 15, 1964.
- <sup>46</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," July 18, 1964.
- <sup>47</sup> George Scattergood, "Scattergood Letters," June 25, 1964.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Louis M. Kyriakouides and Hayden Noel McDaniel, "Listening to Freedom's Voices," 65.

<sup>50</sup> David J. Dennis, Sr., "Unsung Heroes of 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer," *Southern Quarterly* vol. 52, no. 1 (Fall, 2014): 44-50.

<sup>51</sup> John Herbers, "Civil Rights Drive Alters Mississippi," *New York Times*, Aug 20, 1964.

<sup>52</sup> Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 109

<sup>53</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*, xxix.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Eliza Berman, "How Life Magazine Covered the Selma Marches in 1965," *Time* (2015).

<sup>56</sup> Joshua Muravchik, "Fifty Years after the March," *Commentary* 136, no. 2 (2013): 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Honey, "King's Last Crusade," *American History* vol. 41, no. 6: 38-45.

<sup>59</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop," *American Rhetoric*, April 3, 1968.