The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Account by Lawrence Dunbar Reddick of Press Conference in New Delhi on 10 February 1959

[1959]

On 3 February King departed for India from New York's Idlewild Airport in the company of his wife, Coretta, and his biographer, Alabama State College history professor Lawrence D. Reddick. They arrived in New Delhi two days behind schedule due to a

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10 Feb 1959 missed flight in Europe and were greeted at the airport by a group of reporters and well-wishers, as well as by James Bristol of the Quaker Centre, who would serve as King's travel guide along with Swami Vishwananda of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi. This excerpt from an unpublished manuscript describes King's press conference at the Janpath Hotel the day of his arrival in New Delhi. 2

We finally made it to our hotel where, after checking in, a press conference was set up. Present were some twenty-odd Indian newspaper men and women, a man from the <u>New York Times</u> and another from the Baltimore <u>Afro-American</u>. Martin pulled out his prepared statement and said:

My Friends,

For a long while I have looked forward to visiting your great country.

To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.

This is because India means to me Mahatma Gandhi, a truly great personality of the ages.

India also means to me Pandit Nehru and his wise statesmanship and intellectuality that are recognized the world over.

Perhaps, above all, India is the land where the techniques of non-violent social change were developed that my people have used in Montgomery, Alabama and elsewhere throughout the American South. We have found them to be effective and sustaining—they work!

Accordingly, I bring greetings to the people of India—greetings and thanks for what your freedom movement has meant to ours.

During our brief stay here, we hope that you will receive us as friends, will share with us your problems and aspirations and will let us share ours with you.

We hope and pray that the bonds of friendship will be strengthened between us and among all men who dedicate their lives and possessions to justice, peace and brotherhood.

In the name of my people and my country, America, I salute you and extend the hand of a brother.

After King had read this statement, I passed around copies of it to everyone. After a pause for a moment or two, the questions started coming. First, he was asked about the bus boycott. He told that story, at least as much of it as he could squeeze into a two-minute statement*³

Then he was asked how the desegregation of buses in Montgomery had affected

^{1.} The King party had flown from London to Paris, where they visited Richard Wright, an expatriate African American novelist and friend of Reddick's. When the flight they expected to board in Zurich bypassed the city due to fog, the travelers flew to Istanbul, Beirut, and then Bombay before reaching New Delhi on 10 February.

^{2.} Reddick, Draft, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s trip to India, 1959. Following King's death in 1968, Reddick wrote "With King through India: A personal memoir." For coverage of King's press conference, see "Martin Luther King, Negro Leader, Pays Tribute to Gandhi," *American Reporter*, 13 February 1959.

^{3.} Reddick added a footnote at the bottom of the page: "For detailed account, see <u>Stride Toward Freedom</u> or <u>Crusader Without Violence</u>."

transportation services in other cities. King answered that some thirty-three cities had desegregated their buses, Atlanta, Georgia being the latest. The following question-answer sequence ensued.:

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- Q. How many Little Rocks are there in the U.S.?
- A. In a sense Little Rock is symbolic of the whole non-complying South. This is not to say that the whole South is not complying but that those communities in the South that do not wish to implement the Supreme Court's desegregation decision are watching Little Rock and cheering from the side lines.
- Q. Do you think that the Gandhian technique can work in Africa?
- A. When I was visiting in Ghana, West Africa, Prime Minister Nkrumah told me that he had read the works of Gandhi and felt that non-violent resistance could be extended there. We recall that South Africa has had bus boycotts also. 5
- Q. Can you say that you have transformed the hearts of the white people of Montgomery?
- A. I wish that I could say that our movement has transformed the hearts of all of Montgomery—some, no doubt; but there is a degree of bitterness and a refusal to accept a new [way?] of human relations.
- Q. How far would your movement have been successful without the Supreme Court decision?⁶
- A. This is a difficult question but even aside from the court rulings, our movement gave the Negro people a deeper sense of dignity and destiny; gave new morale all over the South and America.
- Q. Does your conception of non-violence include vegetarianism?
- A. No.
- Q. Is non-violence with you a creed or a policy?
- A. I have come to believe in it as a way of life. Perhaps most people in America still treat it as a technique.
- Q. Have many Negroes married white Americans?
- A. Not many.

^{4.} King met Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah during Ghana's independence celebrations in March 1957 (see Introduction in *Papers* 4:7–8).

^{5.} In 1957, over 60,000 South Africans participated in a bus boycott in Alexandra, a township near Johannesburg. For three months, protesters challenged the rising cost of bus fares until employers agreed to subsidize the transportation costs of their employees.

^{6.} The U.S. Supreme Court ordered Montgomery's buses desegregated on 17 December 1956, and the MIA called off the boycott a few days later (*Gayle v. Browder* [352 U.S. 950] and King, Statement on Ending the Bus Boycott, 20 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:485-487).

- 10 Feb Q. Is intermarriage illegal in all Southern states?
- ¹959 A. Yes.⁷
 - Q. Do American Negroes look down upon Africans?
 - A. Maybe in times past but today there is a great deal of pride, mutual pride between Africans and Negro Americans, real sympathy in the common struggle.
 - Q. What is the number of Negroes moving North every year?
 - A. Sorry, I don't have the statistics. I may say, however, that the motivation is principally economic. Usually there are more jobs, for the major industries are in the North; also, greater civil liberty in the North.
 - Q. What is the position of Paul Robeson in America and in the Negro community?
 - A. There are mixed views. He has some supporters, many admire his artistry as an actor and singer and also his integrity but do not accept his political views.⁸
 - Q. What is your personal view of Robeson?
 - No comment.
 - Q. Do you note any marked leftist views among American Negroes or do they still believe in free enterprise? On the basis of their mistreatment, we should have expected a larger shift to the left.
 - A. My guess is that not more than one per cent of American Negroes have embraced definite extreme leftist views. Even during the depression the percentage was not very large. Negroes, like many other Americans, do want a wider distribution of wealth but the Negro still believes that he can get his economic and political rights under democracy without turning to other ideologies.⁹
 - Q. Now that you have won your case on the buses are you going to consolidate your gains and expand the movement.
 - A. It is my hope that the philosophy of non-violence will carry over into the

^{7.} The U.S. Supreme Court declared "antimiscegenation" laws illegal in 1967; at that time, interracial marriage was illegal in sixteen states (*Loving v. Virginia* [388 U.S. 1]).

^{8.} An outspoken supporter of the Soviet Union and critic of racial segregation, Robeson was forced to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1956. At the hearings, Robeson refused to provide names of Communist Party members or to divulge his relationship with the organization.

^{9.} According to the American Reporter, King replied that "the basic reason is that the American Negro has faith that he can get justice within the framework of the American democratic set-up" ("Martin Luther King, Negro Leader," 13 February 1960).

general struggle for full and complete rights for all. We have organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference along this line. It is composed of major Negro leaders of the South and we will have a South-wide institute during the coming summer [1959] to discuss the theory and techniques of non-violent resistance. We have had three such institutes in Montgomery. 11

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- Q. Will non-violence be a permanent part of the struggle for justice in America?
- A. I hope so and hope that it will be successful. Some of us believe in it strongly and you know that it is usually the creative minority at work who stand against the general trend.
- Q. Do you function through political parties or churches?
- A. Our movement is non-political in terms of any particular party. Our approach is through mass action as a majority of our people are affiliated with some church.
- Q. What are the next burning issues in the Negro struggle in America?
- A. It is difficult to say but school integration seems to be the biggest issue just now. There is also the question of voting throughout the South.
- Q. Don't you have the vote already?
- A. According to the federal Constitution and recent federal civil rights legislation in support of the 14th and 15th Amendments, theoretically there should be no denial of voting rights on the basis of race or color. But in the South today while more than fifty-per cent of the white people of voting age do vote only twenty-five per cent of the Negroes vote. The Civil Rights Commission is now making investigations of the nature and extent of disfranchisement and will report to the President, Congress and the public on its findings.¹²

TAD. LDRP-NN-Sc.

^{10.} SCLC, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) co-sponsored the Southwide Institute on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation, which was held in Atlanta from 22 to 24 July. For more on the institute, see Resolutions, First Southwide Institute on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation, held on 22 July-24 July 1959, 11 August 1959, pp. 261-262 in this volume

^{11.} King refers to the annual MIA-sponsored Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change (see King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Address at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change, 3 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:451-463, and King, "Some Things We Must Do," Address Delivered at the Second Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1957, in *Papers* 4:328-343. For details on the 1958 institute, see Introduction in *Papers* 4:36-37).

^{12.} U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1959 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), pp. 134–142.