



Time's Coverage of "The Assassination"

Magazine examined riots, memorials and life in wake of King's death

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If people bring so much courage to the world, the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. — Ernest Hemingway

"Grief," "shock" and "shame" — the words appeared over and over again in the nation's press after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. African Americans had lost their most compelling spokesman and white America had lost its most effective bridge to Black America.

During the week of April 5, 1968, America's three dominant issues — the war in Vietnam, the domestic racial crisis and the prevailing question of who would win the presidency in the November

elections — exploded one after another in an historic and dramatic week. It was President Lyndon B. Johnson who set off the week on March 31 by proclaiming a ceasefire over most of Vietnam and then announcing that he would neither "seek nor accept" a nomination for a second full term as president.

Then tragedy struck on April 4: a white assassin shot and killed Dr. King in Memphis, Tenn. This tragedy first produced a feeling of national shame, grief and anger that resulted in a chaotic frenzy of looting, fires and violence in more than 40 U.S. cities.

A message from *Time's* publisher, James Shepley, came eight days after King's death. The letter highlighted the three previous dates King had appeared on the magazine's cover. Shepley said, "One of the first questions that occurs after an event as shocking as King's death is whether the man had been adequately explained to the public."

Time reviewed its own cover-

age of King throughout his mission for civil rights. Its first cover story on King was published on Feb. 18, 1957, after his first civil rights achievement in Montgomery, Ala. He was *Time's* "Man of the Year" for 1963, appearing on its Jan. 3, 1964 cover as "the unchallenged voice of the Negro people and the disquieting conscience of the whites." The last time he appeared before his death, King was the cover story for March 19, 1965, during the historic movement in Selma, Ala. Shepley chose to feature President Johnson on the April 12, 1968 cover instead of King because "(few Presidents in U.S. history have ever been confronted with such a confluence of events or had as much power to influence them."

The magazine featured articles on the rioting generated by King's assassination before discussing his death itself. The lead article, titled "An Hour of Need," said King's murder touched off a black rampage that subjected the nation to

the most widespread racial disorder in its violent history. Minutes after news of King's death was broadcast, crowds began to gather in the streets of America's cities. They did not have to wait long for a leader to come forth: Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael said, "Go home and get your guns, because when the white man comes he is going to kill you and I don't want any black blood in the street."

In Harlem, mobs filled the streets as New York Mayor John Lindsay walked among them helpless. Looting, called "early Easter shopping" by one Harlem resident, was the popular activity.

In Washington, D.C., Vice-President Hubert Humphrey said shamefully that "this nation of law and order has had its presidents shot down, its spiritual leaders assassinated and those who work for human rights have been killed. My fellow Americans, we must resolve that we will never let it happen again."

President Johnson finally called out federal troops to the nation's capital to guard the White House. As he did so, *Time* asked, "Are pictures of machine guns in the nation's capital and U.S. cities in flames only premonitions of an America without King?"

The April 12 issue gave an accurate account of King's death. Simply headlined "The Assassination," it appeared on page 18.

The precipitate cause of his death was a minor labor dispute of Black garbage collectors who were striking for better living wages and improved working conditions. The first event King planned for the workers in Memphis earlier that year ended in a riot, leading King to believe his nonviolent philosophy had been eclipsed. Memphis had been an embarrassment to King and the thought of returning sent him into depression. King's aides in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference urged him to stay, but King traveled back to Memphis despite death threats.