"Revolt Without Violence—The Negroes’ New Strategy"

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Interview

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Martin Luther King, Jr. - Political and Social Views

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**Details**

*In this interview for*U.S. News & World Report,*King predicts that the sit-in demonstrations, which had spread to more than thirty southern cities, will extend beyond dining facilities.*[1](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn1)*He stresses that no organization planned the protests; rather, they were “spontaneous” and “initiated by students,” who then “asked for the advice and counsel and direction from organizations and individuals who had been more experienced in this area.” King further claims that earlier protests, such as the Montgomery bus boycott, had influenced the students: “I am sure that many of the forces of history and many things that have happened in the United States at least inspired these young people to start them, because they had been hearing about nonviolent resistance.”*[2](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn2)

**Q: Dr. King, is the protest movement of Negroes in the South going to continue and grow greater?**

**A:** I can say this—that the Negro is no longer willing to accept segregation in any area of life, whether it’s in public eating places; whether it’s in public transportation; whether it’s in public schools. There is a strong revolt against the whole system of segregation on the part of Negro people all over the South and all over the nation.

It is natural and possible that this movement will go beyond eating places. For the moment it is being centered on eating places—and I’m not saying that it will go into another area the next week after we’ve finished working in this area.

But I do feel that, ultimately, the movement will dramatize the problem of segregation in every area and any other areas with which we are confronted.

**Q: What would you say is the basic purpose of this campaign?**

**A:** Well, the real purpose is to use a creative method to achieve full citizenship rights for the Negro people of the United States.

I am convinced that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to impress people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity. Therefore, I have advised all along that we follow a path of nonviolence, because, if we ever succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of the long and desolate night of bitterness—and our aim is not to defeat or to humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.

One of the ways we seek to do this is through this nonviolent protest, thereby arousing the dozing conscience of the white community and hoping to ultimately achieve the beloved community and the type of brotherhood that is necessary for us to survive in a meaningful manner.

**Q: Is it difficult for a Negro to find a good place to eat in the downtown area of a Southern city?**

**A:** It is extremely difficult in the average Southern city. Negroes can’t find eating places. Occasionally, they have segregated facilities, but these facilities for Negroes are usually very inadequate, very limited.

This is one of the reasons—I think probably more than anything else—that the protest moved in the area of eating facilities, because the conditions are, in many instances, appalling. In many of these stores, since they are stores with lower prices—and the Negro is still low on the economic ladder; he has to buy in these stores—the clientele is predominantly Negro.

This is why we feel that this protest is not only righteous from a moral point of view, but it is righteous from a practical point of view. It is justifiable in the sense that we spend a lot of money in these stores, and the young people are simply saying now: “We want you to respect our person and our selfhood as much as you respect our dollars.”

**Q: Are you saying that there is a real problem involved and this is not just a dramatic movement to get attention?**

**A:** Oh, no—it’s a real problem, a problem of accumulated injustices over the years.

**Q: Is there danger, in your mind, that the picketing and the “sit-ins” may lead to violence?**

**A:** Well, I certainly hope not. On the part of the Negro community, I think violence will remain at a minimum—that is to say I don’t believe the Negro people will precipitate the violence, that they will inflict violence upon the white community, because we have stressed over and over again the need for nonviolence. And I’m proud that, by and large, the Negro students have followed a very disciplined course of action and a way of nonviolence.

Now, as far as the white community goes, I cannot give an absolute answer. I would say this: It depends on the law-enforcement agencies in the particular community. If the law-enforcement agencies are concerned about keeping peace and preventing mobs and the unlawful elements in the community from taking over, I don’t think there will be any real violence. But, if the law-enforcement agencies continue to predict violence—as they do in so many cases—this will turn out to be an unconscious invitation to violence.

We know that violence develops in the whole racial struggle only when the violent forces feel they have support and that they are aided and abetted by the law-enforcement agencies. Wherever the law-enforcement agencies and the public officials have made it clear that they would not have violence, it hasn’t emerged.

If the law-enforcement agencies are not really concerned, then there is a possibility that violence will emerge.

**Q: How powerful is the Negroes’ economic weapon, as used in these sit-downs, in your opinion?**

**A:** I think it’s a very sizable weapon. We haven’t achieved economic justice in its total meaning in the United States as a race, but we have made real progress in the area of economic justice, and it has come to the point now that the national income of the Negro, collectively, is about 18 billion dollars a year—which is more than all the exports of the United States or total wages and salaries paid in Canada.

Now, with this much economic intake, so to speak, I think the Negro has a great weapon, and, in many of these areas, particularly in stores that have public eating places, Negroes are spending a lot of money. Many of these firms and many of these businesses would really suffer if the Negro decided to withdraw his support and refused to trade with them. So that I think it’s really a powerful weapon and it’s not to be underestimated, and, whenever the Negro can use it creatively, I think it is possible to bring amazing results.

**Q: Do you expect the demonstrations and the present movement to continue over an extended period?**

**A:** Well, I can’t say. It depends on what breaks through in terms of achieved victory. If, in the next few weeks, some of the stores will come to the point of saying, “We will break down the barriers of segregation and allow people to eat on an integrated basis,” then I believe this will stimulate many of the communities to slow up on the demonstrations and do more in terms of negotiation. It just depends on what we are able to achieve.

I do think it is a spreading movement, and it is still spreading. The Negro students are greatly concerned about their civil rights, and naturally the whole struggle in the world today has its implications in this country. I think this is really a part of the world-wide movement for freedom and human dignity. This isn’t an isolated struggle, it’s a part of the world-wide movement. And I’m sure that it will not automatically cease. It will cease only when the Negro people feel that they have achieved something.

**Q: How many ministers are members of your organization—that is, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?**

**A:** We are not a membership organization. Our organization is an organization of organizations. We have affiliate organizations, rather than having memberships.

Now, in terms of our affiliates, I really don’t have the number of ministers that would be involved; but in terms of our affiliates, that would bring in many, many ministers from across the South. In most States I would say the organization would cover the vast majority of Negro ministers. But I do not have the exact number.

**Q: Are Negro educators members of the organization also?**

**A:** Yes, we have some Negro educators who are working with us very closely—some on the executive board. One of our officers is the chairman of the department of history of Alabama State College in Montgomery.[3](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn3) He’s quite a writer and has given active support. And we have other Negro educators and more are coming in, to share with us and give us their broad experience as we go on.

TRAINING IN NONVIOLENCE—

**Q: How are the college students reached and trained for the demonstrations?**

**A:** Well, by and large they have read literature on nonviolence and used that as a guide before they moved out. The leaders of the movements have stressed it over and over again, and we have had several of our board members in the situation and on hand to give assistance—as in North Carolina, the Rev. Douglas Moore, who is a member of our board, was on hand to guide the North Carolina students.

The Rev. Jim Lawson, who was expelled from Vanderbilt [University] a few days ago, a very dedicated Christian gentleman, was on hand in Nashville. He’s a member of our organization, and he gave advice and direction.[4](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn4)

The Rev. Mr. [*Ralph*] Abernathy in Montgomery, who is the secretary-treasurer of our organization, the Rev. Mr. [*C. K.*] Steele, who is one of our vice presidents, in Tallahassee—all of these men have been disciplined in nonviolence, because we have had institutes constantly in our organization, and they have been on hand to give the students a sense of direction and a sense of the meaning of nonviolence.

And I shouldn’t say only our organization, but other national organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE].[5](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn5) CORE has worked in this field for many years and has had members of its national staff going in local communities, guiding the students in the whole area of nonviolence.

**Q: Have there been training courses for leaders?**

**A:** Yes. Last year we had a South-wide institute on nonviolent resistance to segregation. It was here in Atlanta. We brought leaders in from all over the South—all of the Southern States.[6](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn6) And we have had local institutes—that is, in the States or in particular cities—so that we have men on hand who have been trained in nonviolence and, as I said, CORE has also come in and has given invaluable advice because of its long history and work in this area.

**Q: So the demonstrations are not entirely spontaneous?**

**A:** Well, I would say that, in the beginning, they were spontaneous—that is, there was no organization that sat down and planned these demonstrations on a national scale.

They were initiated by students; they have been fed and sustained by students. Once they started, however, the students asked for the advice and counsel and direction from organizations and individuals who had been more experienced in this area. But I think it is important that they were spontaneous in the beginning and initiated by the students. No organization started the demonstrations directly.

I am sure that many of the forces of history and many things that have happened in the United States at least inspired these young people to start them, because they had been hearing about nonviolent resistance. There was the Montgomery bus boycott, which was based on the whole nonviolent approach.[7](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn7)

PROGRESS FOR NEGROES—

**Q. Do you feel that the position of the Negro in the South is changing?**

**A:** Well, I definitely think the position of the Negro is changing in the South. We have made some very meaningful strides, I think, in past years. And I am sure that, as the years unfold, we will continue to make greater strides.

We are gradually gaining more economic security. The educational standards are rising. Even specific areas in the civil-rights struggle are moving and developing. Therefore, I think the Negro is gaining something very definite in the South.

Now, I am convinced there are many forces working in our world today, and in our nation in particular, that will bring about an even greater movement toward our goal in the next few years. There is, first, the rolling tide of world opinion which will make it necessary for the country to do something about this problem if it is to maintain its moral leadership in a world that is two-thirds colored.

The South is gradually industrializing, and this industrialization of the South, with its concomitant urbanization, will inevitably break down the mores of white supremacy.

Then, many forces of good will are at work in the South—and I’m not talking merely about Negro forces, but millions of white people who have been silent because of fear, fear of political, social and economic reprisals. But, I think, more and more, the liberals of the white South are going to be forced to come out, if for no other reason than to keep their schools open.

So this type of backing and support from the moderates of the white South and from the church—the church is coming out more than before—and, finally, the determination of the Negro himself will serve to make conditions better for the Negro in the next few years.

I feel that we are now moving toward the last days of the strong resistance in the South. I can’t say exactly how many years, but I do feel that the forces of resistance are on their last legs and that, in a few years, even in the most recalcitrant State, the officials will recognize that it is necessary to come to terms with what is now the law of the land, and what is necessary to become a reality if we are to survive.

[1.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref1) In an earlier letter to a supporter, King accused the magazine of having a racially biased editorial slant: “It has proved to be anti-Negro through and through and seeks to play up the ideas that are quite precious to the segregationists in the South” (King to Shirley A. Livingston, 30 May 1959).

[2.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref2) King’s interview was preceded by a photo essay that included remarks about race relations in Montgomery from SCLC secretary-treasurer Ralph Abernathy, Alabama governor John Patterson, and *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Grover C. Hall, Jr.

[3.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref3) King refers to SCLC historian Lawrence D. Reddick.

[4.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref4) Lawson, who had been conducting workshops on nonviolent protest with Nashville students for several months, was expelled on 3 March for his role in the city’s sit-in demonstrations. “University” bracketed in original.

[5.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref5) Acronym bracketed in original.

[6.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref6) SCLC, FOR, and CORE sponsored the three-day nonviolent institute in July 1959 (see Resolutions, First Southwide Institute on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation, 11 August 1959, pp. 261-262 in this volume).

[7.](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/revolt-without-violence-negroes-new-strategy%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftnref7) In August 1956 *U.S. News & World Report* published a version of King’s “The Montgomery Story,” an address delivered at the June 1956 annual NAACP convention, and a rebuttal to it from Grover C. Hall, Jr. (King and Hall, “Pro and Con, Alabama’s Bus Boycott: What It’s All About,” *U.S. News & World Report,* 3 August 1956, pp. 82-89). For reactions to King’s 1956 article, see King to William Cooper Cumming, 18 September 1956, and King to Sally Canada, 19 September 1956, in *Papers* 3:371-372 and 373, respectively.

**Source:**

*U.S. News & World Report,* 21 March 1960, pp. 76-78.