

# Martin Luther King And Civil Rights

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

The events which led to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s meteoric rise were present in more places than Montgomery. For years, throughout the country, the conditions under which Black people and other minorities were forced to live, had cried out for solution. For an equal number of years, those pleas were ignored.

Having been born in 1929, Martin was thereby able to live in quite diverse eras — pre-depression, depression, World War II and Korea, the Nuclear Age and resultant Cold War, the "red scare" and on into the conflict in Southeast Asia, Hippies and space exploration. The one ingredient which was present throughout was the quest for civil rights by Black people. It seems almost redundant that civil rights must be pursued in a

democracy but, who ever said that the people must be representative of the ideas they embrace?

The period between the time of his birth and the beginning of the 1950s, was a time of great stress for Black

of Black Americans was something to be bared for. Functioning under that illusion, it was "Open season" on Black people. Yearly, there were lynchings and other kinds of brutal acts of terrorism perpetrated against Black people. They were invariably reported in newspapers around the country. That kind of

Such reporting served a twofold purpose. The first seems to have been to inform the nation and the second, to put fear in the hearts of Black people. The behavior of Black people was influenced by their being constantly reminded that their lives could be "snuffed out" without fear of punishment from authorities.

A network, of sorts, existed throughout the country and the relationship existing between Black and white Americans was generally uniform. The kinds of things which affected the life of Martin, in Atlanta, also affected the lifestyle of Black people in Las Vegas.

At the time that Martin was graduating from Morehouse, in 1948, and on through the next seven years, a number of major developments were taking place nationwide. He was aware of those and they affected his life. On March 31, 1948, A. Philip Randolph initiated a non-violent civil disobedience campaign against the armed forces. His efforts resulted in President Truman signing Executive Order 9981 which established equal treatment and opportunity in the armed forces. The tactic of civil disobedience would be used later by Martin Luther King, Jr. and it would also be used, by threat, by the Las Vegas Chapter of the NAACP in ending segregation in Las Vegas in 1960.

On May 3, 1948, a landmark Supreme Court decision was rendered. In the case of Shelley vs. Kramer, it was determined that restrictive covenants in the buying and selling of housing was unconstitutional. One would think that that ruling would have been sufficient to end discrimination in housing, but it was not. That same year, in Las Vegas, the bill of sale for a piece of property purchased by

J.C. Slayton and George S. Norris in Section Four, stated in Part One "That said parcel of land, or any portion thereof, shall not be sold, transferred, leased, rented or mortgaged to any person, or persons other than of the Caucasian race, nor shall any person or persons other than of the Caucasian race occupy or be permitted to occupy said parcel of land, or any portion thereof, except as the servant of the occupant thereof." The failure of local authorities to abide by and uphold the law in protecting the rights of Black people created

1948, the Court decreed that each state was obligated to provide for the legal training of its residents. Oklahoma responded by setting up a school for the student. The state was, however, forced to admit the student to the long established law school. Most of the southern states sent Black students out of state and "picked up the tab" for doing so. A dent, nonetheless, had been made in the armour of segregation.

At Crozer, Martin's schoolmates often questioned him about the conditions of Black people in the south. He knew that the condi-

tive role models for Black people had been limited and the achievement of Bunche inspired a whole generation of Black people.

In Las Vegas, Black residents were becoming more politically active in spite of their small numbers. Their aspirations were understandably limited because they were novices in the game of politics. They had to keep an eye on events which were occurring around the country. The race riot which took place in Cicero, Ill. in 1951, did not help matters. Black people were still not get-

during that twelve-month period, no Blacks were lynched anywhere in the United States. A remarkable accomplishment, considering the fact that punishment was never meted out for such deeds. The cauldron, however, was boiling. The forces which had been put into play could not be denied. As Victor Hugo said: "Nothing in the world is stronger than an idea whose time has come." The idea of equality had arrived and there could be no turning back. race for City Commissioner of Las Vegas. All were isolated inci-

dences but all were part of the deck from which the fate of Black Americans were to be dealt.

Ralph J. Bunch received a prize Cicero went up in smoke In Baton Rouge, they walked to work And many ended up broke A mother sent her son to school Where he sat upon his bench She prayed to the Lord to protect him So that he would not be lynched It was like the quiet

before a storm And no one ventured far They jumped back from the roadway With each approaching car Things were no longer normal But normal had always been bad With each reported killing They could only say "how sad" The cards were moving faster The hour was growing late It looked like the old "Deadwood" hand The infamous Aces and Eights

## CONSUMER AFFAIRS PROBLEMS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: I fell "hook line and sinker" for an ad that had certain clothing items up for sale at a "real steal." After I returned home, I discovered the items were evidently water-damaged and had a smoke odor. It was not advertised as water-damaged goods. I think I have a case against the store. Do I?

ANSWER: It appears you have a legal right to pursue this problem and seek redress. It has all the earmarks of deceptive trade practice. If you feel that you have been a victim of any deceptive trade practice, you should contact a representative of the Nevada Consumer Affairs Division.

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Americans. The percentage is reduced today but, at that time, most Americans believed that the rights of citizenship

reporting was basically the only news printed, in the major newspapers, which pertained to Black people.



the environment in which Martin and others like him were forced to live. Such conditions would not end until the passage of an Open Housing Law during the late 1960s.

As those events were taking place, Martin was enrolling in Crozer Theological Seminary and living in an integrated environment for the first time in his life. While studying the basic tenets of Christianity and other religions and philosophies, he was confronted with the hypocrasies of his world. In Atlanta, Blacks and whites could not attend the same schools but in Pennsylvania, they could. Another major Supreme Court case began to address that issue. In the Sipuel vs. Oklahoma ruling of

tions were wrong, but he had not determined a way in which they could be changed. While yet in Atlanta, he had become a youth member of the NAACP and was aware of the efforts of that organization to bring about legal changes. It was, however, a slow, long and drawn-out process.

An event occurred in 1950, which would give him a degree of hope. Just as his first year at Boston University was getting underway, Ralph J. Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for having settled the Middle Eastern Crisis. It was the highest international honor one could receive and Bunche became the first Black person ever to be so honored. Previously, the number of visible, posi-

ting police protection anywhere and they were therefore cautious. Being isolated as they were, perhaps, more cautious than most. 1952 was the first good year that Black people had experienced since the Civil War. The NAACP reported that

On June 19, 1953, a bus boycott had been initiated in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Three months earlier, a civil rights bill had been introduced in the Nevada Legislature and just two months before, Rev. J.L. Simmons had thrown his hat in the ring in the

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## EBONY'S GALLERY OF FAME



RALPH BUNCHE, born Detroit, Michigan, August 7, 1904; statesman: acting U.N. Mediator on Palestine 1948-1949; under-secretary for special political affairs, U.N.; recipient of Spingarn Medal 1949, Nobel Peace Prize, 1950, Theodore Roosevelt Associate Medal of Honor, 1954, and Third Order of St. Francis Peace Award, 1954.

Johnson Publishing Co., Chicago

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