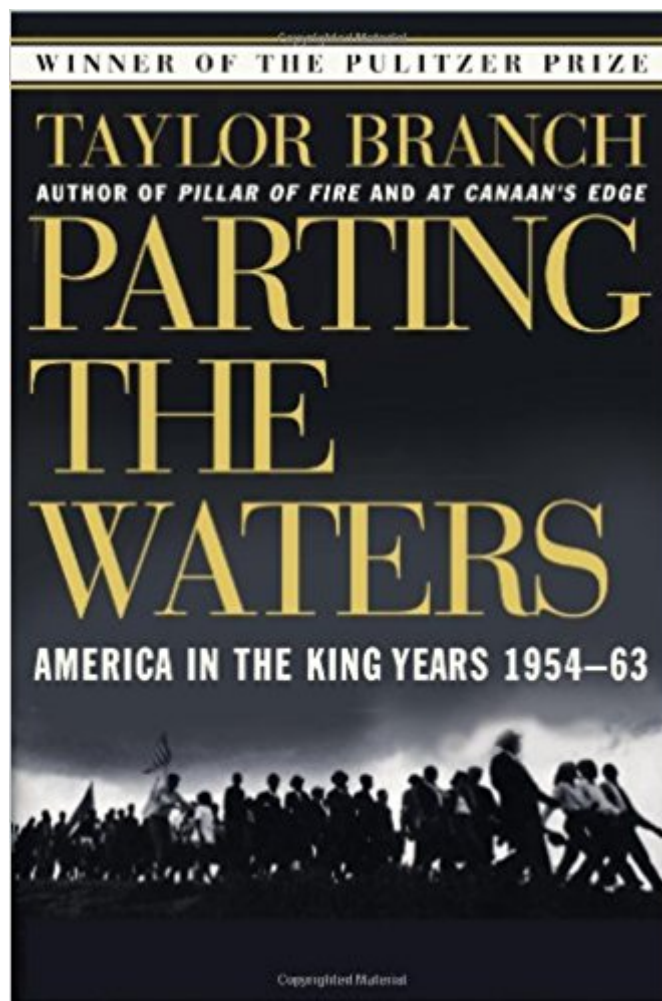


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# Parting The Waters : America In The King Years 1954-63



## Synopsis

In volume one of his *America in the King Years*, Pulitzer Prize winner Taylor Branch gives a masterly account of the American civil rights movement. Hailed as the most masterful story ever told of the American civil rights movement, *Parting the Waters* is destined to endure for generations. Moving from the fiery political baptism of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the corridors of Camelot where the Kennedy brothers weighed demands for justice against the deceptions of J. Edgar Hoover, here is a vivid tapestry of America, torn and finally transformed by a revolutionary struggle unequalled since the Civil War. Taylor Branch provides an unsurpassed portrait of King's rise to greatness and illuminates the stunning courage and private conflict, the deals, maneuvers, betrayals, and rivalries that determined history behind closed doors, at boycotts and sit-ins, on bloody freedom rides, and through siege and murder. Epic in scope and impact, Branch's chronicle definitively captures one of the nation's most crucial passages.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The first book of a formidable three-volume social history, *Parting the Waters* is more than just a biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during the decade preceding his emergence as a national figure. Branch's thousand-page effort, which won the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction, profiles the key players and events that helped shape the American social landscape following World War II but before the civil-rights movement of

the 1960s reached its climax. The author then goes a step further, endeavoring to explain how the struggles evolved as they did by probing the influences of the main actors while discussing the manner in which events conspired to create fertile ground for change. Timeline of a Trilogy Taylor Branch's America in the King Years series is both a biography of Martin Luther King and a history of his age. No timeline can do justice to its wide cast of characters and its intricate web of incident, but here are some of the highlights, which might be useful as a scorecard to the trilogy's nearly 3,000 pages.

**King The King Years Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63**

May: At age 25, King gives his first sermon as pastor-designate of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. 1954 May: French surrender to Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Unanimous Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board* outlaws segregated public education. December: Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus, leading to the Montgomery bus boycott, which King is drafted to lead. 1955 October: King spends his first night in jail, following his participation in an Atlanta sit-in. 1960 February: Four students attempting to integrate a Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter spark a national sit-in movement. April: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is founded. November: Election of President John F. Kennedy May: The Freedom Rides begin, drawing violent responses as they challenge segregation throughout the South. King supports the riders during an overnight siege in Montgomery. 1961 July: SNCC worker Bob Moses arrives for his first summer of voter registration in rural Mississippi. August: East German soldiers seal off West Berlin behind the Berlin Wall. March: J. Edgar Hoover authorizes the bugging of Stanley Levinson, King's closest white advisor. 1962 September: James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi under massive federal protection. April: King, imprisoned for demonstrating in Birmingham, writes the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." May: Images of police violence against marching children in Birmingham rivet the country. August: King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech before hundreds of thousands at the March on Washington. September: The Ku Klux Klan bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church kills four young girls. 1963 June: Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers assassinated. November: President Kennedy assassinated.

**Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65**

November: Lyndon Johnson, in his first speech before Congress as president, promises to push through Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill. March: King meets Malcolm X for the only time during Senate filibuster of civil rights legislation. June: King joins St. Augustine, Florida, movement after months of protests and Klan violence. October: King awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and campaigns for Johnson's reelection. November: Hoover calls King "the most notorious liar in the country" and the FBI sends King an anonymous "suicide package" containing scandalous surveillance tapes. 1964 January:

Johnson announces his "War on Poverty." March: Malcolm X leaves the Nation of Islam following conflict with its leader, Elijah Muhammad. June: Hundreds of volunteers arrive in the South for SNCC's Freedom Summer, three of whom are soon murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. July: Johnson signs Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. August: Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing military force in Vietnam. Democratic National Convention rebuffs the request by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be seated in favor of all-white state delegation. November: Johnson wins a landslide reelection. January: King's first visit to Selma, Alabama, where mass meetings and demonstrations will build through the winter. 1965 February: Malcolm X speaks in Selma in support of movement, three weeks before his assassination in New York by Nation of Islam members.

At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68

March: Voting rights movement in Selma peaks with "Bloody Sunday" police attacks and, two weeks later, a successful march of thousands to Montgomery. August: King rebuffed by Los Angeles officials when he attempts to advocate reforms after the Watts riots. March: First U.S. combat troops arrive in South Vietnam. Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech makes his most direct embrace of the civil rights movement. May: Vietnam "teach-in" protest in Berkeley attracts 30,000. June: Influential federal Moynihan Report describes the "pathologies" of black family structure. August: Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act. Five days later, the Watts riots begin in Los Angeles. January: King moves his family into a Chicago slum apartment to mark his first sustained movement in a Northern city. June: King and Stokely Carmichael continue James Meredith's March Against Fear after Meredith is shot and wounded. Carmichael gives his first "black power" speech. July: King's marches for fair housing in Chicago face bombs, bricks, and "white power" shouts. 1966 February: Operation Rolling Thunder, massive U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, begins. May: Stokely Carmichael wins the presidency of SNCC and quickly turns the organization away from nonviolence. October: National Organization for Women founded, modeled after black civil rights groups. April: King's speech against the Vietnam War at New York's Riverside Church raises a storm of criticism. December: King announces plans for major campaign against poverty in Washington, D.C., for 1968. 1967 May: Huey Newton leads Black Panthers in armed demonstration in California state assembly. June: Johnson nominates former NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. July: Riots in Newark and Detroit. October: Massive mobilization against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C. March: King joins strike of Memphis sanitation workers. April: King gives his "Mountaintop" speech in Memphis. A day later, he is assassinated at the Lorraine Motel. 1968 January: In Tet Offensive, Communist guerillas stage a surprise coordinated attack across South Vietnam. March: Johnson

cites divisions in the country over the war for his decision not to seek reelection in 1968.

Pacifist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr influenced Martin Luther King Jr. more deeply than did Gandhi, according to Branch, whose 880-page chronicle shows the civil rights leader taking Billy Graham's evangelist crusades as his model for organizing mass meetings to attack segregation. Epic in scope, often startling in its judgments and revelations, this gripping narrative mingles biography and history as it moves from the founding in 1867 of the First Baptist Church in Alabama, where King's movement took hold, to John Kennedy's assassination. Branch, journalist and coauthor of *Second Wind*, provides disturbing glimpses of John Kennedy wavering over integration while manipulating King, and of Robert Kennedy, who authorized FBI wiretaps on King's home and offices. Ralph Abernathy, Bayard Rustin and other leaders are also here, though King holds center-stage for most of the narrative. This stirring, vivid tapestry is the first volume in Branch's *America in the King Years*. First serial to *Washington Post Magazine*; BOMC segmented main selection. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

"Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963" is Taylor Branch's magnificent first volume of a three-volume biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. This masterful book traces the early life of America's greatest advocate of civil rights and non-violence from his birth, childhood, and young adulthood; through the critical decade of the 1950s, when the struggle for African American rights reached its peak; to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. King is presented as a flawed but noble hero who battled not only the segregationist establishment of the Deep South, but the federal government as well. (Some very surprising villains will be found in these pages.) A brilliant biography that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1984, "Parting the Waters" is also a towering history of one of the most disturbing periods of the twentieth century. Most highly recommended.

Amazing and inspiring stories of courage. Though the book is thick, the author's lucid and at times rhapsodic writing makes it a fairly quick read. I've learned more about the civil rights movement from this sweeping narrative than from any video (including *Eyes on the Prize*, excellent as it is) or museum. It is particularly good at describing the diversity of tactics employed, the competing interests held, and the maneuvering (both public and private) carried out by various civil rights activists and members of state and federal governments.

At the end of 922 pages of text in *Parting the Waters* I felt stunned at the scope and beauty of Branch's story of the early King years; emboldened by such a moving, well-told story, shocked and horrified at details I had never known of the horrors the Freedom Riders and King suffered. This book is both haunting and inspiring. Most importantly, I wished for 922 pages more of Branch's story to read. Thankfully, it is the first in a trilogy so there is more to read. No one who cares about or wants to learn more about the Civil Rights movement can afford to miss this book.

Taylor Branch, in this first volume of his Civil Rights era chronicle, admirably fulfills a writer's twin duties of telling a compelling story while managing a vast amount of historical material. Covering the years 1954 to 1963, Branch takes the reader from movement's birth in the black Baptist churches of the South through the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, concluding with JFK's death and its aftermath. Every participant, man, woman, or child, famous or obscure, has his story told with a veteran reporter's eye for the truth. Branch has a way with words, as we can appreciate on virtually every page. Here are a couple of samples. The first discusses the FBI's extensive wiretapping of King and his associates: "That an intelligence agency in the belief that King was an enemy of freedom, ignorant of the reality that King had just set in motion the greatest firestorm of domestic liberty in a hundred years, was one of the saddest ironies of American history." (p 692) The other sample illustrates Branch's use of ironic humor: "Walker's [an organizer of the March on Washington] presentation was at once breathtaking and quixotic. It envisioned a precisely organized march into history by an organization that had taken four years to find a mimeograph machine." (p 690) Martin Luther King, Jr. and his movement were rooted in the church, as the titles of the three series' volumes (*Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire*, *At Canaan's Edge*) which recall the Biblical journey of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, make clear. And, as was true in the Bible, the heroes were also all-too-fallible human beings, petty and sinful, but ultimately victorious. Events today have their roots in the past. If you'd like to understand where we are in Civil Rights, this book genuinely earns its five stars. I look forward to reading the remaining two volumes.

A great book chronicling the Civil Rights movement from 1955-63. So many great stories about Civil Rights legends are in this book. I didn't like the length of the book, but it was useful to help gain full understanding. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of US history in the 1950's and 60's.

It's a great read for anybody interested in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights

movement of the early sixties. It also brings the reader into contact with many unsung heroes of the era like Bob Moses, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Lawson and many others. The author also discusses the areas where civil rights leaders concentrated their efforts, the reception they received from the people who opposed them including law enforcement at the local, state and federal levels are explored and explained. The thing this reader liked most was the courage of the people, whether they were share-croppers trying to register to vote, freedom riders, or sit-in demonstrators or just ordinary citizens attempting to do what other Americans take for granted.

This is a highly good read, Taylor Branch has a way of letting you live in the present, while drawing you in the past. You are able to remember the sounds, sights, and energies of the past. You read a name or an event and your long unanswered question of why is brought in living color. I highly recommend this very, very, very long, but impressive book to anyone who wonders about history. This book is so inspiring it has given me the opportunity to view my race from different lens, a people I am proud of for standing up when it would have been safer to sit back. It encourages you for future.

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