

Marching through '64

PILLAR OF FIRE:

America in the King Years, 1963–65.

By Taylor Branch. Simon & Schuster. 746 pp. \$30

by David J. Garrow

Pillar of Fire is the second volume of Taylor Branch's projected three-volume history of the American black freedom struggle during the 1950s and 1960s. Ten years ago, Branch published his first volume, *Parting the Waters*, a richly detailed account of the civil rights movement that covered the years 1954–63 in 922 pages of text. Ending with the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's November 22 assassination, *Parting the Waters* was intended to be the first of two volumes that would carry the story forward until Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968. But Branch changed plans, expanding his history from two volumes to three. *Pillar of Fire* covers the movement's history from December 1963 until February 1965 in 613 pages of text. Or, to be more precise, about 419 pages of text, for the first 194 pages are devoted to recapitulating much of the 1962–63 history that the author comprehensively treated in *Parting the Waters*.

Should *Pillar of Fire* be evaluated by itself, or should it be assessed in tandem with *Parting the Waters*? As King often said, most "either-or" questions—this one included—are best answered with "both-and" responses. Comparing *Pillar* with *Parting* raises two questions: why devote almost one-third of *Pillar* to a reprise of *Parting*, and why allocate 400-plus pages to essentially just 1964,

when all of 1954 through 1963 merited "only" 900? In the author's defense, his readers—whether or not they read *Parting the Waters* a decade ago—deserve some recapitulation, and 1963 and 1964 almost inarguably were the crucial years of the civil rights movement.

Still, Branch and his editors might have had it right the first time: two comprehensive volumes might have been ideal, while adding a third one in the middle may result in a badly misshapen trilogy. The necessary recap could have been handled in 40 pages rather than 190, and a more selective treatment of the events of 1964 might have aided readers. There's another possible answer: even if three volumes *are* better than two, should not the middle volume have ended in August 1965—following the Selma, Alabama, protests, and passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act—rather than six months earli-



January 1964: President Lyndon Johnson meets with civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. (center, front), to discuss his war on poverty.

er, when the Selma campaign was just beginning? In any event, the price for covering relatively little of the movement's history in *Pillar of Fire* will be paid by the author himself, for he will have a *very* tall order and a *very* long book on his hands when he tries to cover the period February 1965 through April 1968 in his final volume. If only for Branch's sake, let's hope that volume three doesn't expand into volumes three and four.

But enough about the strategic pitfalls of a multivolume work. Reviewing *Parting the Waters* for *Dissent* 10 years ago, I wrote that Branch was "a careful and trustworthy interpreter" of the movement's history. The breadth of his accomplishment in *Pillar of Fire* more than verifies the accolade. Other movement historians viewed *Parting the Waters* critically or dismissively (Charles Payne wrote that Branch "tells a good story, but not always the one that happened"), but Branch's missteps in *Pillar of Fire* are so few and generally so inconsequential (e.g., the air base outside Selma was Craig Field, not Clark) that the academic carping ought to be held to a minimum. That's especially appropriate in light of *Pillar of Fire's* two most substantive achievements: Branch's attention to grassroots activists in Mississippi and his full-scale integration (no pun intended) of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam into civil rights movement history.

One of the most notable strengths of *Parting the Waters* was Branch's detailed treatment of the work that Robert P. Moses and other young staff members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee undertook in Mississippi. *Pillar of Fire* continues that story, and Branch rightly stresses both the extent of physical violence that movement workers encountered in the South's most dangerous state and the deep political disappointment they experienced when their challenge to the all-white "regular" Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention was turned aside by the

forces of Lyndon B. Johnson.

President Johnson is, along with King, Malcolm, and Moses, one of the four dominant figures in *Pillar of Fire*, and the recent release of hundreds of LBJ's secretly recorded telephone conversations allows Branch to present Johnson's role in this history with unprecedented precision and detail. Those tapes fully justify Branch's verdict that LBJ at times could be a "manic, unstable president," and Branch's rendition of how Johnson manipulated the 1964 convention's rejection of the Mississippi challengers is important and top-notch history. (Many of LBJ's more significant 1963–64 recorded conversations are presented in Michael R. Beschloss's valuable volume, *Taking Charge* [1997], but Beschloss's book is understandably selective, not comprehensive. Any good historian wanting to mine the Johnson recordings will, like Branch, have to do his or her own research at the Johnson Library in Austin, Texas.)

The close attention Branch devotes to the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the emergence of Malcolm X as a national figure is perhaps the single most important virtue of *Pillar of Fire*. The NOI and its corrupt and reclusive leader, Elijah Muhammad, have been accorded little attention in most "civil rights" histories, in large part because Elijah believed that his followers should keep themselves apart from political protest. That was only one of several important reasons why Malcolm X, the NOI's top spokesman in the early 1960s, began to chart his own independent course, and Malcolm's official break from the NOI and Elijah in March 1964 turned out to be one of the decade's more momentous events. Malcolm's assassination at the hands of NOI gunmen 11 months later, in February 1965, was the most tragic reflection of how Elijah's NOI bore more resemblance to an organized-crime family than to anything involving the Islamic faith. Had Malcolm lived, and had his political evolution been allowed to continue, he might well have emerged as the dominant African-American voice of the late 1960s.

Branch's treatment of Malcolm is far from worshipful, but *Pillar of Fire* makes superb use of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's copious surveillance files on Malcolm and the NOI that have been publicly released under the Freedom of Information Act. Branch also deserves kudos for undertaking some valuable interviews with onetime NOI members, particularly the late Yusuf Shah, who as "Captain Joseph," Malcolm's ostensible deputy in the NOI hierarchy, may have known more about Malcolm's assassination than he ever chose to reveal.

Pillar of Fire thus has tremendous richness and strengths, but it has shortcomings too. One notable flaw is Branch's oddly noncommittal treatment of King's private activities, which attracted the secret, prurient interest of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and other officials. The full story of the Bureau's extensive electronic surveillance of King—both wiretapping his telephone conversations and bugging some of his hotel rooms—has been public since 1981. While Branch adds no new details to the story, he surprisingly abstains from discussing how King's activities should (or should not) influence our view of him.

Drawing on FBI agents' memories, Branch recounts one crucial recording that captured disparaging sexual comments King made while watching a television broadcast of President Kennedy's funeral—comments that the FBI immediately passed along to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The author's rendition differs in significant detail from my own understanding of that recording, but a far more significant problem is posed by Branch's unsupported interpretation of King's remarks. Branch contends that "King's outburst," as he calls it, stemmed from a "hidden fury" that King had toward President Kennedy because of JFK's underwhelming executive response to the September 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing that killed four young girls.

No evidence at all suggests that King felt any "hidden fury" toward Kennedy.

A full appreciation of King's often-lascivious private sense of humor supports a far more benign interpretation of his off-color remarks: the taped comments, whatever they precisely were, stemmed from King's enjoyment of dirty jokes, not from any "unguarded rage" toward the late president. Branch's explicit refusal to plumb the matter more deeply—he adds that "its causes are too personal for the scope of this history"—suggests that this is not a matter the author has pondered carefully.

Pillar of Fire has other, smaller lacunae as well. Some important movement activists, such as Bayard Rustin (whose most important essay Branch erroneously dates to 1964 rather than 1965), receive insufficient attention.

But the most serious challenge *Pillar of Fire* poses to a reader is the number of stories it serves up. Someone who already knows the history can cope, but anyone not fully familiar with the entire cast of characters may often feel overwhelmed. For example, in one eight-paragraph sequence, Branch jumps from the defeat of Massachusetts governor Endicott Peabody to LBJ's campaign schedule to student protests in Berkeley to NOI violence in Boston to FBI reports on violence in Mississippi to King's appearance at a conference in Georgia. Not all of these topics necessarily merit inclusion, but even if they did, more sustained accounts and fewer abrupt transitions would make *Pillar of Fire* far more digestible.

Taylor Branch deserves our plaudits for a rich, valuable book, but *Pillar of Fire* tells only a relatively small portion of the author's larger story. By choosing to postpone a disproportionate amount of King's story and the movement's history to his third volume, Branch has set for himself a far more difficult challenge than he has had to face in either *Parting the Waters* or *Pillar of Fire*.

> DAVID J. GARROW, *Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory University Law School, is the author of Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for biography.*