A review of <u>Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65</u>,
by Taylor Branch, Simon & Schuster, 1998, 758 pp., $30.00.

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Having twice read his first volume, Parting of the Waters, covering 1954-63, I eagerly anticipated publication of Taylor Branch's Pillar of Fire. I wasn't disappointed. The second in a trilogy on America in the King years, Pillar covers the tempestuous 1963-65 period that began with the hope that America would undergo a nonviolent revolution in civil rights and ended as a prelude to the explosion of "Black power" as the new slogan of militants in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Branch weaves together disparate strands of American life into a brilliant quilt, establishing both the context for the period and the dynamics of the Black community.

Outside the South, various personalities and forces emerge in the narrative. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell works to expose New York City police corruption in Harlem. The Los Angeles police mount a brutal and paranoid attack on the city's Black Muslim Mosque. The Conference on Religion and Race is founded in Chicago. The rift within the Nation of Islam between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad is followed by Malcolm's assassination. Alabama Governor George Wallace's 1964 Democratic Presidential primary campaign success in the North stuns the Democratic Party.

In the South, King's work and life are set in context. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) has a role in shifting King from national speech-making to action based on the idea of redemptive suffering. SNCC organizers' disdainful characterization of King as "de Lawd" is told. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's vicious attempts to destroy King are dramatically chronicled. The steadfast determination of Civil Rights Division attorney John Doar (a Republican holdover from the Eisenhower Administration) to fight for voting rights stands in sharp contrast with the vacillation of the Kennedy and Johnson Justice Department. Harry Belafonte's quiet, yet crucial, political support for The Movement is given its due. The equivocation and vanity of top National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leadership is contrasted with the determination of local branch leaders who turn to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC because they would not accept the control and conservatism of their national office. The significant role of the National Council of Churches and leaders of other predominantly white faith communities in the North in supporting the southern movement–with dollars, political pressure on Washington, and by the presence of hundreds of ministers, rabbis, priests, and women religious on the front lines–is detailed. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party dramatically develops as a challenge to the whites-only Democratic Party. SNCC's legendary Bob Moses' approach to leadership is contrasted with that of King and the ministers of SCLC.

While describing well-known events, people, and institutions, Branch also recognizes the unheralded courage of thousands of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, day laborers, and domestics who finally decided they were going to be first-class citizens. They are central characters in the drama of the period.

Traditional narrative history focuses on the great men (and less often great women) of a time and their relationships with rivals, adversaries, and enemies–others "not-so-great," but still in the league of

the great. Everything else going on in society is merely background ,if mentioned at all. Economic trends, massive population shifts, social movements, and cultural changes barely exist in these narrative histories.

In reaction, sociologists and a new generation of historians have sought to correct the "hero in history" view by looking at what happens at the base of society. In this new approach, economic forces–like Mississippi Delta unemployment created by the mechanization of cotton picking and the use of chemical sprays for weeding–are the critical substructure shaping what goes on in society. The economic trends are accompanied by demographic shifts like the massive movement of Southern Blacks to the North. Cultural changes such as the emergence of the "new Negro" (often World War II veterans who got a taste of equality while they fought for democracy in Europe) might play a central role as well. These forces create major social dislocations within which new political opportunities arise for those who were previously powerless. Mass organization and mobilization project spokespersons who lead new social movements. But in this view of history, the leaders are almost incidental to the whole process. If one of them disappears, there is always someone to fill the vacant position.

Branch skillfully maneuvers between these two approaches. There are dislocating forces from which a social movement and key leaders of that movement emerge. The leaders provide a voice for the movement, amplifying its effectiveness by the quality of their leadership and eloquently mirroring the values for which the movement stands. Such leaders sustain commitment through hard times and command the attention of the news media that, in turn, draws the attention of other leaders and groups in society. Some leaders also seek to build a team at the apex of an organization to direct and coordinate the various parts of the movement. If they are successful, an infrastructure of communication, responsibilities, lines of authority, discipline, and leadership development emerges. A more permanent organization develops, capable of enforcing victories won at peak moments of mass mobilization.

When the outside allies and news media depart, as Branch shows they inevitably did, the organization remains at the scene of the action to monitor implementation of agreements reached in the heat of battle. It can do this because of its capacity to recreate the pressure–through civil disobedience, electoral action, boycotts, strikes, or mass demonstrations–that won the victories in the first place. Further, as it grows in power, the organization becomes capable of shaping the very forces from which it emerged. At this point, conscious human intervention, expressed in a powerful organization, guides or shapes history itself. Looking back to the 1930s, we can see how John L. Lewis and the industrial union movement amassed this kind of power and began to shape the history of the period.

Like Lewis, King was a charismatic leader. In speaking both to southern African-Americans in mass meetings and to the rest of America, King articulated a vision of justice and inspired hope for its realization. He presciently warned against increased rhetorical militancy that isolated The Movement from its base. His generosity of spirit made it possible for him to forgive the sometimes egotistical behavior of his ministerial colleagues and his rivals in other organizations, and to play a major role in maintaining the always fragile alliance of militant groups like the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) and SNCC with the moderate NAACP, Urban League, and National Council of Negro Women.

But unlike Lewis, King did not build structure and discipline into the movement he led. Branch captures King's ultimate failure–the absence of an infrastructure for the Black movement in the South that went beyond pre-existing networks of clergymen, which would often deteriorate in internal squabbling soon after King and the SCLC staff left town.

SNCC's deepest disagreements with King arose over the question of how little was left behind after the headlines faded and nationally prominent leaders left the scene of action. Branch uses the tension between SNCC and King to illuminate the distinction between mobilizing and organizing, focusing on the contrast of SNCC in Mississippi with King in Birmingham. SCLC's action in Birmingham moved Congress and the President to more active support for civil rights, and ultimate passage of the Civil Rights Act. But agreements won in Birmingham were never enforced because the powerful organization needed to overcome deeply engrained racism was not in place when King and his SCLC staff left town. On the other hand, SNCC sought to build a network of local organizations that would be in place for the long haul. The local organizations and the national civil rights organizations were united in the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)–the umbrella coalition for the movement in Mississippi. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was developed as an alternative to the state's "regular" Democrats.

In clarifying detail, Branch describes the MDFP's effort to unseat the white-only regulars at the 1964 Democratic Convention. He traces the dramatic confrontation between MFDP and the Johnson Administration and how defeat of the MFDP challenge, combined with the growing tension between Northern white volunteers and Southern Black staff, contributed to increasing and debilitating conflict in SNCC.

Branch also succeeds in capturing the intrigue and vacillation of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. Neither Jack, as President, nor his brother Bobby, as Attorney General, showed either political acumen or courage. Trying to placate white Southern Democrats who had a stranglehold on key commit- tee chairmanships in Congress, avoid international embarrassment at the height of the Cold War, and keep both the Northern "Negro vote" and significant numbers of white working class voters, they failed to satisfy anyone. One example illustrates the pattern. John Doar filed a "strong" lawsuit in Greenwood, Mississippi, asserting systematic discrimination against Blacks seeking to register to vote. This kind of Justice Department legal action had been pushed for over a year by SNCC, but strength quickly turned to weakness as the suit was withdrawn.

There are other examples. Trying to placate J. Edgar Hoover and his vendetta against King, the two Kennedys, joined by Civil Rights Division director Burke Marshall, demanded that King cease all contact with "Kremlin agent" Stanley Levison–a devoted, sincere, politically "left," but unaligned and tactically cautious Northern white supporter and key adviser to King. As President, Lyndon Johnson repeated the Kennedys' behavior, except for his determined support for the Civil Rights Act. He, too, worried about losing the "solid South" to Barry Goldwater and the Republicans, who abandoned their historic support for civil rights and actively courted disenchanted Southern Democrats in the 1964 election.

Another tension in the African-American community climaxed in this period. The conflict between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King was emblematic of the struggle for the allegiance of Black America, especially in the North. By 1963, Northern Blacks had long since learned that the right to vote and the semblance of equal rights offered little protection against discrimination in housing, education, and employment. Nor did it protect African Americans from police brutality, on the one hand, or their neighborhoods from the absence of police protection on the other. While the church remained the pre-eminent institution of the Black community, the minister was no longer the uncontested leader. Malcolm X and the Muslims gave voice to the explosive rage beneath an exterior of pundit-labeled "apathy." James Baldwin said at the time, "To be Black and in America is to be in a constant state of rage." While the number of Muslims was relatively small, their influence was great, growing as the nonviolent movement failed to deal with the problems facing Blacks in the ghettoes of the North, and reaching people who were alienated from the Black church.

Branch brilliantly weaves back and forth from King, Moses, and other movement "big names" to day laborers, teen-age activists, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, independent yeoman farmers, and domestics, making the connection between history at the top and bottom. But he fails to fullytie together the threads of the tapestry. There are no interview notes on what the unsung movement heroes and heroines wanted in addition to "equal rights." Street lights, blacktop roads, decent schools, and public facilities were among things wanted in the towns. Indoor toilets, fair cotton planting allotments, houses that didn't leak in the winter, and basic services were sought in "the rural." Both wanted land and decent, secure, jobs. These issues only show up as resolutions from students in Mississippi Summer's Freedom Schools, when mostly-Northern, white summer volunteers offered classes on Black politics, culture and history, economics, and other matters distorted or ignored in the state's public school curriculum. The voices directly demanding them are not to be found.

Branch's counterpoint account of Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, Adam Clayton Powell, and other Northern "stars" is not connected with stories from ghetto residents and local leaders of anti-freeway and urban-renewal fights ("Black removal" it was called then). Lacking are grassroots accounts of tenant union organizing, school equality struggles, police brutality, or the demand for jobs. He notes that economists in 1963 predicted "a fierce racial competition for diminishing blue-collar jobs." But this and other general references lack the elaboration in stories, quotes, and local action that would make intelligible the support received by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X–a support far broader than membership in the Muslims and far deeper than most at the time understood.

A description of President Johnson's War on Poverty citizen participation "component" (at the time called "political pornography" by community organizer Saul Alinsky) and King's reference to "political machines, automation, crowded slum conditions, police brutality, and the exploitation...on rural southern plantations" give thin voice to such issues. Branch's problem is born of dependence on the written record and interviews with those most available to him. As a result, the importance of those "at the bottom" is generally diminished–as is the importance of behind-the-scenes players like movement strategist Ella Baker, who appears only five times in the index while Selma Police Chief Wilson Baker appears 14 times.

The problem of errors in detail plagues all historians; Branch does far better than most. His end notes themselves are worth reading, and the bibliography is rich. But there are things omitted and wrong details. It was Theodore Bikel, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and the SNCC Freedom Singers who publicly performed on the July 4, 1963, weekend at the courageous Laura McGee's farm, not "Bob Dylan and Josh White [performing] privately." I am identified as the Bay Area chair of Friends of SNCC and a 1964 Mississippi volunteer. I was a SNCC field secretary from 1962-66, and was in Mississippi in 1963. Further, I wish Branch had paid more attention to the abysmal job done by the media, including the New York Times, in covering the movement in general, and SNCC in particular. I wish he had more material about, and stories from, Northern "realignment" Democrats, both in Congress and out, who were willing to let the Dixiecrat South go to the Republicans. Anticipating the danger of race as a "wedge" issue, they sought full employment legislation as the way to stop the loss of "ethnic white" votes by responding to fears of job competition from Blacks.

The book captures the complex relationship between SNCC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the Democratic Party itself. Its most serious weakness is its inability adequately to capture the complex inter-relationship between organizing versus mobilizing and the ambiguity of civil rights victories when contrasted with the continuing powerlessness and growing poverty of the Black majority–problems that persist to this day. Branch would like to believe that SNCC and MFDP in 1964 were part of a continuum of struggle and progress whose goal of ending white-only state parties was realized four years later by the integrated Mississippidelegation of 1968. He is right and wrong.

While Blacks and whites were in the 1968 delegation and important victories were won, especially the general (though hardly total) elimination of Southern police and Klan violence against Blacks, the Black delegates of 1968 were different from those who controlled the 1964 MFDP. The middle class who remained in the wings during the early period of the movement were its principal beneficiaries in 1968. Their distinct interests included control of the poverty program, electing Black public officials, and creating equal opportunities for Blacks in "the system" as it was.

The MFDP delegates of 1964 were rooted in the 90 percent of the state's Black population who were poor, generally untouched by the poverty program, and largely unaffected by such things as equal access to hotels and restaurants. Had those 1964 delegates been seated and their candidates for Congress elected, they would have pressed for much more. Massive public employment, affordable housing, health and child care and quality education programs, participatory democracy and the provision of land to farm--as promised the former slaves in the Reconstruction period–would have been part of their agenda. They would have demanded that a debt be paid, the debt of the legacy of slavery.

SNCC sought to root itself among this majority of the Black community. Its emphasis on organizing, often better stated than practiced, was born of its conviction that the poor and unlettered were the best spokespeople for their own interests. SNCC staff wanted to participate with them in the creation of organizations that could give powerful voice to Southern Blacks' hopes and dreams. On this point, SNCC leaders Bob Moses and Jim Forman were in agreement, an agreement obscured by Branch's emphasis on their conflict. SNCC's collective heart was broken by the 1964 defeat in Atlantic City. Its decline was largely the result of the external resistance of its powerful adversaries. To suggest

that in 1968 SNCC won is to miss this point. SNCC was unable to predict, understand, nor adequately cope with the resistance it met and all it meant about where the rest of the country was in relation to SNCC's struggles. It failed to build a community that could withstand the pressures against it, and soon after the 1964 Atlantic City defeat it collapsed.

Branch fails to grasp the vision of the beloved community of SNCC's religiously inspired organizers or the participatory democracy of its small "d" democrats. While the narrow "civil rights" agenda has made great strides, the one against poverty and powerlessness remains unfulfilled. (The reader interested in pursuing this discussion would do well to examine John Ditmer's Local People and Charles Payne's I've Got The Light of Freedom.)

An epilogue introduces readers to the secret, unconstitutional, and growing US government commitment to the war in Vietnam that shifted the interest of Northern white students to the peace movement, the violent death rattle of the Klan, and other cameo parts of the story to come in Volume III.

In early February, I organized a gathering of 30 movement veterans and supporters to discuss the Pillar period with Branch. After beginning remarks, he opened the floor to discussion. The question, "Why did the movement fall apart?" was raised and debated for two hours. It remains the critical subject if we are to heed the admonition, "those who fail to learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes." Branch provides most, but not all, of the material needed for this discussion. Little more can be asked of one man and one book. We can look forward to the final volume in the trilogy with the confidence that it will be a fitting conclusion to this brilliant work, and with the hope that questions raised in this review will find opportunity for discussion in what remains to be written.