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“Fires Dimmed for a Time” — Taylor Branch on Martin Luther King, Jr. and His Era

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Historian [Taylor Branch](#) has now completed his massive and magisterial chronicle of the civil rights era with the much-awaited release of *Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968*. *Canaan's Edge* is the third volume of Branch's trilogy, and the three volumes are now the definitive account of this crucial era in America's history. [*Parting the Waters*, Branch's first volume, won the Pulitzer Prize.]

As readers discovered in the first two volumes, Branch combines an eye for detail with a sense of the grand scale of history in the making. *Canaan's Edge* begins just before the march in Selma and ends with King's assassination in 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. stands at the center of the story, but Branch gives much attention to lesser-known figures in the movement and provides a sense of what it must have been like to have risked all for the cause of voting rights. His account also provides fascinating insights into figures such as President Lyndon B. Johnson (who frustrates King with his support for voting rights but his resistance to public protest) and J. Edgar Hoover (who reads every political and social development as a question of communist conspiracy).

The historian's closing words:

Like America's original founders, those who marched for civil rights reduced power to human scale. They invested enormous hope in the capacity of ordinary people to create bonds of citizenship based on simple ideals—"We the people"—and in a sturdy design to balance self-government with public trust. They projected freedom as America's only story in a harsh world. "The arc of the moral universe is long," King often said, quoting the abolitionist Theodore Parker, "but it bends toward justice." His oratory mined twin doctrines of equal souls and equal votes in the common ground of nonviolence, and justice refined history until its fires dimmed for a time.

King himself upheld nonviolence until he was nearly alone among colleagues weary of sacrifice. To the end, he resisted incitements to violence, cynicism, and tribal retreat. He grasped freedom seen and unseen, rooted in ecumenical faith, sustaining patriotism to brighten the heritage of his country for all people. These treasures abide with lasting promise from America in the King years.

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