

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #24

The year 1968 was one of extreme turbulence in the United States – even for that tumultuous decade. Stirred by turmoil in American cities, and seeing the limitations of his civil rights achievements, Martin Luther King, Jr., began to expand his vision beyond civil rights to confront the deep-seated problems of poverty and racism in America as a whole. He started to criticize President Lyndon Johnson and Congress for prioritizing the war in Vietnam over the fight against poverty at home. King also began to plan a massive movement called the Poor People’s Campaign to fight economic injustice.

Discouraged by opposition within his own Democrat party to his Vietnam policy and physically exhausted, Johnson stunned the nation on March 31<sup>st</sup> by announcing that he would not seek reelection for president. To advance the cause of poor people, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike by predominantly black sanitation workers. Americans had barely adjusted to the news that a sitting president would not stand for reelection when, on April 4<sup>th</sup>, King was gunned down while standing on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

The assassin was James Earl Ray, an escaped white convict, who had expressed hostility toward blacks and support of Governor George Wallace of Alabama for president of the United States. Debate still continues over whether Ray was a pawn in an organized conspiracy to kill King.

Irrespective of that debate, King’s death set off an outpouring of grief among blacks and whites. It also ignited a further round of urban rioting, with major violence erupting in over sixty American cities. The worst of the uprisings occurred in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. Altogether the urban violence in the U.S. left dozens dead and hundreds of millions of dollars in property damaged or destroyed.

Tragically, King was murdered before achieving the transformations he sought: 1) an end to racial injustice; and 2) a solution to poverty. The civil rights movement had helped set in motion permanent, even revolutionary, changes in American race relations. Jim Crow segregation ended, federal legislation guaranteed basic civil rights to black Americans, and the white monopoly on political power in the South was broken.

By 1968, however, the fight over civil rights had also divided the nation. The Democrat party was splitting, and a new conservatism was gaining strength. Many whites believed that the issue of civil rights was receiving too much attention – to the detriment of other national concerns. The riots of 1965, 1967, and 1968 further alienated many whites, who blamed the violence on the inability of Democrat officials to maintain law and order.