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LeMoyne Reflections on Sanitation Strike March pp. 213-215 -- V.B.

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A confident, nearly happy group gathered at Clayborn Temple around 10 AM Thursday morning, March 28. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was late arriving, and many at the church were ready to begin their own demonstration. But by 11 AM King arrived, and the march was ready after last minute emphasis on the non-violence of the marching protest. Hernando St. was the beginning of the march that was to turn north to west on Beale St and then to north again at Main. Dr. King was to lead the march. He expected no violence.

True enough, the “Black Militants” were not planning to use the demonstration as a spark for a riot. In fact, “John Jones said four days later that this group regretted its non-involvement; they had not counted on the amount of people who came out, and they hadn’t hoped for the five-hour lag between the time the National Guard was called in 2 PM- and their arrival at 7 PM. Mr. Jones said a major offensive could have been successful in affecting the whole city with organization of supporters and the use of the element of surprise. But the extra six days between the date proposed for the march and the actual one (posponed [sic] from 3/22 to 3/28 because of snow) were not used by the Black Militants to organize a riot

Dr. King was unaware, however, of a plan of six “Long” College students to keep the crowd non-violent until they reached Main and Madison. At this strategic point, the center of downtown, widespread destruction would be signaled by breaking the Florsheim Shoe Shop window at 2 S. Main. This plan was never carried out, of course, because the premature violence could not be restrained.

The march began its route north on Hernando and turned west onto Beale. Agitators were kept in check with less and less success as the crowd of 15,000 began to cross S. Third St and then S. Second St. A few stores past that last

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Corner a young boy broke from the crowd and destroyed a window of Pape’s Men’s Store at 159 Beale, then darted back into the crowd. A group of boys then moved ahead of Dr. King and began breaking into the stores between Second and Main. The police did not stop them. King realized that the march was getting out of control and began to turn it back before reaching Main and Beale. The students who had pushed ahead anxiously were now at the end of the crowd retreating toward Second. After the marchers had turned around, the police began to follow them spraying Mace gas and clubbing them. The greatest number attacked and arrested were students retreating behind the crowd; only about 25 actually caused any damage.

Dr. King escaped through the alley between Main and Second. Looters moved into the stores from watching the marchers, and others removed merchandise from show windows. But no one

was free from the gas. Even after the marchers returned to Clayborn Temple, police followed two looters into the church and sprayed Mace in the Sanctuary. On Beale St. policemen entered shops and ordered frightened owners and clerks outside. If they refused, they also were clubbed and sprayed with gas and forced from their own shops without explanation and without warrants.

Thursday night Beale St. was boarded up and guarded, and violence occurred sporadically in other parts of the city. One college student was using a phone booth at Greenwood and Walker and was arrested and jailed for burglary of the drugstore there until he was able to prove his innocence 17 hours later. Another incident brought the death of a 17-year-old boy being chased (for looting) by policemen. The boy ran into the boiler room of a project

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Nearby; he was cornered [illegible] and had nowhere to run. Yet he was shot to death at close range in that room, [illegible] and immorally.

Newspapers throughout the country carried the story. The Friday Chicago Tribune carried an extensive objective report of the incidents Thursday and the background of the march, indicating the complete refusal by Mayor Loeb to compromise or even negotiate with the union. The Friday morning Rocky Mountain News, however, covered the riot superficially, including one incident (only one) in the riot: a policeman put his arm around the shoulders of an elderly Negro man and guided him out of the chaos saying, "This is no place for you older folks."

The article did not say that King and the marchers were retreating before they were sprayed with Mace. It lauded the officers for their restraint and gave all credit for ending the violence to them.

Explanation of the purposes of and reasons for the march in the main article (3/29 UPI) was only this: "The Memphis demonstrations are to protest alleged discrimination against the city's garbage workers most of whom are Negroes." The sanitation workers cannot expect national intelligent awareness of the situation with unfair reporting.

But like Mayor Loeb the nation is going to see soon enough that the mayor's 1300 "boys" are men and must be treated like men.

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