Miracle in Alabama . . .

by Carey McWilliams

The indictment of a hundred or more Negroes in Montgomery for leading a peaceful mass protest movement against segregated city buses places not them but the American nation on trial. Whether we have the courage or candor to acknowledge it, the fact that is that the indictment calls in question every value—moral, political and constitutional—to which we so glibly pledge allegiance; here and now is a test which will determine the loyalty of the entire nation to its basic ideals and values.

Great issues are sometimes difficult to recognize. The issue in Montgomery is not whether this outrageous indictment will be upheld in the courts; one may safely assume that, ultimately, it will be set aside. Nor is it primarily a question of whether racial violence in some form or other will occur. This may or may not happen. Something far more important is at stake in Montgomery, "the cradle of the Confederacy." America is promised. At stake in Montgomery is the fidelity of every citizen to the promises which are American.

It is one thing to ask citizens to be patient in seeking a redress of grievances; it is something else again when the right to petition for a redress of grievances is itself denied. The Montgomery indictment strikes at this right; it is a crude attempt to intimidate an entire community. The Negroes of Montgomery are not asserting a narrow legal principle; they are proclaiming to the world their insistence on being regarded as members of the human race. The movement they have organized is peaceful. It is moral. It is constitutional. Not to support their modest proclamation is to repudiate one's birthright and heritage as an American.

What is happening in Montgomery is in the nature of a miracle, something that has never happened before in the history of the South. A community which only a few years ago, like most Negro communities in the South, gave the appearance of being inert and apathetic, without structure or form, has, without any outside help or assistance, organized itself into a disciplined, articulate, superbly confident community. This transformation represents a fulfillment of the American dream, achieved in broad daylight, in the full but uncomprehending gaze of the nation and the world. Not the false American dream of two-tone classy sports cars, kitchens laden with gadgets and "little" $17,000 ranch houses (California-style) in the suburbs; but a realization of the real American dream of freedom and equality and the dignity and worth of every human being.

The South of the White Citizens Councils understands what has happened. It realizes full well that the Montgomery bus boycott is a major historic development with irreversible consequences. If the Negroes win, the same non-violent Gandhian resistance may spread throughout the South. Hence the "white" South is determined to suppress it. At first the opposition could not believe the boycott would be sustained. Now an effort is being made to intimidate the leadership. Should intimidation fail, physical violence and terror may be used. Violence, in fact, has already been used. Yet the South should have the wit to recognize that the Montgomery Negroes cannot fail for the simple reason that they have already succeeded. Knowledge once given, we have been told, cannot be recalled. By indicting the leadership of this movement, the "white" South has—most ironically—not only advertised the methods used; it has acknowledged their effectiveness. Win or lose in Montgomery, this type of resistance is likely to spread.

At the moment what is chiefly to be feared is not a failure of nerve or determination on the part of the peaceful resistors but of imagination on the part of the rest of us. The "white" South seems incapable of imagining how it looks to the world. The rest of the nation views the South as though it can hardly believe what it reads and hears. It acts as though the Montgomery bus boycott were merely another racial "incident"—a provincial noise that will soon subside. The "white" South stares incredulously at the Negro, the nation stares incredulously at the South, and the world stares incredulously at America. This incredulity needs to be banished all around. What is happening in Montgomery is not happening in the Union of South Africa. It is not a nightmare. It is not a television script or a movie. This is no "Communist" or any other kind of plot. What is happening in Montgomery is an American miracle. Here citizens, acting openly under leaders selected from their own ranks, in response to motivations which are religious and moral as well as social and economic, have banded together to insist that they be recognized as human beings. They ask for nothing more. For the nation not to lend them its moral support—and there will be opportunities to support them in other ways well—would be tantamount to a repudiation of the promise of American life.

The miracle in Alabama, unheralded, without prece-
dent, has put the entire nation to the test. It is not merely that the Administration from the President downward has been placed on notice that the lives and liberties of the Negro residents of Montgomery are endangered; this they have been told. The test is much broader. It is addressed to the trade unions, the churches, press, veterans groups, civic organizations—to the entire nation. It is addressed with peculiar directness to American Protestantism. The twenty-six Negro ministers who are identified with this movement have given their brethren an example of Christian social leadership that is truly inspiring. "If we are arrested every day," the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.—the name has a fine echo—told his fellow walkers, "if we are exploited every day, let nobody pull you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us. So many people have been taught to hate, taught from the cradle. They are not totally responsible." With prayers and chants, with good-will and self-confidence, the Negroes of Montgomery are determined to "walk with God" and shun the city's buses. Let it be noted, too, that at least one white Protestant minister in Montgomery is supporting them—symbol of the large and growing section of the "white" South that in one form or another supports this and similar protest movements.

AS WITNESSES to this magnificent demonstration, we cannot stand around, in John Jay Chapman's phrase, "like blighted things, like ghosts about Acheron, waiting for someone or something to determine" our destiny for us. If this dramatic demonstration of the potency of the American dream does not strike a response in the nation's conscience, then that dream has been corrupted. But what is happening in Montgomery is the most convincing proof that such is not the case. For here, in the heart of the "black belt" of the South, new hope and confidence and, above all, a new democratic leadership has emerged. An entire community has experienced a rebirth of freedom. The men and women who compose it now stand erect. Unafraid, in high spirits, without malice, they are walking with chants and prayers toward freedom's future in response to the American promise.

The Shape of Things

At Miami

The first executive council meeting of the AFL-CIO gave evidence—if any were needed—that disunity can exist in a merged labor movement. On the eve of the Miami sessions, a section of the Packard plant was being converted from auto to jet aircraft engine production. Auto workers claimed the jobs associated with maintenance; the building-trades group, formerly AFL, claimed those relating to construction. The claims

conflicted in the actual allocation of jobs, and the building trades put a picket line around the plant. Walter Reuther, for the Auto Workers, agreed to arbitrate the issue but refused to respect the picket lines. At Miami it was clear that James Hoffa, the ambitious Teamsters official, was supporting the building trades, foreshadowing a major struggle for power between himself and Reuther. After a few uneasy days, President George Meany intervened and an interim solution was agreed upon. But the flareup was significant, for it indicates that some of the craft unions are marshalling their forces behind Hoffa and Dave Beck in the struggle for power now in process.

At Miami, too, Beck reiterated his view that the merger had been too hasty. With Maurice Hutchison of the Carpenters, he declined to participate in the discussion of political action. The AFL-CIO, Mr. Beck observed, was not a political organization and ought not to be directly involved in national campaigns. He also announced that the Teamsters would not tolerate the interference of the Ethical Practices Committee in their affairs. The committee is not likely to function very effectively if the Teamsters continue to deny its jurisdiction. These rumbles do not, of course, mean that the AFL-CIO is faced with new divisions, but the struggle for power exhibited at Miami could be troublesome if it is permitted to continue. Before much time is lost the new labor movement must generate a sufficiently strong sense of unity to prevent the surviving loyalties and rivalries from the old regimes from finding expression in new combinations and factions.

Right at the Wrong Time

Pierre Herve, ex-propaganda chief of the French Communist Party, was "read out" of the party, according to the New York Times, only a few days before Moscow announced its new and "softer" line. What kind of spot this puts French party stalwarts in is anyone's guess. An article by Guy Besse, published in L'Humanite, official Communist daily, stated:

With the excuse of defending the revolution against fetishes, Herve takes pot shots at the party. A fine way to encourage the honest worker to join the party of the working class at the very moment when all Communists are in duty bound to close ranks! A fine way to work for the coming Popular Front, to attack the party that is its soul, accusing it of calumnies which the bourgeois reactionaries have always used to block the unity of the workers!

These columns have given the outline of Herve's four-square offensive against what he considers excessive rigidity among the intellectuals who toe the party line (The Nation, February 11). But now that Moscow has attacked rigidity, what will happen to Herve, who still claims he is a Marxist? Can the Communists afford in this doctrinaire way to jettison one of its ablest men? As Alexander Werth says elsewhere in this issue, here is the classic example of a man who was right at the wrong time.