


**National  
Civil Rights  
Museum**

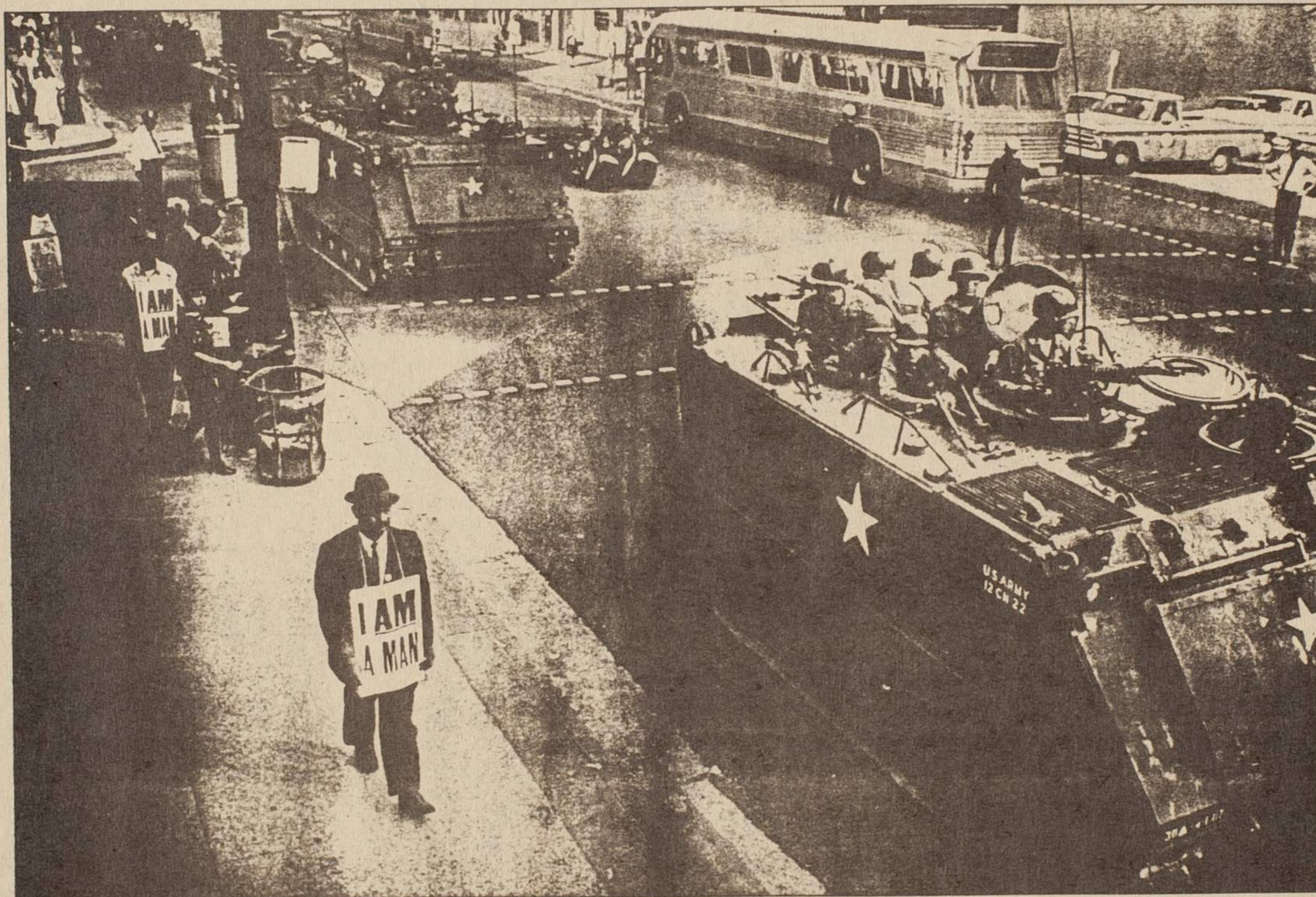

An aide clears the way for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Ralph Abernathy as they lead a March 28, 1968, demonstration that broke up in disorder.



Trash piles up on the southwest corner of Second and Union after 930 of 1,100 city sanitation workers walked off the job Feb. 12, 1968. The workers demanded AFSCME be recognized as their bargaining agent and sought action on a series of grievances.

**WITNESS: TOMMY LEE SMITH**

Smith, 64, city sanitation worker: "The worst thing was the way people talked to you. Some of them acted nasty, cussing and calling you 'nigger' and things like that. You had to let it roll off, or you'd get fired. You had to do it, and nobody liked that." Smith carried an "I AM a Man" banner during the strike. "It felt pretty good." Afterward: "Things got better, but not all at once. It's different now. I like it better. You don't have to work from sunup to sundown. The pay's better. We used to have to go in the backyard and drag it (garbage) out. Now we get it on the curb. It's a whole lot better now, a lot faster."



National Guard armored personnel carriers escort sanitation workers on Main Street March 29, 1968, the day after a march led by Dr. King disintegrated when some youths chose window-breaking over nonviolence.



Abe Schwab (left), Beverly Schwab and Michelle Johnson react in astonishment at the sight of armored military vehicles on Beale Street on March 29, 1968. They were cleaning up glass from windows broken the day before at Schwab Brothers at 163 Beale.

## '68 strike, violence ended city's calm and Dr. King's life

Until Feb. 12, 1968, Memphis seemed a peaceful city in a turbulent land.

Beginning with the stormy desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School a decade earlier, racial unrest had swept through the South — student sit-ins and freedom rides; the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala.; James Meredith at Ole Miss; police dogs in Birmingham; the beating of demonstrators in Selma, Ala. Memphis joined the upheaval

when many of the city's 1,300 sanitation workers struck in February 1968. Two black workers had been crushed to death, and on a rainy day, blacks were docked while white supervisors got paid in full. Mayor Henry Loeb called the strike illegal. Seventy-five black ministers and several white clergymen backed the workers. The strike escalated; garbage piled up.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was preparing to lead a march



A Memphis police officer uses a stick on a youth who was looting a store at Main and Beale on March 28, 1968. Violence broke out during a scheduled march in support of striking sanitation workers. One person was killed, more than 200 arrested, and a 7 p.m.-5 a.m. curfew was imposed.

on Washington. He made a detour through Memphis and led a protest march that ended in a riot. One person was killed, 60 were hurt, 300 arrested. King felt his nonviolent reputation had been damaged, and he vowed to return.

King and his aides were preparing for a second march when he was killed by a sniper's bullet at the Lorraine Motel. A curfew was invoked, the National Guard was called out and military vehicles patrolled the streets. America rioted.

Twelve days later, a compromise was struck and the garbage strike was over.