

APRIL 3rd 1995 NEW YORKER



Sharpton at Governor Pataki's Peekskill, N.Y., from "The Situation Is: In fact, we'll create for Pataki."

AL SHARPTON PROTESTS IN PECKSKILL, N.Y. WITH AN ARMY OF 100,000. He spins back and forth on his heels while his hips sway sideways like a dowager's. Head tilted back, a choir of hum cascading, chest puffed out, he has the puny, cocky walk of a small man with a big fan behind him.

Marching like King Jr. wore a fit and sensible shoes when he marched, Al Sharpton, on his long trek to Albany to protest Governor George Pataki's budget cuts—170 miles on crated highways and small country lanes—wore a sweat suit and sneakers. King led thousands, among them doctors and lawyers. Sharpton, whose march ended last Tuesday, often presided over little more than a dozen, most of whom seemed to have nothing better to do.

But at this moment of acrimonious national debate—

over welfare, affirmative action, and poverty, Al Sharpton—the preacher, Reverend 911, the former FBI informant, the mouthpiece of Tamara Browley, a figure who only recently graduated from vaudeville to national notoriety—is asking, nay, demanding, to be compared to Martin Luther King Jr.

In the cosmography of the Struggle, there are two guiding stars: Martin and Malcolm. In the past, Sharpton was a dusty corner, more Malcolm than Martin, more race-mixing nationalist than race-denying integrationist. The grand old men of the King generation, Sharpton believed then, had grown complacent, status-hungry, and out of touch. Al Sharpton became the Willie Mandela of African American politics, brave, illuminatory, espy, seeking and finding an adoring audience among the poorest of the poor. Now, through his

impacting of racial tensions, Sharpton has become a symbol of the politics of resentment, and the fact that he is a stream politician. He is marching into Martin's shoes, but it is Martin's shoes with Malcolm's. Martin did the work of biblical 19, a otherwise Martin with more than a little shadow thrown.

The evidence, you say, is in Sharpton's. The evidence is in the Church in Harlem, the dormitory of Dr. King's former aide-to-camp, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, whom King mentored. It is in the fact that before he was shot, Walker, headfish, righteous, and unimpeachably correct—in the house of King's home, he is everything Sharpton is not. Yet on the morning of March 6, the start of the march, Walker and the heirs of Dr. King, who once mentored Sharpton like many things and more

Sharpton's March

It wasn't the Poor People's Campaign or the March on Washington, but on the long walk to Albany that ended last week, you could catch just a whiff of that old civil-rights spirit. By Richard Stengel