

American History Online

King, Martin Luther, Jr.

America's preeminent civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., was the founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King.

Religion was an integral part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s lineage. His maternal grandfather, Adam Daniel Williams, had served as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta for more than 30 years, until his death in 1931; his father was assistant pastor of the church at the time of young Martin's birth and became pastor on the death of Reverend Williams; and his older sister, Christine, and his younger brother, Alfred Daniel, both became ministers.

Intelligent and precocious, King entered Morehouse College, an all-black school, as part of a program that accepted bright high school students for early admission. So at age 15 he was studying for a bachelor's degree and reading [Henry David Thoreau's](#) essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849), which he later said "left a deep impression on me." In those years immediately after World War II, with the modern [civil rights movement](#) beginning to stir, Thoreau showed King how to defy authority peacefully for the sake of liberty.

In 1947, one year before King graduated, he was ordained a Baptist minister and served as assistant pastor to his father. With his bachelor's degree in sociology in hand the following year, King enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, a predominantly white school. Here the philosophical basis of his later crusade for civil rights fell into place. King read the writings of [Walter Rauschenbusch](#), a proponent of the social gospel, who assailed capitalism for encouraging selfishness and an imbalance of wealth that left many people impoverished; he called on Christians to replace capitalist competitiveness with a new morality dedicated to harmony and community.

King studied Karl Marx and accepted the philosopher's critique of capitalism—a decision that later contributed to his enemies labeling him a communist. But King was no communist. He saw in Marx what he had seen in Rauschenbusch, namely, that capitalism encouraged selfishness, that it lacked a moral center. He disliked, however, communism's atheism and its authoritarianism—both inimical to the fulfillment of human potential—and the ruthless tactics used by the Soviet Union's leaders.

But until King attended a lecture devoted to the ideas of the Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, he doubted that Christian love could be used to reform the world. Excited by what he heard, King delved into books about Gandhi and into Gandhi's autobiography, and he discovered *Satyagraha*, a Sanskrit word for "persistent truth"—which Gandhi applied to his tactic of nonviolent protest—along with *agape*, or the love for fellow human beings. To King, that love could be found in Christ's teachings as an antidote to the selfishness bred by capitalism and the hatred generated by racism.

King studied Gandhi's use of nonviolent protest against British oppression in India, and he concluded it could be used by blacks against racist oppression in America. He liked the tactic because it rejected violence as a weapon by emulating the "turn the other cheek" precept of Christianity and because it called attention to injustice in a dramatic way and purged both the oppressor and the oppressed of hatred. Yet for King nonviolent protest rooted in Christian love was always more than a tactic—it was a way of life, the way that he tried to live, and the way he hoped others would live to expand social justice.

Martin Luther King Jr., graduated from Crozer at the top of his class in 1951 with a divinity degree, and with a fellowship from the seminary he entered Boston University as a graduate student in the philosophy department. Two years later he married [Coretta Scott](#), a voice student at the New England Conservatory. The couple had four children. Coretta Scott King later joined her husband in his civil rights campaign, providing him with crucial support and advice.

King wrote his doctoral dissertation on the concept of God as presented by Paul Tillich and H. N. Wieman, while taking additional philosophy courses at Harvard and preaching in Boston churches. In 1954, one year before King completed his Ph.D., the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, recruited him to serve as their preacher, so he returned to the Deep South and its fiercely segregated society.

He was at Dexter little more than a year when on December 1, 1955, [Rosa Parks](#), an African-American seamstress, was arrested when she refused to abide by a bus driver's order to give up her seat to a white passenger. Blacks in [Montgomery](#), led by E. D. Nixon, had for some time been looking for a case that would allow them to protest the city's bus segregation. Now they had it, and with the newcomer King as eager as they were to press for reform, the city's black ministers gathered at the Dexter Avenue Church and decided to begin a boycott on December 5. Later that day they organized the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to run the boycott and chose King as its president.

With the bus boycott King applied his nonviolent protest; he urged blacks who were harassed by whites and detained by the police to react with peace rather than violence. He always thought that violence promoted hate, and hate more violence, and he told a rally:

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you. If we fail to do this our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history, and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garments of shame. In spite of the mistreatment that we have confronted we must not become bitter, and end up by hating our white brothers. As [Booker T. Washington](#) said, "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him."

Using his rich voice and the cadence of the Baptist preacher—qualities that over the years would mesmerize many audiences—King continued:

If we protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, "There live a race of people, of black people, of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization."

King's philosophy was sorely tried when whites bombed his house, but he held to a steady course. The bus boycott drew national attention to the city's segregation, and the national spotlight illuminated King as the charismatic young leader of the civil rights movement. When in November 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court declared Montgomery's segregationist bus laws unconstitutional, blacks and white liberals hailed King and his nonviolent strategy. That December King and several MIA colleagues rode Montgomery's first desegregated bus.

In January 1957 King and some 60 black leaders met at the Ebenezer Baptist Church and founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As its name indicated, the SCLC applied to the civil rights movement Christian values and King's nonviolent philosophy, both as a strategy and as a vision for a more humane society. In May he led a prayer pilgrimage of 25,000 people in Washington, D.C., demanding that Congress pass a civil rights bill.

In January 1958 King's book *Stride toward Freedom* appeared. In it he told about the Montgomery bus boycott, and the following month the SCLC launched the Crusade for Citizenship with the goal of enrolling 3 million black southerners as voters over two years. King said, "History has demonstrated that inadequate legislation supported by mass action can accomplish more than adequate legislation which remains unenforced for lack of a determined mass movement." The SCLC held workshops, clinics, and rallies throughout the South, but strong white resistance to the crusade caused it to fall far short of its goals—only 160,000 blacks registered to vote.

King resigned as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Church in January 1960 so he could devote himself full-time to the SCLC. That October black college students in Atlanta began a series of sit-ins to tear down the city's racial segregation—the "Second Battle of Atlanta," they called it—and they asked King, as the most prominent civil rights leader, to join them. He did so and was arrested. He had been jailed before, but this time he was sentenced to four months hard labor and thrown into Reidsville Penitentiary for violation of a one-year probation given him several months earlier for a minor traffic incident. The stunningly harsh sentence was reversed, and King was released only after Democratic senator [John Kennedy](#) of Massachusetts intervened on his behalf.

That action led King and many other African Americans to support Kennedy for president in 1960. With Kennedy victorious, King expected the new president to act quickly on civil rights. But Kennedy, worried about antagonizing southern congressmen, dragged his feet—a move that greatly disappointed many black leaders.

In spring 1963 King launched a campaign to desegregate [Birmingham](#), Alabama. Under Sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor, the police

retaliated against the protesters who were attempting to march peacefully by unleashing on them dogs, cattle prods, and fire hoses. Pictures of the brutal assault appeared on national TV—and on televisions and in newspapers around the world—greatly damaging America's standing in its cold war with Russia.

King was arrested and thrown into a solitary cell, during which he wrote, on April 16, 1963, his "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," since considered to be among the most important protest documents in American history. King wrote the letter in response to criticism from eight white Christian and Jewish clergymen who thought nonviolent street protests too extreme. To those who said he was wrong to be breaking the law, he explained when it was proper to do so:

Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law....Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.

His statement reflected his belief that segregation damaged blacks *and* whites by degrading the personalities of *both*. Segregation damaged whites by calling forth the worst within them, by calling forth hate.

In early May Birmingham officials met most of the demands made by King and the SCLC and desegregated the city's public facilities. A few weeks later, on August 28, 1963, King participated in the [March on Washington](#) for civil rights, organized by [A. Philip Randolph](#), and addressed 200,000 people with his "I Have a Dream" speech:

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal...."

Let freedom ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi. From every mountaintop, let freedom ring. When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

In 1964 King received the Nobel Peace Prize and said that the award added credence to nonviolent protest. His efforts contributed substantially to Congress's passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the [Voting Rights Act](#) of 1965. Over the next several months he continued to press his fight for expanded voting rights and a complete end to [segregation](#).

But additional controversy arose from two different quarters. For one, many young blacks thought his civil rights gains inadequate. This was especially true of blacks living in northern and western urban ghettos. The SCLC was largely southern in focus, and ghetto blacks argued that King had done nothing to bring about economic gains for them. In effect, they were saying it meant little to use the same water fountain as a white person when white economic domination meant few jobs in the ghettos.

Many young African Americans embraced the militant [Black Power](#) movement, which stressed black self-determination, black culture, and black strength separate from the white community. This was exactly opposite to King's integrationist approach, and the dislike for nonviolence as a way of life that ran through Black Power only added to the challenge posed to King's leadership.

King did take his civil rights campaign into the North. Most notably, early in 1966 he entered Chicago and vowed to force an end to policies that perpetuated the slums. "We're going to organize to make Chicago a model city," he told his supporters.

"Remember, living in a slum is robbery. It's a robbery of dignity, and the right to participate creatively in the political process. It's wrong to live with rats."

The other controversy arose from his remarks about the Vietnam War. He condemned the war as racist and so earned the enmity of President [Lyndon Johnson](#), who thought King should have shown more gratitude for all the White House had done to advance civil rights.

As during the Montgomery bus boycott, King had received many death threats over the years, and the possibility of assassination stalked him. In spring 1968 he traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to support striking sanitation workers. On April 4 he was standing on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel when a gunman shot and killed him. James Earl Ray was later arrested and confessed to the crime. In the late 1970s evidence compiled by the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives portrayed Ray as King's lone assassin. But while in jail Ray recanted his story, and the King family and others have long thought him innocent—or part of a much larger conspiracy.

Some skeptics have even questioned the role of the federal government in the killing, suggesting its complicity given the animosity shown by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) toward King and its extensive surveillance of him. Ever since King had gained prominence, FBI director [J. Edgar Hoover](#) had ordered that information be gathered about him and used to discredit him. Hoover disliked blacks in general, considered the civil rights movement a threat to order, and thought King a closet communist.

With the approval of Attorney General [Robert Kennedy](#), agents tapped King's home telephone and those located at the SCLC offices. They even planted unauthorized and illegal microphones in his hotel rooms and then gave journalists and political and religious leaders a report that accused him of sexual and financial misconduct. They sent King an audio-tape of his sexual indiscretions, with a note hinting that he should kill himself. Such secret and sordid activity by the federal government was not uncommon—political dissidents were typically surveilled and harassed to restrict their liberties and destroy their influence.

In *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1982), Stephen Oates writes about a black janitor in Montgomery who at the time of the bus boycott said about King's effort and the Supreme Court decision ending bus segregation: "We got our heads up now, and we won't ever bow down again—no, sir—except before God!"

Further Information

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