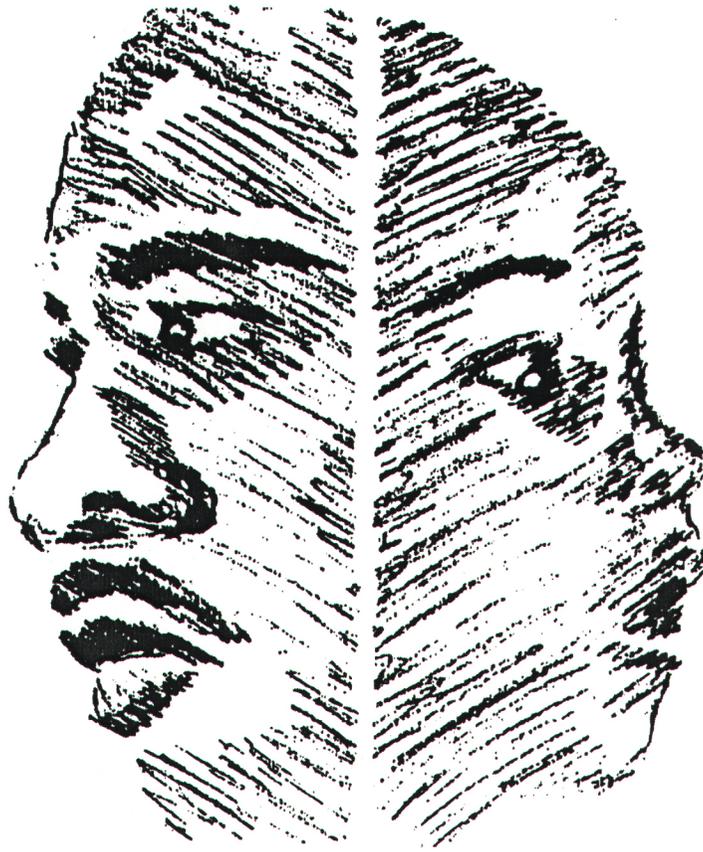


**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

**HOLIDAY  
CELEBRATION  
2000**



**WISDOM FROM THE PAST  
VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

**Remember ! Celebrate! Act! A Day On, Not a Day Off!!**

Prepared by  
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## **PREFACE**

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## **SCOPE**

The Topical Research Intern Program (TRIP) provides the opportunity for servicemembers and DoD civilian employees to work on diversity/equal opportunity projects while on a 30-day tour of duty at the Institute. During their tour, the interns use a variety of primary and secondary source materials to prepare a report pertaining to an issue of importance to equal opportunity (EO) and equal employment opportunity (EEO) specialists, supervisors, and other leaders throughout the Services. The resulting publications (such as this one) are intended as resources and educational materials and do not represent official policy statements or endorsements of the DoD or any of its agencies. The publications are distributed to EO/EEO personnel and selected senior officials to aid them in their duties.

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**Remember! Celebrate! Act!**  
A Day On, Not A Day Off!!

## **Introduction**

Many consider Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be one of the greatest figures of the twentieth-century, certainly one of the greatest orators in American history. Like other heroic figures, Dr. King was uniquely prepared to meet the challenges of his time, and equally willing, even eager, to answer the call to leadership. As the pre-eminent champion of civil rights and nonviolent social change, Dr. King dominated the social landscape in the third quarter of the twentieth century, as America came to terms with centuries of discrimination and disenfranchisement.

Some Americans remember well Dr. King and the tumultuous events that swirled about him. Some were even touched directly by his eloquent words and courageous deeds. Yet many younger Americans know of him only through a sound bite of famous oratory, and have no substantive knowledge of who he was and how he led America through a revolution for justice.

As we enter a new century, it is good to reflect on what distinguished Martin Luther King, Jr. from others, and why he is worthy of our remembrance. Dr. King was driven by the simple desire to see all Americans enjoy equal rights and opportunities. While some other African-American leaders espoused separation and violence, Dr. King envisioned a united America created through nonviolent social change. His philosophy of nonviolence flowed logically from his upbringing in the African-American church and his preparation for the ministry. Over the course of 14 grueling years, he molded the tactic of nonviolent, direct action from an admirable theory into a powerful force for concrete social change. Through it all, he motivated others through his mastery of the spoken word and his willingness to suffer on behalf of others. His commitment to civil and human rights eventually cost him his life. Dr. King's legacy is now enshrined in a national holiday, and will endure into the 21st century and beyond.

## **1929-1954: Early Life and Preparation for the Ministry**

Martin Luther King, Jr. received from his family a heritage of leadership in the African-American church and community that strongly influenced his own leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. He was also inspired by the dynamic leaders of the African-American community he encountered and the philosophers and theologians he studied while in college and graduate school. It was during his graduate years at Boston University that he met his wife Coretta Scott, with whom he began a family and promising pastoral career in Montgomery, Alabama. These sources of tradition, intellect, and spiritual support helped prepare him for the difficult days ahead.

## The King Family Heritage

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born January 15, 1929, in the Atlanta, Georgia home of his parents and maternal grandparents. His grandfather, Reverend A. D. Williams, was born to enslaved parents in 1863 and struggled to educate himself during the era of Reconstruction. He became the senior pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1894 and worked throughout his 37-year tenure to improve conditions for African Americans in Atlanta. He was a charter member and president of the Atlanta chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and helped establish Booker T. Washington High School, Atlanta's first secondary school for Blacks. (11:4-7)

Martin's father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was raised on a sharecropping farm in central Georgia. He was so captivated by the leadership of the ministers encountered during his youth that he aspired to serve in the ministry himself. He enrolled in Morehouse College in Atlanta, one of the first private colleges for young African-American men, in the fall of 1926 and married Alberta Williams, Reverend Williams' daughter on Thanksgiving Day of that year. Reverend and Mrs. Williams invited the newlyweds to move into their large Auburn Avenue house and assist with pastoral duties at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The partnership continued until Reverend Williams' death in 1931. As the new senior pastor, Martin Luther King, Sr. continued the activism of his father-in-law in the community, serving on the Executive Board and Social Action Committee of the local NAACP, which won a significant legal battle to equalize salaries between Black and White teachers in Atlanta. When young Martin was seven years old, Martin Luther King, Sr. led several hundred African Americans in an unprecedented march to City Hall to demonstrate for voting rights. (11:5-7)

## Childhood and Awakenings to the World

The King family life revolved around worship and church activities, with each day beginning and ending with family prayer. Young Martin exhibited indications of high intelligence at an early age. By age five he could recite whole Biblical passages and hymns. He began singing hymns at church gatherings, often with a hint of the blues. Martin learned from preachers the power of language and spoken words, and surrounded himself with books even before he was able to read. He once told his parents, "You just wait and see. When I grow up, I'm going to get me some big words." (11:9-10)

His loving family and supportive church community could not shield him from the depressing reality of racial segregation. His first best friend was a White boy whose father owned a store across the street from the King home. In 1935, they entered separate schools, and Martin was no longer permitted by the boy's parents to play with him. Martin's parents then explained to him what it meant to be "colored." He remarked later, "As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person." (11:10) As he grew older, Martin became painfully conscious that he was not allowed to sit at a restaurant lunch counter, and was required to use "colored" restrooms and drinking fountains, freight elevators, and sit only in the balcony of

movie theaters. He also became aware that his father, as he grew more prominent in the business community, received threatening telephone calls and abusive letters from the Ku Klux Klan, a White supremacist organization. (11:10-11,14)

### Life-Changing Days at Morehouse College

King skipped several grades in school and entered Booker T. Washington High School in the fall of 1942 at the age of 13. Two years later he passed the high school exam, graduated, and enrolled in Morehouse College. At Morehouse, he was mesmerized by its president, Dr. Benjamin Mays, who championed liberation through knowledge. King thought Dr. Mays was the ideal minister. He was rational, not emotional; yet his sermons were both intellectually and spiritually stimulating. Dr. Mays helped King realize the ministry could be a worthy vocation from which he could attack social injustice. Although he had always resisted following in his father's and grandfather's path, he decided at age 17 to pursue the ministry and soon after was ordained as assistant pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. (11:15-16, 19-20)

It was also during his time at Morehouse that King began to understand the complexities of racial attitudes and modify his own attitude toward White Americans. Historian Taylor Branch, whose *Parting the Waters* and *Pillar of Fire* are perhaps the most comprehensive chronicles yet of King and the Civil Rights Movement, noted that King and fellow students at Morehouse during World War II were cognizant that African-American soldiers who fought for democracy overseas were denied equality, even safety, at home. In the summer of 1946, an African-American war veteran and three companions were executed at a roadside ditch near Monroe, Georgia, and a total of six war veterans were killed across the South during a three-week period. (3:63-64)

Despite these infuriating tragedies, King's increasing interaction with Whites helped open his mind. During his undergraduate summers, he worked on tobacco farms in Connecticut and enjoyed weekends with his friends in the integrated restaurants, clubs and theaters of Hartford. Back at school, he served on the Atlanta Intercollegiate Council, an interracial student group. He realized there were many Whites of good will and that interaction could lead to a resolution of inequities. He later remembered "my resentment softened and a spirit of cooperation took its place." (11:17,21)

Another critical development occurred at Morehouse when he read for the first time Henry David Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience." Throughout college, King had searched for a method to help African Americans solve the problem of racial discrimination. Thoreau's concept of passive resistance seemed promising. According to Stephen B. Oates, Civil War historian and author of the authoritative biography *Let the Trumpet Sound*, King was "infatuated with Thoreau's provocative argument that a creative minority—even a minority of 'one honest man' could set in motion a moral revolution." (11:23)

### Graduate Study at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University

King's post-graduate years were, in his own words, "a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil." (7:91) King graduated from Morehouse College in the spring

of 1948 and elected to attend Crozer Seminary, just southwest of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At Crozer, he discovered theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, who encouraged church activism in creating a moral society on earth. Rauschenbusch and other Social Gospel advocates insisted the church must be relevant to all aspects of human life, not just the soul. (11:25-26) King also carefully considered the theories of Marx and Lenin, which he ultimately rejected as fraudulent distortions of Christianity because of their emphasis on materialism and denial of human liberty and the existence of God. (7:92-95)

The pivotal event in his seminary years was an electrifying lecture presented to the students on the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had applied Thoreau's philosophy in nonviolent strikes, boycotts, and marches aimed at ending British oppression in India. King regarded Gandhi as the first person to elevate the love ethic of Jesus above personal interaction to achieving social change on a large scale. King said Gandhi "came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." (11:31-32, 7:96-97)

King's enthusiasm for Gandhi's philosophy was tempered as well as encouraged by the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, a former pacifist, pastor, and veteran of social activism among auto workers in Detroit, Michigan. Niebuhr believed African Americans could make Gandhi's tactics work for them, provided they were willing to endure a long, difficult campaign. He added his own caveat that protest needed to be active, not passive, to be effective. (3:81-86) King's interpretation and understanding of Rauschenbusch, Gandhi, and Niebuhr provided the intellectual foundation on which he formulated strategy throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

King graduated from Crozer in June 1951, as class valedictorian and recipient of a \$1,200 scholarship for two more years of graduate study. (5:28) He chose to pursue a doctoral degree at Boston University's prestigious School of Theology.

### Marriage to Coretta Scott

While studying philosophy at Boston University, King met his future wife. Coretta Scott was a music scholarship student at the New England Conservatory when she and Martin were introduced by a mutual friend. She wanted to pursue a singing career and was resistant to becoming a preacher's wife. Martin, however, eventually won her affection with his intelligence, confidence, and charm. They were married by Martin Luther King, Sr., at Coretta's parents' home in Marion, Georgia, on June 18, 1953. (11:43-45)

### The Call to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

King completed his coursework at Boston University in 1954 and considered several teaching and preaching offers in the northern United States. While visiting his family in Atlanta one weekend he was invited to preach at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He accepted the invitation and soon received a call from the church to serve as their senior pastor. King struggled with the decision because he and Coretta enjoyed their social freedom in the integrated North and were wary of returning to the South and what he described as "all the tragic implications of segregation." (7:18) Ultimately, his sense of duty to go where

he was needed most prevailed and he accepted the call to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He preached his first sermon there in May 1954, the same month the United States Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision mandating the desegregation of public schools. (11:47-50)

Martin and Coretta's decision to return to the South ended a sequence of crucial events in his formative years that set the course for his remarkable rise to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement in America. He had experienced first-hand the denigration of segregation and inherited from his father and grandfather a tradition of protest against that segregation. He learned from them and other preachers the power of oratory to influence hearts and minds. He had studied great philosophers and synthesized their ideas of active, nonviolent resistance. King arrived in Montgomery well-prepared and equipped to shepherd his congregation and others in Montgomery through turbulent events that would grab the nation's attention and eventually sound the final death knell for centuries of segregation in the South.

### **1955-1956: King and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement**

Soon after accepting the call to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King was thrust to the forefront of an effort to win respect and fair treatment for African Americans who used Montgomery's bus system. The successful year-long boycott is widely considered by many Americans as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement in America. The success of the boycott was due in large part to King's leadership and his implementation of the principle of nonviolent resistance. Throughout the boycott, he drew heavily upon the traditions of his father, grandfather, and the African-American church, the knowledge he acquired in his formal education, and the support of Coretta and close friends.

#### The Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Montgomery boycott began on Thursday, December 1, 1955. Mrs. Rosa Parks boarded a bus and sat down behind the section reserved for Whites. More passengers soon boarded the crowded bus, and the driver ordered Mrs. Parks and three other African-American passengers to surrender their seats to boarding White passengers, as was required by Montgomery law. There were no other seats available, and Mrs. Parks was tired, so she politely refused and was arrested. (7:43)

There had been other similar incidents in the preceding years, but Mrs. Parks' arrest touched the nerve of Montgomery's Black community as none other had. The next afternoon, African-American ministers and civic leaders planned a one-day boycott to protest the segregation and lack of courtesy toward African-American passengers. (7:45) Their initial demand—elimination of the reserved zone for Whites and seating on a first-come, first-served basis with African-American passengers starting at the rear of the bus—was so modest that the conservative newspaper, *Montgomery Advertiser*, advised Whites to “simply accept the proposal and be done with it.” (3:144) The mayor, city commissioners, and company officials ignored the advice, convinced that the African-American passengers would soon tire of walking and return to using the buses. However, the protesters remained resolute and after King spoke at a mass rally the first evening of the boycott and they voted unanimously to continue indefinitely until their

demands were met. (7:63-64) In his best-selling memoir of the boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, King christened that fateful rally on the evening of December 5, 1954 “Montgomery’s moment in history.” (7:70)

Martin Luther King, Jr., the young, new pastor in town, did not instigate the boycott and did not seek leadership in the effort that established leaders in the community had anticipated for several years. Even so, there was something about him that inspired others, and he was immediately elected president of the organization set up to organize the boycott, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). (7:56)

The logistical challenges of the boycott were staggering. The MIA had to coordinate and finance a carpool capable of transporting 17,500 former bus riders. They relied on over 300 automobiles volunteered for the effort, and eventually added a fleet of 15 station wagons purchased by sponsoring churches. The cost of the carpool and campaign was approximately \$5,000 per month. As the boycott lengthened, King traveled around the country to generate support and money from Black churches, the NAACP, and labor, civic, and social groups. (7:74-81)

Even more challenging and critical than managing the logistics was maintaining the morale and motivation of participants to endure hardships, harassment, and threats against their lives and property. Many African Americans in Montgomery shared that burden, but no one more than King and his family. City officials targeted him as the movement’s center of gravity and the cause for lost revenue. One day, early in the boycott, as King and his friend Reverend Ralph Abernathy were transporting riders in King’s own car, he was stopped and arrested for traveling 30 miles per hour in a 25 miles per hour zone. He was searched, handcuffed, and taken to the city jail where he was fingerprinted. Initially, the jailer refused to allow King to post bond, but reconsidered and quickly released him when a large, restless crowd gathered outside the jail. It was an eye-opening experience, the first time King had ever been arrested and taken to jail, something he would experience several more times during the boycott and many more times during his fight for equal rights. It steeled his resolve, and he wrote later, “From that night on my commitment to the struggle for freedom was stronger than ever before.” (7:131)

### Adoption of the Principle of Nonviolent Resistance

The boycott provided the crucible in which King forged a philosophy that would sustain not only the Montgomery boycott but also future direct action campaigns. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, he described how the philosophy evolved from an initial appeal to the concept of Christian love, familiar to the Black community, toward the ideas of Thoreau he had learned and studied as a college student. Their intention was not to destroy the bus line, but rather to refuse cooperation until the company instituted justice. King wrote, “We were simply saying to the White community, ‘We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system.’ Something began to say to me, ‘He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.’” (7:51)

Later, the image of Gandhi was introduced to the protest not by King, but by a White woman who wrote a letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* noting the similarities between the boycott and the Gandhian movement in India. King welcomed the insertion and helped popularize the analogy. Many in Montgomery who previously knew nothing about Gandhi became familiar with his teachings. According to King, “Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.” (7:84-85)

Some members of the African-American community were reluctant to adopt the philosophy of nonviolence. They viewed it as weak and compromising. Others argued that the threat of violence was necessary to convince Whites they were serious and not afraid. Others were willing to accept it only as it applied to a group, but vowed to protect themselves in self-defense if attacked personally. Despite the objections and concerns, King and other leaders prevailed and most of those supporting the boycott were willing to test the idea. (7:87-88)

King acknowledged in retrospect the importance of his leadership in gaining a tentative but firm embrace of nonviolence:

In a real sense, Montgomery’s Negroes showed themselves willing to grapple with a new approach to the crisis in race relations. It is probably true that most of them did not believe in nonviolence as a philosophy of life, but because of their confidence in their leaders and because nonviolence was presented to them as a simple expression of Christianity in action, they were willing to use it as a technique. (7:87-89)

Since the beginning of the boycott, King had received many threatening letters and telephone calls. The crucial hour of the experiment in nonviolence and test of leadership occurred when King’s own home was bombed. Moreover, after a particularly disturbing call in late January 1956, he was tempted to give up the boycott and prayed in desperation. However, in the next moment he felt a Divine presence. “I could hear,” he wrote, “the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.” (7:132-135)

Three days later, January 30, 1956, while King was speaking at an evening rally, a passing motorist tossed a bomb onto the front porch of his home. The explosion rocked the neighborhood. By the time King arrived to find his wife and daughter safe in the back portion of the house, the mayor, police commissioner, and an angry crowd had all gathered at the scene. Blacks—some of them armed—were ready to meet violence with violence. White reporters inside the house were afraid to go outside. King stepped forward and calmly encouraged the crowd to disperse peacefully. “We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence,” he said, “We must meet violence with nonviolence.” Miraculously, the crowd moved quietly away. (7:136-138)

Privately, King was not so certain of his convictions. He considered the viciousness of people who would bomb his home and attempt to kill his wife and daughter. His anger rekindled

the hatred he had once felt toward Whites. He applied for a permit to carry a gun in the car, but then reconsidered. He fought off the bitterness. He and Coretta made a seminal decision that they were committed to nonviolence and would not arm themselves for self-defense. They even disposed of the single gun they already owned. (7:140-141) King had again made a critical decision of immeasurable consequences for the course of the Civil Rights Movement.

### Victory in Montgomery

Another attempt to break King's spirit occurred when a Montgomery County grand jury indicted him and more than one hundred others in February 1956 for violating a law that prohibited interference in the operation of a lawful business without just cause. King returned from a speaking trip and voluntarily surrendered, was fingerprinted, booked, jailed, and released on bond. His was the first case to go to trial. During his trial, 28 witnesses told the court why the boycott for better treatment was justified. One woman's husband was shot to death by a policeman because he demanded a refund of his 10 cent fare; another woman's blind husband was dragged down the street when his foot caught in the closing door and the White driver refused to stop. Despite their moving testimony, King was convicted on March 22, 1956 and fined \$500, a minimal penalty because the judge appreciated his efforts to keep the boycott nonviolent. King, now a convicted criminal, remained undeterred. (7:143-149) The boycott stretched on through the spring, summer, and fall of 1956.

The boycott ended officially on November 14, 1956. The United States Supreme Court had ruled the day prior that Alabama's transportation laws requiring segregation were unconstitutional. Supporters of the MIA decided not to board buses again, however, until the enforcement order reached Montgomery, which occurred on December 20, 1956. (7:151-160, 170)

After initial calm, angry Whites responded violently to the integration of the buses. Some buses were fired on, an African-American teenage girl was beaten by White men as she exited a bus, and a pregnant woman was shot in the leg. Evening bus service was suspended. On January 9, 1957, Reverend Abernathy's home and church were bombed, as well as the homes and churches of other Black and White ministers whom had supported the boycott. More bombings occurred on January 28, including a second attempt on the King home. Seven men were arrested for the bombings and even signed confessions, yet a local jury refused to convict them. After their trial, though, the disturbances ended and desegregation proceeded. King observed "The skies did not fall when the integrated buses finally traveled the streets of Montgomery." (7:178-180)

The importance of the Montgomery story can not be overstated. Montgomery produced a template for nonviolent, direct action campaigns that King used throughout the rest of his life. He and the other Montgomery leaders were convinced nonviolent resistance was the technique they could use to bring about social justice. Montgomery provided the intellectual grounding and became the model for all subsequent campaigns led by King. According to biographer Stephen B. Oates, the "Montgomery way" enabled Blacks to shed their passivity without resorting to violence, which only would have gotten them killed. It also instilled a sense of pride in Blacks throughout the South, who felt they could hold their heads up high for the first time

and never have to bow them again. It also demonstrated that the Church, and ministers such as Dr. King, could and would provide the leadership that propelled the movement. (11:112)

### **1957-1959: Preparation for a Sustained Southern Campaign**

The Montgomery boycott catapulted King to national prominence. He was deluged with offers to write and speak about the experience, and he quickly realized there was tremendous hunger throughout the South for a leader and organization that could help dismantle segregation. In the years following the boycott, King labored to establish a network of leaders and organizations who could meet that challenge. Additionally, he solidified his commitment to nonviolence and returned with his family to his home church in Atlanta, a more effective base for region-wide operations.

#### Spreading the Montgomery Story

King took advantage of every available opportunity to tell the Montgomery story and call for an end to segregation in the South. He lectured constantly on behalf of the NAACP and other organizations. *Time* magazine featured a cover story on Dr. King and the boycott on February 18, 1957, which brought him national attention. Later that spring, on May 17, he spoke at a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, a prelude to the March on Washington six years later. Tens of thousands were inspired as never before when he delivered his “Give Us the Ballot” speech. (13:197-200) He met separately with President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon, lobbying for federal civil rights legislation. He finished *Stride Toward Freedom* in May, 1958, which triggered even more requests for television and radio appearances. (11:115-138) The post-boycott period proved perilous, too, as King was stabbed by a deranged woman during a book-signing event in New York City in September 1958. The tip of the blade pressed against his aorta, and very delicate surgery, involving the removal of a rib and portions of his breastbone, was required to spare his life. The surgeon’s incision left a permanent scar in the shape of a cross on King’s chest. (11:138-139)

#### Founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

The Montgomery boycott inspired additional boycotts in Birmingham and Mobile, Alabama, and Tallahassee, Florida. King and other boycott leaders realized there was opportunity and need for a permanent coordinating agency that could expand the movement across the entire South. The church was the most logical organization on which to base the new organization because of its widespread influence in the Black community and its reservoir of ministers from which to develop leaders. King convened leaders in Atlanta in January 1957 to discuss the idea, and they met again in Montgomery on August 7 - 8, 1957 to finalize plans. They named the organization the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and elected King president. The purpose of the SCLC was to operate through southern Black churches to help coordinate civil rights activity. The first and primary objective adopted by the SCLC was to increase voter registration of Blacks in the South. They kicked off a registration campaign called “Crusade for Citizenship” on the anniversary of President Lincoln’s birthday in 1958, aimed at registering enough new voters to influence the presidential election of 1960. (11:108-109, 122-123, 129)

## Trips to Ghana and India

Dr. and Mrs. King were invited to Ghana in March 1957 to witness ceremonies marking Ghana's independence from Great Britain. The trip instigated a new and life-long interest in African affairs, and helped convince King that people of color around the world were anxious to realize their full citizenship rights. (11:116-118)

The Kings were also able to make a pilgrimage to India in February and March 1959. They visited with Prime Minister Nehru and other disciples of Gandhi. King was shocked at the poverty he saw, but amazed at the moral power the government exerted in efforts to end discrimination against India's lowest class, the "untouchables." The trip was one of the most rewarding experiences of his life. It strengthened his conviction that nonviolence could be used to achieve racial equality in the United States as it had in India between the British and Indians. King was inspired to imitate Gandhi more in his personal life, emphasizing humility more and material wealth less. (11:140-144, 5:75)

## Return to Atlanta and Ebenezer Baptist Church

The newly formed SCLC met in the fall of 1959 to map out an ambitious strategy to register Black voters, push for integration of southern schools, and pressure state officials to comply with federal civil rights laws. The strategy would require extensive training of leaders and volunteers in the technique of nonviolence. King was eager to lead the campaign forward, and acknowledged reluctantly that he could no longer pastor a church full-time and simultaneously give the SCLC the attention it required. Once again, King was faced with a decision that would signal his resolve. He knew there was a larger struggle ahead, one that would require an exhaustive amount of labor. He decided to resign as pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and move his family to Atlanta, where he could work full-time for SCLC and assist his father on a part-time basis at Ebenezer Baptist Church. (11:145-146)

The move to Atlanta was the last in a series of events following the boycott that prepared King for the transition from the pastoral leader of the Montgomery boycott to the leader of the larger campaign for civil rights in the southern United States. According to Oates, "History was calling him home to Atlanta, obliging him to abandon his role as a preacher with a concern for civil rights and become a militant movement leader with a private and abiding religious faith." (11:146).

## **1960-1963: Major Campaigns**

While he was busy organizing the SCLC, King supported the efforts of other grassroots organizations. They often sought his participation because of his stature and ability to move people with his powerful words. The first campaign directed by King and the SCLC in Albany, Georgia, had only limited success, but provided valuable training for the exhaustive and groundbreaking campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. Soon after Birmingham's success came the unforgettable March on Washington, arguably the most memorable event of the Civil Rights Movement in America.

## Sit-ins and Student Movements

Sit-in demonstrations began on February 2, 1960, when four Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina refused to leave a Woolworth lunch counter until they were served. Their protest touched off a wave of similar sit-ins all over the South, and nine days later James Lawson, Jr., a future associate of Dr. King, led more than 500 people in sit-ins at lunch counters all over Nashville, Tennessee. (11:161)

Students who instigated the sit-in demonstrations were motivated primarily by King and the model of the Montgomery boycott. It had been the central event of their teen years. King was not involved in planning or starting the sit-ins, but he quickly stepped into the leadership role the students expected him to fill. Concerned that the energy of the uncoordinated, spontaneous protests would dissipate, he called student leaders together for a conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960. He emphasized the importance of nonviolence and recommended the formation of a standing committee to organize the demonstrations. Out of this conference evolved the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization that often worked closely with King and SCLC in the years ahead. (1:112-114)

King's participation in the sit-ins helped elect John F. Kennedy President in November 1960. King was arrested at a sit-in in Atlanta on October 19, 1960, and opted to remain in jail rather than post bond. His arrest triggered additional charges in a neighboring county where he had been arrested and placed on probation the previous year for failing to transfer his driver's license from Alabama to Georgia. As a result, King was taken to Reidsville Penitentiary. King's transfer to one of Georgia's maximum-security prisons alarmed many supporters who were concerned for his safety. Vice-President and presidential candidate Nixon refused to intervene, but Senator Kennedy helped win King's release on bond on October 28. Kennedy's intervention won widespread support in the African-American community, and he won the election days later with a margin of less than 113,000 popular votes. Many analysts believed the episode swung votes toward Kennedy. King used their analysis to dramatize his belief that "one of the most significant steps a Negro could take was the short walk to the voting booth." (11:161-166)

King and the SCLC also supported the Freedom Rides, which were sponsored by a northern organization, the Conference On Racial Equality (CORE). Black and White members of CORE boarded commercial buses and rode through the South in 1961, attempting to force southern states to abide by federal law and desegregate their bus terminals. The SCLC purchased tickets for the riders, and King had dinner with them as they passed through Atlanta. He raised money to bail them out of jail and send them back to school in the fall. (11:174)

The riders were subject to deadly violence by White protesters, who attacked and burned one bus between Atlanta and Birmingham and attacked the riders of a second bus in the Birmingham terminal with baseball bats, lead pipes, and bicycle chains. When a replacement group of riders attempted to depart Birmingham a few days later, police deserted the station and more than 1,000 Whites descended on the riders and beat them with pipes and clubs. In response, King traveled to Montgomery to address Freedom Ride supporters at a rally in

Abernathy's church. A mob assembled outside, and President Kennedy sent in 500 federal marshals to prevent a riot. (11:174-177)

The Freedom Riders persisted and eventually won an end to Jim Crow laws in bus terminals all over the South. News reporters captured on film the vicious attacks on the riders, and the nation was outraged. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy requested the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue guidelines in September 1961 requiring an end to segregation in all interstate bus terminals beginning November 1, 1961. King learned a great deal from the ordeal, particularly the importance of media coverage. Without the irrefutable evidence provided by the news cameras, most Northerners would never have believed such brutality against peaceful demonstrators was possible in America. (11:178)

### The Albany Campaign

The first campaign sponsored by the SCLC was in Albany, Georgia in 1961. It was not a success. King and Abernathy became involved in the protests there, sponsored by SNCC, in 1961. King spoke at a church rally in December 1961 and accepted an on-the-spot invitation to lead a march two days later. He and Abernathy were arrested during the march. While they were in jail, one faction of Black leaders settled for an unsatisfactory agreement with city officials. As a result, Blacks were demoralized and the movement fizzled. King and Abernathy were jailed again during a subsequent march, and a coalition of Whites and Blacks who were working against King bailed him out of jail, against his will, hoping to dilute his influence. (11:188-194)

King regretted having become involved in a campaign he had not planned, but realized that the credibility of nonviolent resistance was on the line. He announced publicly that SCLC would conduct a campaign in Albany aimed at an across-the-board desegregation of all public facilities. King and SCLC led numerous marches with the intent of filling the jails and creating a moral crisis for the community. His nonviolent techniques were foiled by Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, who had carefully studied King's tactics. Pritchett made sure the police were polite and equally nonviolent in their arrests of the marchers, and arranged for temporary use of jails outside of Albany, thereby ensuring King could not overwhelm the jail system. The movement sputtered again without any substantive achievement. (11:194-199)

The Albany Campaign failed because of disunited factions, lack of a plausible strategy, and a lack of willpower on the part of many of the participants. (11:199) King learned from the experience and was able to reap tremendous success from his next campaign in Birmingham by developing adequate strategy and ensuring the entire Black community was united in its effort.

### The Birmingham Campaign

Dr. King and the SCLC were invited to Birmingham by community organizer Fred Shuttlesworth after businesses there reneged on their promise to desegregate. King considered Birmingham "the most thoroughly segregated city in the country." (11:210) He also believed a campaign there would be dangerous, because of the notoriously violent police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor. On the other hand, he knew that if he was successful in leading a

campaign under these circumstances, then success was possible anywhere in the South. (11:209-210)

King developed a detailed strategy for Birmingham, aimed at business leaders instead of government officials, since Blacks did not have the votes to influence politicians but did spend enough money to have an impact on merchants. He planned to begin with demonstrations at a few selected targets, followed by mass marches, all of which would lead, over the course of several weeks, to a point of “creative tension.” Ultimately, he hoped the Federal Government would be forced to intervene, spurring legislation that would end segregation in the South once and for all. (11:210-211)

As the SCLC staff made final preparations for the campaign, King made them aware of the dangers they faced:

“I want to make a point that I think everyone here should consider very carefully and decide if he wants to be with this campaign.” He said, “There are less than a dozen people here assessing the type of enemy we’re going to face. I have to tell you that in my judgement, some of the people sitting here today will not come back alive from this campaign. And I want you to think about it.” (11:213)

King announced in January 1963, that he was going to Birmingham to lead the campaign until “Pharaoh lets God’s people go.” (11:213) Not all Blacks in Birmingham initially welcomed him, but King was able to use his legendary oratory skills to unify the divided community. On April 3, he released the *Birmingham Manifesto*, which demanded that all lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains in stores be desegregated; that a biracial committee be established to schedule additional desegregation; and that Blacks be hired in local business and industry. (11:216-217)

The Birmingham Campaign, like others, relied upon peaceful sit-ins and marches and the willingness of the protesters to suffer violent attacks and jailing without retaliating. Several times, King made crucial decisions which proved essential in achieving the objectives. On Good Friday, he opted to lead a march in defiance of a court injunction in order to go to jail and demonstrate his commitment (it was the thirteenth time King had been jailed). While in prison, King responded to a group of Christian and Jewish clergy who had published an open letter in the Birmingham newspaper asking why he pushed so hard for changes in the social order. King’s eloquent response, “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” outlined in concise terms exactly why Negroes could wait no longer for their freedom and was so forceful and persuasive the clergy did not attempt to respond. (13:289-302) Copies of King’s letter were circulated and printed all over the world and it was instrumental in communicating the rationale behind the protests. (11:220-230)

King made another fateful decision when he chose to employ junior high and high school students in the marches after most of the adult volunteers were detained in jail. King and other SCLC leaders were wary of the move, but the youth were eager to help and willing to pledge to the technique of nonviolence. On May 2, 1963, 1,000 youngsters turned out to march, and Commissioner Conner ordered more than 900 of them arrested. Police carted the chanting

children to jail in school buses. The next day, more than 2,500 began the march, and a frustrated Conner ordered his men to turn their dogs against the children and blast them with water from fire hoses. Media reporters filmed the nauseating debacle and pictures of the bloodied youth were broadcast all across America. (11:232-235) Conner understood the power of the media, and had threatened to confiscate the press credentials of reporters from outside Birmingham, but was unable to stop news of the carnage from reaching the outer world. (8:46) The children, for their part, persisted unafraid. On Sunday, May 5, Reverend Charles Billups led more than 3,000 marchers. On that particular day, Conner's men, burdened with shame, refused his orders to attack, and the march proceeded uninhibited as quieted police and firemen stood by. The Black children of Birmingham had galvanized the entire nation and won an unprecedented moral victory. (11:236-237)

Final victory was achieved in Birmingham when the jails overflowed with more than 3,000 protestors and Conner had nowhere else to put them. Business leaders softened in the crisis and agreed finally to the demands of the *Birmingham Manifesto*. As in Montgomery, Whites responded with violence. They bombed the home of King's brother, a local pastor who led some of the marches, and also the hotel from which King had led the campaign. Unlike Montgomery, however, King was unable to calm the Black community, and the entire city erupted in a night of violence. President Kennedy sent 3,000 federal troops to restore order. (11:237-242) The bombings continued throughout the summer and into autumn, as schools were desegregated. On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, four young African-American girls were murdered in a bomb attack on the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. (3:888-891)

Despite the tragedy that followed the campaign, the Birmingham Campaign was a resounding success. Businesses did in fact desegregate. King confirmed his ability to pull together various factions in a unified campaign based on nonviolence. The campaign inspired other nonviolent, direct action campaigns all across the United States in the summer of 1963, forcing the desegregation of hotels, restaurants, schools, parks and pools in 261 cities. King called it the "summer of our discontent," when Blacks became the equal of all men. King emerged in the minds of Americans as the primary spokesperson for the Black community. *Time* magazine named him "Man of the Year," declaring Birmingham the battleground in the revolution of equality for Blacks, and noting that Black and White Americans both considered King the leader of the revolution. (1:198) Most of all, the Birmingham Campaign succeeded in capturing the attention of the President and Congress, as King had hoped, and highlighting the need for federal legislation to outlaw segregation. (11:242-243, 254-255)

### The March on Washington

The March on Washington on August 28, 1963 was organized by labor leader A. Philip Randolph to demonstrate support for the civil rights bill President Kennedy had introduced to Congress earlier in the year. King agreed to speak at the rally because, as he told the President, it "could serve as a means through which people with legitimate discontents could channel their grievances under disciplined, non-violent leadership." (11:246)

The organizers planned for 100,000 people, but more than a quarter of a million gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial on that sweltering August afternoon to listen to the singers and

speakers. There had been no other gathering like it in American history. Their enthusiasm and hope was obvious. Historian Taylor Branch described the gathering as a convergence of “determined high spirits.” (3:876) King wrote, “Among the nearly 250,000 people who journeyed that day to the capital [sic], there were many dignitaries and many celebrities, but the stirring emotion came from the mass of ordinary people who stood in majestic dignity as witnesses to their single-minded determination to achieve democracy in their time.” (8:134)

King was scheduled as the final speaker of the day, allotted just eight minutes after singer Mahalia Jackson. When his moment arrived, he stepped to the microphone amid great expectations. All three television networks interrupted scheduled programming to carry his speech live. He delivered his carefully crafted lines, alluding to the unfulfilled promises of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation 100 years earlier. Thousands clapped and shouted in cadence to his rhythmic lines. As he gazed at the multitudes spread across the mall, Black and White together, he was deeply moved. He doubted his words were worthy of the occasion these pilgrims had created. His conscience called him to depart from the prepared text and summon from his years of struggle, suffering, and successes a vivid description of the vision he carried in his heart. He paused. Mahalia Jackson called from behind, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.” And so he began, “I still have a dream . . .” (11:257-260, 3:882)

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American 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.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with

new meaning—“my country ‘tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride; from every mountain side, let freedom ring”—and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that.

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in words of the old Negro spiritual; “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” (13:219-220)

King was elated at the success of the entire march, as well as his own speech. The television coverage allowed millions of Americans to see Blacks and Whites together engaged in a serious, peaceful political undertaking. He wrote, “For the first time millions listened to the informed and thoughtful words of Negro spokesman, from all walks of life.” (8:136)

President Kennedy also was encouraged at the success of the event and invited the speakers, none of whom had eaten lunch, to the White House for an impromptu meal. Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, said Kennedy was “bubbling over.” [with excitement] (11:262) Novelist James Baldwin described the euphoria King inspired as a moment when “it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real, perhaps the beloved community would not forever remain that dream one dreamed in agony.” (11:262)

Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech captured the attention of many who had not previously thought seriously about civil rights for African Americans, and was as instrumental in garnering support for federal legislation as the many miles he walked and the many nights he spent in jail.

## **1964-1965: Victories and Recognition**

The major and minor victories King helped win all across the South began to produce results on a national scale soon after the March on Washington. After the nation was wrenched by events in Birmingham and lifted by King’s words before the Lincoln Memorial, Congress passed landmark civil rights legislation in 1964. Also in 1964, King was honored for his leadership with the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace. Another bloody but successful campaign in Selma, Alabama in 1965 led directly to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

## The Civil Rights Act of 1964

King had lobbied hard since the Montgomery boycott for a satisfactory federal civil rights bill. The Eisenhower Administration, urged on by King and other Black leaders, submitted a bill in 1957, the first since Reconstruction. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson pressed for passage, but had to water it down to get enough votes. Although it became law, the Eisenhower Administration did not enforce it with enough vigor to challenge the entrenched segregation of the South. King was not satisfied. (11:119-122) He helped persuade President Kennedy to introduce a new bill in 1963, but it was not satisfactory to King either and was filibustered in the Senate. (11:214, 292)

The Birmingham campaign and March on Washington both influenced President Kennedy and renewed his interest in a strong civil rights bill. All of his cabinet members were opposed to introducing the controversial legislation, except for Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who convinced the President to ally with King and move forward. President Kennedy addressed the nation on June 11, 1963, paraphrasing some of King's own speeches and sent proposed legislation to Congress eight days later. (11:244-245) Kennedy was assassinated on November 23, and President Johnson told Congress in his first address on November 27 that nothing could honor the slain president more than passage of the civil rights legislation for which he had fought. (11:274)

President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 immediately upon its passage July 2, 1964. He opted not to wait for July 4 because he wanted the full attention of the nation before they began holiday festivities. Just hours after the bill cleared the Senate, Johnson spoke to the American people and signed the bill in the presence of eight Black leaders, including Dr. King and Rosa Parks. (4:387-388) He said, "those who are equal before God shall now be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public." (11:301)

## The Nobel Peace Prize

By the time Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, King had emerged as the primary spokesperson for African Americans, and the rest of the world was beginning to understand his technique of direct action through nonviolence, which set him apart from other civil rights leaders. This distinction was emphasized when King was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in December 1964. King, only 35 years old, was the youngest recipient ever. He was gratified, and careful to share the honor with others who shared his convictions. In a released statement he said, "I do not consider this merely an honor to me personally, but a tribute to the discipline, wise restraint and majestic courage of the millions of gallant Negroes and White persons of good will who have followed a nonviolent course in seeking to establish a reign of justice and rule of love across this nation of ours." (11:312)

King used the presentation ceremonies to advocate his conviction that all great social evils could be confronted nonviolently. The Kings and several friends traveled to Oslo, Norway, where King Olav V presented the medal on December 10, 1964. The chairman of the Norwegian

Parliament introduced King as “an undaunted champion of peace . . . the first person in the Western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence.” (11:320) King accepted the medal as “profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time . . . the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.” (11:321)

Periodicals in America joined in the endorsement of King and his methodology over alternative leaders who favored separatism and violence. The *Christian Century* wrote, “Some would-be Negro leaders are quite willing to pull the house down on everyone, destroying the Negro in the process. King has not only won more battles for the Negro than any other individual of our times; he has done so in a spirit and wisdom which provide the ground for new and even more extensive Negro victories.” (11:313)

### The Selma Campaign

Events surrounding the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize and increasing demands on King for public appearances did not distract him from leading the SCLC toward its primary objective of gaining the ballot for Blacks in the South. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not have clear language on voting rights, and there remained very strong resistance across to South to registration of Blacks to vote. By Christmas, 1964, King and the SCLC completed planning for a major campaign in Selma, Alabama to overcome that resistance. The SNCC had started a registration drive there in 1963, and in December 1964, a committee of fifteen community organizations invited King to come lead the struggling effort. King agreed to go to Selma because it was a typical, rigidly segregated, deep-South community, where the County Board of Registrars met only twice a month, processing as few applications as possible and routinely rejecting applications from Blacks on minor technicalities such as misspelled words. Selma was also a good opportunity for King because of a crude, swaggering sheriff named Jim Clark, who proved to be a perfect foil for King’s technique of nonviolent resistance. King hoped to use Clark’s ruthless aggression against the demonstrators to draw attention to the cause and spark more effective federal legislation. (11:302, 325-328)

The Selma Campaign began in January 1965, and followed a course similar to others King led. Demonstrators periodically marched to the county courthouse, where they encountered Sheriff Clark and were beaten and jailed. King and Abernathy were both jailed. As the jails overflowed with more than 3,000 inmates, a congressional delegation was dispatched to meet with King and national news media increased their coverage. On February 10, Sheriff Clark’s deputies chased Black youths with cattle prods, and a furious King led more than 2,800 in a protest march the next day. The moment of creative tension arrived when Alabama state troopers shot and killed teenage marcher Jimmie Lee Jackson. King announced he would defy a ban on further demonstrations issued by Governor George Wallace and lead a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery on March 7. (11:335-347)

The violent events of March 7, 1965 outraged Americans as no other civil rights movement event, and became known as “Bloody Sunday.” King intended to delay the march one day so he could return to Atlanta and preach to his congregation, but consented to allow his associate, Reverend Hosea Williams, to lead an eager group of 500 down the Jefferson Davis highway on Sunday, as originally planned. Williams, John Lewis of SNCC, and the marchers

were tear gassed by state troopers after they crossed the Pettus Bridge just outside of Selma. Sheriff Clark, mounted on horseback, led the attack, with troopers using bullwhips and rubber tubes wrapped in barbed wire. Lewis' skull was fractured. The ABC television network interrupted its programming to broadcast the carnage live. Americans were appalled at what they saw. (11:356-348)

King was sickened by the turn of events and escalated his effort to bring a successful conclusion to the campaign. He sent telegrams around the country urgently requesting clergy of all faiths and races to join him in another march on Tuesday, March 9. More than 400 clergymen responded to his call and flew to Selma on Monday. On Tuesday, King led them in a dramatic march across the Pettus Bridge, where they again encountered 350 state troopers. King, hoping to avoid more bloodshed, agreed to turn the march around. That night, James Reeb, a White Unitarian, was beaten in Selma for his support of the campaign, and later died in a coma. His death brought more outrage throughout the country. President Johnson finally sent federal troops to Selma to stop the bloodshed, and addressed a joint session of Congress on March 15 to ask for a new voting rights bill. (11:349-354)

King's Selma strategy, though costly in human terms, worked perfectly. According to Oates, "As King had hoped, events in Selma—and the wide-scale outrage they had ignited—had convinced Johnson that he should draft a stronger voting bill than his administration had been contemplating, and had aroused moderate and progressive members of both parties in Congress, thus assuring Johnson of the support he needed to get the measure enacted." (11:354)

The Selma Campaign ended in a glorious celebration at the state capitol in Montgomery. After Johnson called for a new voting bill, an Alabama state judge approved King's plan for a march from Selma to Montgomery. Three hundred carefully selected marchers walked the entire three days, with more than 3,000 walking the first leg across the Pettus Bridge and more than 10,000 completing the last day's portion at Montgomery. On Thursday, March 25, King led over 25,000 people on a march around the city of Montgomery, the largest civil rights demonstration ever in the southern United States. The celebration brought King and the larger Civil Rights Movement full circle back to Montgomery to the steps of the state capitol, just a stone's throw from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. (11:355-363)

Selma was the finest hour for King, the SCLC, and the Civil Rights Movement. President Johnson requested King's presence in the gallery when he addressed Congress regarding the proposed voting bill, and paid homage to the protests, which provided him the leverage to call for more federal action. The *Washington Post* called King "a master organizer of demonstrations," who had exposed "the plight of the Negro in the South as had never been done before. As television journalism zeroes in, Dr. King brought . . . Alabama dramatically into the homes of Americans. He made racism in the South come alive." (11:354)

### The Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Selma Campaign provided the momentum required for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but King and the SCLC supported efforts by other organizations that were working toward the same objective. King worked with SNCC and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

field workers who conducted a registration drive throughout Mississippi in the summer of 1964. He visited towns and rural communities on a five-day tour. The SNCC campaign was also costly in human terms: Six people were killed, two wounded by gunfire, at least 80 were beaten, 1,000 arrested, 27 Black churches were burned, and 31 homes were burned or bombed. (11: 306-309).

The direct link between King's Selma Campaign and the Voting Rights Act, however, is quite clear. After Bloody Sunday, support in Congress for legislation grew exponentially. The *Birmingham News*, which criticized King heavily during his campaign there in 1963, and the *New York Times* both urged Congress to respond to King's call for the ballot before frustrated Blacks grew impatient with nonviolence. (6:247) According to Oates, political analysts at the time were nearly unanimous in their assessment that without the pressure from Selma, Congress would have taken years, perhaps longer, to approve a similar bill. Yet due to King's tactical prowess, his commitment to nonviolence, and his understanding of how to apply it effectively, the SCLC was able to realize its first priority from its original inception back in 1957—gain for Southern Blacks' full participation in the democratic process. (11:371)

The Voting Rights Act was the SCLC's greatest victory. Congress approved a bill in early August that outlawed all literacy tests, provided federal supervision of registration in seven states, and challenged the legality of poll taxes in state elections. (11:370-371) King flew to Washington for meetings with the President and was present when he signed the bill on August 6, 1965. President Johnson called it a "triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that's ever been won on any battlefield . . . today we strike away the last major shackle of . . . fierce and ancient bonds." (9:2) The bill had very practical as well as symbolic impact, as it changed permanently the political landscape of the South. In Mississippi alone, registration of Black voters jumped from seven to 60 percent in less than two years. (4:606)

### **1966-1967: Broadening of Concern**

As King matured, he became more mindful of problems outside the South and beyond the color barrier. He deliberately shifted emphasis from securing civil rights for Black Americans toward securing human rights for all Americans. Consequently, he nationalized the effort to end racial discrimination, gave voice to his concerns about American involvement in Vietnam, and planned the largest direct involvement campaign he had ever attempted—an effort to eliminate poverty among all of America's poor, both Black and White. None of these efforts were as successful as his Southern campaigns, but they are significant because they reflect his transition from a Southern civil rights leader to a national spokesman for moral reform.

#### The Campaign Moves North

King and the SCLC had considered expansion northward as early as January 1964, but decided not to because they didn't want to create tension with Northern-based allies such as CORE and the NAACP. (11:291) However, after riots in Northern cities in the summer of 1964, and particularly after the Watts riot in Los Angeles in mid-August 1965, King felt he should do something to help Northern Blacks who did not think their problems were being addressed. He told SCLC staff in August 1965 that the "present mood dictates we cannot wait." (12:39)

In June 1965, King announced publicly that he was nationalizing the campaign and moving north. He visited New York and Boston, where he toured African-American communities and spoke at rallies. He also visited Chicago in July, and led 30,000 in a march to City Hall to demand improvements in the education system. (11:367-369)

King returned to Chicago for a Birmingham-style campaign in January 1966. He wanted to destroy the forces responsible for creating and maintaining slums, and he rented a tenement in the West side community of Lawndale to live in during the campaign. He applied the same tactics as he had in the South, mostly marches and rallies. Response from White communities through which he marched to protest housing segregation was as expected. He and police were both battered with bricks from onlookers. In Chicago, however, King encountered a new obstacle: Black Power proponents who were not committed to nonviolence. King struggled and was not always successful in maintaining control of his marches, and gang-related violence broke out. Mayor Richard Daley acquired a court injunction limiting the marches to 500 people per day. King threatened to outflank the injunction by leading a march to the all-White suburb of Cicero, which was not covered by the injunction. Cicero was well-known nationally because of a Black couple that attempted to move there in 1951 and was threatened and harassed until they moved away. To avoid the conflagration that was certain to occur in Cicero, Daley and other leaders signed a moderate "Summit Agreement" that theoretically opened housing markets to Blacks. (11:387-388, 408-415)

The Chicago Campaign was not very successful, except for the limited concessions gained in the Summit Agreement. However, Bernard Lafayette, an organizer with the American Friends Service Committee and close associate of King's who helped with the Chicago Campaign, thought it broke significant ground. It proved for the first time that large numbers of people could be mobilized in a northern city for a nonviolent, direct action campaign. Furthermore, it exposed myths about open housing in the North. King was able to spotlight conditions in a major northern city for the entire nation to see. (12:23)

The SCLC followed Chicago with a voter registration drive in Cleveland during the summer of 1967. The drive was instrumental in electing Carl Stokes mayor, the first Black to serve as mayor of a major American city. King was also convinced the SCLC's work there helped prevent riots, which took place in most major cities during the long hot summer of 1967. (11:444-445)

### King's Struggle of Conscience over the War in Vietnam

During this time period, King became increasingly alarmed about the escalation of the war in Vietnam. He had voiced his concerns to President Johnson privately prior to the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King viewed the war as part of a worldwide struggle against colonialism, and thought America had made some crucial errors in its response to the upheaval. He also thought the war was tearing apart America domestically, and wasting money that could be used to fight poverty at home. The loss of some of the best SCLC staff members to other organizations devoted specifically to ending the war seemed to him analogous to the nation's diversion of resources on a larger scale. He was also frustrated that the government could integrate the troops so easily yet seemed unable to achieve that same integration among civilians.

“So we have been repeatedly faced” he said, “with the cruel irony of watching Negro and White boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.” (11:373-376, 426-428, 434)

King felt obliged as a Christian minister and Nobel Peace Prize recipient to speak out against the war, despite warnings from nearly every friend and advisor that it would cost him support in his other endeavors. King delivered a major speech, devoted wholly to the war in Vietnam, in Los Angeles on February 25, 1967. He also participated in an anti-war rally at the United Nations on April 15, 1967, even though he was uncomfortable being associated with some of the extremists involved. His most famous statement regarding the war was a sermon he delivered at the Riverside Church in New York, also in April 1967. King’s sermon brought relentless attacks from both friends and enemies, but he stood firm in his conscience and was confident that history would confirm his judgement. (11: 431-444).

### Concern for the Poor of America

As King became more concerned about the broad range of social problems in general, he decided to act more forcefully to eliminate poverty. The concern itself was not new. He had long believed there was a direct connection between the plight of Blacks in the South and lack of economic opportunity. He recognized the irony that many of those involved in the lunch counter sit-ins would not have been able to pay for their food if they had been served. (11:303) In anticipation of the Chicago Campaign, King had said “The nonviolent movement must be as much directed against the violence of poverty, which destroys the souls of people, as against the violence of segregation.” (11:380)

King’s concern about poverty signified his growing understanding of the connections between all social evils and the necessity of attacking them on a global scale. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, King wrote in 1967:

However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war. (9:167)

King devised a grand plan, inspired by Marian Wright Edelman, for a Poor People’s Campaign, based on the war veterans’ Bonus March of 1932. He announced formally that beginning in the spring of 1968, the SCLC would provide three months of training in nonviolent techniques to 3,000 poor people from 10 cities and five rural areas of the United States. The poor would travel to Washington in caravans, and camp out indefinitely until the federal government instituted an acceptable plan to eliminate poverty. (11:447-451)

Many of King’s advisors thought the Poor People’s Campaign was far too ambitious for the SCLC, and King never had the opportunity to resolve the issue because of his assassination in April 1968. The campaign was conducted as planned, however, and King’s death brought a groundswell of support in both financial contributions and volunteers. With high hopes, campers arrived in Washington in May 1968. But the experiment struggled and eventually fizzled due to

poor leadership and incessant rain. King's lieutenants had hoped for a jubilant campaign that would serve as a fitting memorial to the great leader. Instead, the political and physical washout seemed a somber and appropriate metaphor for the loss of leadership America experienced when it lost Martin Luther King, Jr. (10:84, 94, 141)

## **1968: King's Final Days**

King's final days are representative of his increasing involvement in causes anchored in, but extending beyond civil rights for Black Americans. As he finalized plans for the Poor People's Campaign, he became entangled in a labor strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Weary, King sensed he was reaching the limit of what he could contribute to improvement of life for others. The nationwide convulsion triggered by his assassination and the stunned silence that blanketed the world reflected the prominence he achieved in his short lifetime as the preeminent leader and spokesperson for nonviolent resistance to social evil.

### The Memphis Labor Strike

King went to Memphis in March 1968 to support striking sanitation workers. The workers, most of whom were Black, wanted recognition for their union, higher wages, and better working conditions. King agreed to help because he thought of their strike as a prototype for the Poor People's Campaign. He spoke at a rally on March 18, and led a march on March 28. There were feuding factions involved in the strike that King did not know about, and the march quickly became violent. As soon as King realized what was happening, he refused to lead the march forward. More than 60 people were injured and dozens of businesses damaged. One teenager later died of gunshot wounds. At a press conference afterward, he acknowledged he had not prepared properly for the march, and vowed to return soon to lead a truly nonviolent protest. (11:469-479)

### The Assassination

During the winter of 1967-68, King and SCLC staff were increasingly apprehensive about the possibility King might be assassinated. Two St. Louis businessmen had offered a total bounty of \$70,000 to anyone who would kill King. King seemed resigned to the reality of hate, and refused to carry a gun or allow armed guards. He said, "You know, I cannot worry about my safety; I cannot live in fear. I have to function. If there is any one fear I have conquered, it is the fear of death." (11:455) On February 4, King preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church and told his congregation that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be remembered as someone who tried to love and serve humanity, rather than someone who won recognition and achieved great success. (11:458)

On April 3, King returned to Memphis to lead a carefully planned March two days later. That evening, he delivered his famous "Mountaintop" speech to 2,000 enthusiastic supporters at Mason Temple. In it, he extolled the importance of the times—and urgency of the crisis. He anticipated his death, and expressed joy at the revolutionary changes he had seen in his lifetime. (11:482-486)

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. (13:286)

The next day, April 4, 1968, Dr. King stepped out onto the balcony of his motel room, as he waited for his staff to gather for dinner. A single bullet from a concealed sniper shattered the quiet of the evening and tore open his neck. He could not survive the loss of blood and died minutes later. He was 39-years-old. (1:482-490)

### The National Mourning

The entire nation was shocked by the murder of Dr. King. Some despondent followers rioted in larger cities, while others were left in silent dismay. President Johnson declared Sunday, April 7 a day of national mourning. Governments worldwide announced their concern and sense of loss. (11:494-495)

Reverend Abernathy, King's closest friend, officiated at the memorial service at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was nurtured as a child and inspired others throughout his adult ministry. The 800 people inside the church were joined by nearly 100,000 mourners in the streets outside. After the service, King's casket was placed in a wooden farm cart and drawn before 50,000 marchers by two mules to the campus of Morehouse College. There, Dr. Mays, his greatest mentor, eulogized Dr. King:

God called the grandson of a slave on his father's side, and said to him: Martin Luther, speak to America about war and peace; about social justice and racial discrimination; about its obligation to the poor; and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war. (11:495-497)

King's body was buried in South View Cemetery, near his grandparents. The marble crypt was inscribed:

FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST  
THANK GOD ALMIGHTY  
I'M FREE AT LAST

### **The King Legacy**

The life and accomplishments of Dr. King are now remembered through the national holiday. In the fourteen years following his call to Montgomery, he established through his life a legacy of hope that America would realize its full potential as one of the greatest nations in

history. During the fifteen years following his death, that legacy was refined during the national debate to create a federal holiday in his honor. The legacy is renewed and affirmed each year as the nation celebrates the anniversary of his birth and reflects on his dream.

### The Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday

In 1983, Congress designated the third Monday in January a national holiday in honor of Dr. King, beginning in 1986. Representative John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, introduced legislation soon after King died, and Congress and the public debated the proposal continually for the next fifteen years. Some lawmakers objected due to the lost productivity that would result from adding another holiday. Editors of Cleveland's *The Plain Dealer* answered by asking readers to consider the increased productivity King brought about by helping open workplaces to African Americans, and correspondingly, to consider the tremendous potential loss over the years if millions of Americans had been shut out of full participation in the nation's economy. (2:6)

A more serious concern about a King holiday was raised by those who wondered if King deserved the recognition more than other great Americans, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. George Washington is the only American other than King to have a federal holiday designated in his honor. As the years passed, however, and the Americans reflected on the volatile events of the Civil Rights Movement, their appreciation of Dr. King, his philosophy of nonviolent change, and his accomplishments grew steadily. An editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reflected the opinion of a great many of Americans who recognized King's role in transforming America. "The one dominant figure who symbolizes this vast and historically important movement—even though he was not present at many significant times and places—was Dr. King for he became the movement's spiritual and philosophical leader." (2:7)

### The Department of Defense Honors King

The Department of Defense (DoD) joins the nation in commemorating the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because of the visionary legacy of hope he established for a more just and peaceful America. Like no one else in his century, King understood and articulated a vision of what America could be when respect and equality were granted to everyone. In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, he recalled the glimpse of the future he caught just after the triumphant march to the steps of the Alabama capitol at the end of the Selma Campaign. King went to the airport, where crowds had gathered for hours, awaiting delayed flights. He saw demonstrators,

crowding together on the seats, the floors and the stairways of the terminal building. As I stood with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shopworkers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of the mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood. (9:3-4)

His vision remains as compelling today as it was more than 30 years ago. More importantly, DoD honors Dr. King because he devoted his life to bringing to fruition the American ideals of liberty and justice for all its citizens. From the earliest days of the Civil

Rights Movement, he reasoned that Black Americans deserved equal rights not because they were Black, but because they were Americans. In the *Birmingham Manifesto*, he linked demands for racial equality to the highest ideals of the American tradition: “We believe in the American Dream of democracy, in the Jeffersonian doctrine that ‘all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these being life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’” (1:133)

Finally, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. commands respect because he was a great patriot who demonstrated in each and every endeavor a willingness to sacrifice his own life to win liberty and justice for others. The threats and attempts to destroy his life began during the Montgomery boycott and never ceased. He labored continually under the realization that his fight against racial discrimination and poverty would cost him his life. (11:270) Even so, he persevered. Women and men in the armed forces, as much as anyone in America, understand Dr. King’s devotion to duty and find in his life an unequalled model of service and sacrifice.

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