The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.

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Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was an American pastor, activist, humanitarian, and leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. He is best known for his role in the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs.

He was born Michael King, but his father changed his name in honor of German reformer Martin Luther. A Baptist minister, King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, serving as its first president. With the SCLC, King led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, and organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, that attracted national attention following television news coverage of the brutal police response. King also helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. There, he established his reputation as one of the greatest orators in American history. J. Edgar Hoover considered him a radical and made him an object of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's COINTELPRO for the rest of his life. FBI agents investigated him for possible communist ties, recorded his extramarital liaisons and reported on them to government officials, and on one occasion, mailed King a threatening anonymous letter which he interpreted as an attempt to make him commit suicide.

On October 14, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolence. In 1965, he and the SCLC helped to organize the Selma to Montgomery marches and the following year, he took the movement north to Chicago to work on segregated housing. In the final years of his life, King expanded his focus to include poverty and the Vietnam War, alienating many of his liberal allies with a 1967 speech titled "Beyond Vietnam". In 1968 King was planning a national occupation of Washington, D.C., to be called the Poor People's Campaign, when he was assassinated on April 4 in Memphis, Tennessee. His death was followed by riots in many U.S. cities. Allegations that James Earl Ray, the man convicted of killing King, had been framed or acted in concert with government agents persisted for decades after the shooting. The jury of a 1999 civil trial found Loyd Jowers to be complicit in a conspiracy against King.

King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established as a holiday in numerous cities and states beginning in 1971, and as a U.S. federal holiday in 1986. Hundreds of streets and a county in the U.S. have been renamed in his honor. A memorial statue on the National Mall was opened to the public in 2011.

Early life and education

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, to Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King. His legal name at birth was "Michael King". King's father was also born Michael King. The father "changed" both names on his own during a 1934 trip to Nazi Germany to attend the Fifth Baptist World Alliance Congress in Berlin. It was during this time he chose to be called Martin Luther King in honor of the great German reformer Martin Luther.

Martin, Jr., was a middle child, between an older sister, Willie Christine King, and a younger brother, Alfred Daniel Williams King. King sang with his church choir at the 1939 Atlanta premiere of the movie Gone with the Wind.

King was originally skeptical of many of Christianity's claims. At the age of thirteen, he denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus during Sunday school. From this point, he stated, 'doubts began to spring forth relentlessly'. However, he later concluded that the Bible has "many profound truths which one cannot escape" and decided to...
Growing up in Atlanta, King attended Booker T. Washington High School. A precocious student, he skipped both the ninth and the twelfth grades and entered Morehouse College at age fifteen without formally graduating from high school. In 1948, he graduated from Morehouse with a B.A. degree in sociology, and enrolled in Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, from which he graduated with a B.Div. degree in 1951. King married Coretta Scott, on June 18, 1953, on the lawn of her parents' house in her hometown of Heiberger, Alabama. They became the parents of four children: Yolanda King, Martin Luther King III, Dexter Scott King, and Bernice King. During their marriage, King limited Coretta's role in the civil rights movement, and expected her to be a housewife.

Religion
King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, when he was twenty-five years old, in 1954. As a Christian minister, his main influence was Jesus Christ and the Christian gospels, which he would almost always quote in his religious meetings, speeches at church, and in public discourses. King's faith was strongly based in Jesus' commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself, loving God above all, and loving your enemies, praying for them and blessing them. His non-violent thought was also based in the injunction to turn the other cheek in the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus’ teaching of putting the sword back into its place (Matthew 26:52). In his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, King urged action consistent with what he describes as Jesus' "extremist" love, and also quoted numerous other Christian pacifist authors, which was very usual for him. In his speech I've Been to the Mountaintop, he stated that he just wanted to do God’s will.

Non-violence
Veteran African-American civil rights activist Bayard Rustin had studied Gandhi’s teachings and Christian pacifism and applied them with the Journey of Reconciliation in the 1940s. Rustin counseled King to dedicate himself to the principles of non-violence. Rustin served as King’s main advisor and mentor throughout his early activism.

Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's success with non-violent activism, King had ‘for a long time...wanted to take a trip to India’. With assistance from the Quaker group the American Friends Service Committee, he was able to make the journey in April 1959. The trip to India affected King, deepening his understanding of non-violent resistance and his commitment to America’s struggle for civil rights. In a radio address made during his final evening in India, King reflected, "Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity".

Bayard Rustin’s open homosexuality, support of democratic socialism, and his former ties to the Communist Party USA caused many white and African-American leaders to demand King distance himself from Rustin, which King agreed to do. However, King agreed that Rustin should be one of the main organizers of the 1963 March on Washington.

King's admiration of Gandhi's non-violence did not diminish in later years, he went so far as to hold up his example when receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, hailing the “successful precedent” of using non-violence “in a magnificent way by Mohandas K. Gandhi to Challenge the might of the British Empire...He struggled only with the weapons of truth, soul force, non-injury and courage.” Gandhi seemed to have influenced him with certain moral principles, though Gandhi himself had been influenced by The Kingdom of God Is Within You, a nonviolent classic written by Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy. In turn, both Gandhi and Martin Luther King had read Tolstoy. King quoted Tolstoy’s War and Peace in 1959. Another influence for King's non-violent method was Thoreau's essay On Civil Disobedience, which King read in his student days influenced by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system. He also was greatly influenced by the works of Protestant theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, as well as Walter Rauschenbusch’s Christianity and the Social Crisis. In his later career, King used the concept of “agape” (the deepest form of Christian love), which may have represented an influence of Paul Ramsey.

Politics
As the leader of the SCLC, King maintained a policy of not publicly endorsing a U.S. political party or candidate. "I feel someone must remain in the position of non-alignment, so that he can look objectively at both parties and be the conscience of both—not the servant or master of either." In a 1958 interview, he expressed his view that neither party was perfect, saying, "I don't think the Republican party is a party full of the almighty God nor is the Democratic party. They both have weaknesses ... And I'm not inextricably bound to either party.”

King critiqued both parties' performance on promoting racial equality: "Actually, the Negro has been betrayed by both the Republican and the Democratic
The march did, however, make specific demands: an end to racial segregation in public schools; meaningful civil rights legislation, including a law prohibiting racial discrimination; and the establishment of a national civil rights commission. Malcolm X, a leader of the Nation of Islam, was critical of the march, calling it a farce. The march's focus on peaceful protest and its avoidance of violence distinguished it from other civil rights demonstrations at the time.

Organizers intended to denounce the federal government for its failure to safeguard the civil rights of blacks in the southern U.S. and an opportunity to place organizers' concerns and grievances squarely before the seat of power in the nation's capital. King's choice to lead the March on Washington was a calculated one, as he was one of the key figures who acceded to the wishes of President John F. Kennedy in changing the focus of the march. Kennedy initially opposed the march outright, because he was concerned it would negatively impact the drive for passage of civil rights legislation. However, the organizers were firm that the march would proceed. With the march going forward, the Kennedys decided it was important to work to ensure its success. President Kennedy was concerned the turnout would be less than 100,000. Therefore, he enlisted the aid of additional church leaders and the UAW union to help mobilize demonstrators for the cause.

The march was originally conceived as an event to dramatize the desperate condition of blacks in the southern U.S. and an opportunity to place organizers' concerns and grievances squarely before the seat of power in the nation's capital. Organizers intended to denounce the federal government for its failure to safeguard the civil rights and physical safety of civil rights workers and blacks. However, the group acquiesced to presidential pressure and influence, and the event ultimately took on a far less strident tone. As a result, some civil rights activists felt it presented an inaccurate, sanitized pageant of racial harmony; Malcolm X called it the "Farce on Washington".
discrimination in employment; protection of civil rights workers from police brutality; a $2 minimum wage for all workers; and self-government for Washington, D.C., then governed by congressional committee. Despite tensions, the march was a resounding success. More than a quarter of a million people of diverse ethnicities attended the event, sprawling from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial onto the National Mall and around the reflecting pool. At the time, it was the largest gathering of protesters in Washington, D.C.'s history.

King delivered a 17-minute speech, later known as ‘I Have a Dream’. In the speech’s most famous passage— in which he departed from his prepared text, possibly at the prompting of Mahalia Jackson, who shouted behind him, “Tell them about the dream!”—King said:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, 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.’

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the 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 that 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” came to be regarded as one of the finest speeches in the history of American oratory. The March, and especially King’s speech, helped put civil rights at the top of the agenda of reformers in the United States and facilitated passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The original, typewritten copy of the speech, including Dr. King’s handwritten notes on it, was discovered in 1984 to be in the hands of George Raveling, the first African-American basketball coach of the University of Iowa. In 1963, Raveling, then 26, was standing near the podium, and immediately after the oration, impulsively asked King if he could have his copy of the speech. He got it.

Opposition to the Vietnam War

In 1965 King began to publicly express doubts about the Vietnam War. In an April 4, 1967 appearance at the New York City Riverside Church—exactly one year before his death—King delivered a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”. He spoke strongly against the U.S.’s role in the war, arguing that the U.S. was in Vietnam “to occupy it as an American colony” and calling the U.S. government “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today”. He also connected the war with economic injustice, arguing that the country needed serious moral change:

Assassination and its aftermath

On March 29, 1968, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, in support of the black sanitary public works employees, represented by AFSCME Local 1733, who had been on strike since March 12 for higher wages and better treatment. In one incident, black street repairmen received pay for two hours when they were sent home because of bad weather, but white employees were paid for the full day.

On April 3, King addressed a rally and delivered his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” address at Mason Temple, the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ. King’s flight to Memphis had been delayed by a bomb threat against his plane. In the close of the last speech of his career, in reference to the bomb threat, King said the following:

And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

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. So 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.

King was booked in room 306 at the Lorraine Motel, owned by Walter Bailey, in Memphis. Abernathy, who was present at the assassination, testified to the United States House Select Committee on Assassinations that King and his entourage stayed at room 306 at the Lorraine Motel so often it was known as the “King-
Rev. Ronald Denton Wilson, claimed his father, Henry Clay Wilson—not James Earl facts are presented. In 2002, The New York Times reported that a church minister, investigation report recommended no further investigation unless some new reliable claims but did not find evidence to support allegations about conspiracy. The In 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice completed the investigation about Jowers’ Pepper represented the King family in the trial. arrange King’s assassination. The jury of six whites and six blacks found Jowers “other unknown co-conspirators”. Jowers claimed to have received $100,000 to with the rest of King’s family, won a wrongful death claim against Loyd Jowers and efforts to obtain a new trial. Two years later, Coretta Scott King, King’s widow, along with the rest of King’s family, won a wrongful death claim against Loyd Jowers and “other unknown co-conspirators”. Jowers claimed to have received $100,000 to arrange King’s assassination. The jury of six whites and six blacks found Jowers guilty and that government agencies were party to the assassination. William F. Pepper represented the King family in the trial. In 1997, King’s son Dexter Scott King met with Ray, and publicly supported Ray’s efforts to obtain a new trial. Two years later, Coretta Scott King, King’s widow, along with the rest of King’s family, won a wrongful death claim against Loyd Jowers and “other unknown co-conspirators”. Jowers claimed to have received $100,000 to arrange King’s assassination. The jury of six whites and six blacks found Jowers guilty and that government agencies were party to the assassination. William F. Pepper represented the King family in the trial. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice completed the investigation about Jowers’ claims but did not find evidence to support allegations about conspiracy. The investigation report recommended no further investigation unless some new reliable facts are presented. In 2002, The New York Times reported that a church minister, Rev. Ronald Denton Wilson, claimed his father, Henry Clay Wilson—not James Earl
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escape route for James Earl Ray,
FBI and King's personal life
FBI surveillance and wiretapping
FBI director J. Edgar Hoover personally ordered surveillance of King, with the intent
to undermine his power as a civil rights leader. According to the Church Committee,
In 1967, Hoover listed the SCLC as a black nationalist hate group, with
leaderships of the groups … to insure the targeted group is disrupted, ridiculed, or
discredited."
Allegations of communism
For years, Hoover had been suspicious about potential influence of communists in
social movements such as labor unions and civil rights. Hoover directed the FBI to
track King in 1957, and the SCLC as it was established (it did not have a full-time
executive director until 1960). The investigations were largely superficial until 1962,
when the FBI learned that one of King's most trusted advisers was New York City
lawyer Stanley Levison.
The FBI feared Levison was working as an "agent of influence" over King, in spite of
its own reports in 1963 that Levison had left the Party and was no longer associated
in business dealings with them. Another King lieutenant, Hunter Pitts O'Dell, was
also linked to the Communist Party by sworn testimony before the House Un-
American Activities Committee (HUAC). However, by 1976 the FBI had
acknowledged that it had not obtained any evidence that King himself or the SCLC
were actually involved with any communist organizations.
For his part, King adamantly denied having any connections to communism, stating
in a 1965 Playboy interview that "there are as many Communists in this freedom
movement as there are Eskimos in Florida.". He argued that Hoover was "following
the path of appeasement of political powers in the South" and that his concern for
communist infiltration of the civil rights movement was meant to "aid and abet the
salacious claims of southern racists and the extreme right-wing elements". Hoover
did not believe King's pledge of innocence and replied by saying that King was "the
most notorious liar in the country". After King gave his "I Have A Dream" speech
during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, the FBI described King as "the
most dangerous and effective Negro leader in the country". It alleged that he was
"knowingly, willingly and regularly cooperating with and taking guidance from
communists".
The attempt to prove that King was a communist was related to the feeling of many
segregationists that blacks in the South were happy with their lot but had been
stirred up by "communists" and "outside agitators". However, the civil rights
movement arose from activism within the black community dating back to before
World War I. King said that "the Negro revolution is a genuine revolution, born from
the same womb that produces all massive social upheavals—the womb of intolerable conditions and unendurable situations."

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Beginning in 1971, cities such as Saint Louis, Missouri, and states established annual holidays to honor King. At the White House Rose Garden on November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill creating a federal holiday to honor King. Observed for the first time on January 20, 1986, it is called Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Following President George H. W. Bush’s 1992 proclamation, the holiday is observed on the third Monday of January each year, near the time of King’s birthday. On January 17, 2000, for the first time, Martin Luther King Jr. Day was officially observed in all fifty U.S. states. Arizona (1992), New Hampshire (1999) and Utah (2000) were the last three states to recognize the holiday. Utah previously celebrated the holiday at the same time but under the name Human Rights Day.

Awards and recognition

King was awarded at least fifty honorary degrees from colleges and universities. On October 14, 1964, King became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded to him for leading non-violent resistance to racial prejudice in the U.S. In 1965, he was awarded the American Liberties Medallion by the American Jewish Committee for his “exceptional advancement of the principles of human liberty”. In his acceptance remarks, King said, “Freedom is one thing. You have it all or you are not free.”

In 1957, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP. Two years later, he won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for his book Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story. In 1966, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America awarded King the Margaret Sanger Award for “his courageous resistance to bigotry and his lifelong dedication to the advancement of social justice and human dignity”. Also in 1966, King was elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1971 he was posthumously awarded a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album for his Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam.

In 1977, the Presidential Medal of Freedom was posthumously awarded to King by President Jimmy Carter. The citation read: “Martin Luther King, Jr., was the conscience of his generation. He gazed upon the great wall of segregation and saw that the power of love could bring it down. From the pain and exhaustion of his fight to fulfill the promises of our founding fathers for our humblest citizens, he wrung his eloquent statement of his dream for America. He made our nation stronger because he made it better. His dream sustains us yet.”

King and his wife were also awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004.

More than 730 cities in the United States have streets named after King. King County, Washington rededicated its name in his honor in 1986, and changed its logo to an image of his face in 2007. The city government center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is named in honor of King. King is remembered as a martyr by the Episcopal Church in the United States of America (feast day April 4) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (feast day January 15).

In 1980, the U.S. Department of the Interior designated King’s boyhood home in Atlanta and several nearby buildings the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site. In 1996, Congress authorized the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, of which King had been a member, to establish a foundation to manage fund raising and design of a national Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. King was the first African American and the fourth non-president honored with his own memorial in the National Mall area. The memorial opened in August 2011 and is administered by the National Park Service. The address of the monument, 1964 Independence Avenue, S.W., commemorates the year that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law.

References
Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy has experienced a shift in American culture. While he is currently regarded as an iconic civil rights advocate, and he has been viewed as such since before his assassination, some argue that his activism and quotes have been misrepresented in a manner that softens his perspective on racism.

The idea of a federal holiday to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King was first proposed in 1979. However, the federal holiday wasn’t signed into law until 1983, following a successful public campaign. The holiday came into effect three years later, although not all states chose to observe it until 1991.