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Martin Luther King, Jr.: Sixty-Fifth Anniversary Overview and Assessment

No one made a greater impact upon the struggle for racial justice in America than Martin Luther King, Jr. Before King, America was a contented segregated society—*de jure* in the South and *de facto* in the North. The idea of racial equality and freedom was a marginal issue in American life, seldom mentioned by government officials and other public figures, and largely confined to the legal work of the NAACP and the academic writings of a few scholars. Looking back over the years from the vantage point of what would be his sixty-fifth birthday—he was born on January 15, 1929—it is clear that Martin King changed all that. Through his civil rights activity, public speeches, and writings, he placed the problem of race at the center of American life and forced this nation to acknowledge racism as its greatest moral dilemma.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into a prominent middle class family in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and also active in the NAACP. At home and at church, "M.L.," as the younger Martin was called during his childhood, acquired ethical and religious values that influenced him to become a minister and to devote his life to the struggle for justice.

After his graduation from Morehouse College, in Atlanta, he went to Crozer Theological Seminary, at that time in Chester, Pennsylvania, and later entered Boston University where he received a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology. King's education

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played an important role in shaping his views about race and justice in the United States. At Morehouse the problem of racial injustice in the social, economic, and political life of America was frequently discussed in his classes. He was a sociology major. Benjamin E. Mays, who was the president of Morehouse, and George Kelsey, a professor in the Department of Religion, showed King that the ministry could be socially relevant and intellectually respectable.

At Crozer and Boston University King was introduced to theological and philosophical ideas about God, social justice, and the worth of human personality that reinforced what he had learned from his parents and heard in the sermons, prayers, and songs of Black churches. With an intellectual foundation for his religious convictions, he began his pastoral ministry at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in September 1954—about three months after the celebrated Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregation in public schools.

Martin King did not go to Montgomery with the intention of starting a national civil rights movement. His social consciousness was defined primarily by the NAACP, an organization he greatly admired. Shortly after arriving at Dexter he influenced the church to become its largest contributor in Montgomery. He was also active in human relations organizations that brought a few Black and White middle-class professionals together to talk about how to improve race relations. There was nothing in King's graduate school essays or his sermons at Dexter and other Black churches that suggested that he was interested in organizing a mass movement, or that he would become America's most influential radical in the African American struggle for racial justice.

King was a reluctant radical. He did not start the Montgomery bus boycott that made him an internationally known leader. The boycott was begun by a group of Black professional women (Women's Political Council) when they decided that the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for defiance of the bus-

seating law, should not go unchallenged. They organized a protest and asked King and other ministers in the city to join them. Initially, King was reluctant to become involved and asked for time to think about it. The preparations for a full-scale boycott of the city buses moved so fast that he was surprised when he was chosen as the leader. He did not decline the choice (as he had done earlier when asked to be the president of the NAACP) because he believed that the *call* came from God who was acting through the people, empowering them to protest.

With only twenty minutes to prepare the most important speech of his life, King stood before an overflowing crowd of five-thousand Blacks and told them that "we are not wrong in what we are doing." Both the God of the Bible and the Constitution of the United States gave people "the right to protest for right." Through an appeal to the biblical idea of justice and the American democratic tradition of freedom, King urged the masses of Blacks to "stick together" and have "the moral courage to stand up for their rights." They did. For three-hundred and eighty-one days, fifty-thousand Black men, women, and children, under King's courageous leadership, "walked the streets of Montgomery with dignity rather than ride the buses in humiliation." They substituted tired feet for tired souls" and, thereby, created a "New Negro," one who was ready to die for freedom.

The Montgomery bus boycott marked the beginning of masses of people being involved in the struggle for racial justice. It was followed by the sit-ins in 1960, the freedom rides in 1961, and many other organized demonstrations for freedom throughout the South. The social disruption that the civil rights movement created forced the great majority of White people to re-evaluate the meaning of America for her citizens of African descent. Although there were many courageous and intelligent activists in the civil rights movement, Martin King was its most influential leader and philosopher.

Martin King developed a philosophy and a method of social change, described as nonviolent direct action, that was effective in destroying legal segregation and blatant klan-like activity throughout the South. It also transformed the social and political relations of Blacks and Whites across the nation. Infusing Mahatma Gandhi's method of nonviolence with the spirituality of the Black churches, King, in his sermons and writings, urged Black people to nonviolently disobey laws that transgressed their dignity as human beings. He challenged Whites to join Blacks in the struggle for justice because, as he often said, we are all "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." King challenged politicians to recognize that America cannot claim to be the leader of the free world and also remain a segregated nation. "If democracy is to live," he said, "segregation must die."

After the Montgomery bus boycott, King's most successful campaigns were the Birmingham demonstrations (1963) and the Selma March (1965). Both events created so much social disruption that the leaders of the federal government were pressured into enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King's most memorable speech was his great "I Have a Dream" address at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, where he electrified the nation with the hope that America would become a just society, an integrated community without racial animosity or religious prejudice. In the eyes of most who loved and adored him it was his greatest moment. *Time* magazine chose him as the "Man of the Year" and called him "the unchallenged voice of the Negro people—and the disquieting conscience of the whites." King also received the Nobel Prize in 1964, thereby making him not just a Black or an American leader, but a world spokesperson for justice and peace.

However, the most radical phase of Martin King's work began after the Selma March. At first he thought that the widespread support for the voting rights of Blacks meant that his work as

a civil rights leader was almost over. But he was grossly mistaken. His most difficult battles for justice were still ahead of him. The Los Angeles riots that began on August 11, 1965, which happened only five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Bill into law, revealed despair among Black people like King had not seen in the South. When he took the movement to Chicago to fight against *de facto* segregation in housing, education, and employment, he soon realized that the racism that undergirded economic exploitation in the Northern cities was much more entrenched and detrimental to the humanity of Blacks than the racism that perpetrated legal segregation in the South. The liberal Northern Whites in government, churches, and labor who supported the civil rights movement in the South often opposed it in the North. Getting rid of legal segregation did not cost America much. But to rid the nation of economic poverty would cost plenty. King's estimate was a hundred billion dollars.

With an escalating war in Vietnam, President Johnson and the Congress were not interested in paying the cost to eliminate domestic poverty. King knew, therefore, that his linking together war, poverty, and racism would not win him friends among Whites and Blacks in government, the churches, the civil rights movement, and even among his own staff and board of directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Many of his friends pleaded with him to stick with civil rights and to stop talking about the war, because the civil rights and peace movements were distinct and separate. But King vehemently disagreed, saying that the "two problems are inextricably bound together," because "you can't have peace without justice and justice without peace."

King's finest hour as an anti-war activist was his "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. Before a capacity crowd, he called the war immoral and unjust and then proceeded to indict America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." He spoke as a "child of God and broth-

er to the suffering people of Vietnam," whose land, home and culture were being destroyed. "Somehow this madness must cease," he proclaimed. "We must stop now."

On April 15, King spoke at a United Nations rally to end the war and called America's involvement in Vietnam an attempt to "perpetuate white colonialism." He urged President Johnson to "stop the bombing" and "save American lives and Vietnamese lives." In almost every sermon and address, he called upon Americans to protest "one of history's most cruel and senseless wars."

President Johnson and his supporters were greatly troubled by King's decision to join the voices of protest in the peace movement against the Vietnam war. Once the most beloved of all civil rights activists, who could get audiences with the President and other government officials, King became regarded as an arrogant Negro preacher who spoke out on foreign policy issues for which he had no expertise whatsoever. Media editorials criticized him severely for making the "serious tactical mistake" of fusing the civil rights and peace movements. Prominent civil rights leaders disassociated themselves from him and ignored his demand that they "take a forthright stand on the rightness or wrongness of the war."

Martin King's spirituality sustained his radicalism in the midst of extreme controversy. He really believed that "all reality hinges on moral foundations." Hostile criticism did not persuade him to keep quiet, or to soften his views about the war. His perspective was not defined by what was politically expedient or financially beneficial for S.C.L.C. Rather, King's radicalism was defined by his personal faith, his deep conviction that "the universe was on the side of right." "When you stand up for justice," he said, "you never fail."

As friends rejected him and the government turned his dream of a just and peaceful world into a nightmare of violence, King's faith gave him hope. Instead of making him passive, his belief

in "cosmic companionship" empowered him for radical action. He moved toward a socialist path, condemning capitalism and advocating the need for a root and branch restructuring of the whole of American society. During his later years, he became especially disappointed with liberal Whites. He called them "unconscious racists," because their responses to the riots, showed that they were "more concerned about order than they were about justice." He then began to move toward an acceptance of Black Power and even advocated "temporary segregation" as the only way to achieve genuine integration. Of course, King was no separatist in the sense advocated by Malcolm X. But since tokenism was the only kind of integration that Whites were implementing, he became concerned that Blacks would be integrated out of the little power that they had managed to amass. He became so militant and Black that a *New York Times* reporter told him that he sounded like a nonviolent Malcolm X.

Although King rejected any public association with Malcolm X, he realized that their views were converging and, through mutual friends, he took private initiatives to meet with Malcolm. Malcolm was assassinated the Sunday (February 21, 1965) before their meeting scheduled for the following Tuesday.

Approximately three years after Malcolm's death and exactly one year after his "Beyond Vietnam" speech, Martin King himself was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. It was April 4, 1968. At the time, he was organizing a march for sanitation workers on strike for better pay and improved job conditions. He was also preparing for the Poor People's Campaign which was to take place in Washington, D.C. Both events highlighted his fight against racism and poverty. In his second March on Washington, unlike the first in 1963, he did not have the support of the President and the Congress. He was planning a militant civil disobedience that was designed to pressure Congress into enacting legislation that would guarantee employment and, for those unable to work, a decent

income.

Eighteen years after his assassination, the Congress and President Reagan established, January 20, 1986, as a legal public holiday in celebration of King's birthday—the only American to receive such an honor. This honor is both an acknowledgement of his great moral power and an attempt to co-opt his radicalism. Through his powerful oratory and militant, nonviolent civil rights activity, he inspired Blacks and pricked the consciences of Whites, thereby enabling both, along with other Americans, to join together in a common struggle for justice. What King created was a coalition of conscience among people of all races and faiths who came together under his leadership to transform the meaning of America—from a nation of *White* people to a nation of *all* the people. That was no small achievement!

The meaning of Martin Luther King, Jr. is not defined primarily by the civil rights laws that he pressured the government to enact. His radicalism was derived primarily from the moral power he embodied in his life and message—transcending race, religion, culture, and nationality. He was America's moral conscience. When he spoke, America and the world listened, even though they did not always obey his call to end racism, poverty, and war. His moral power has inspired people struggling for justice around the world. Andrew Young correctly observed that "When the Berlin Wall came down, they were singing 'We Shall Overcome.' When the Polish shipyard workers went on strike, they were singing 'We Shall Overcome'. When the students went to Tiananmen Square, they wrote 'We Shall Overcome' on their T shirts. It is clear that the legacy . . . [of] Martin Luther King . . . was universal."

Because King inspired people to fight for justice, he also frightened government leaders. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI Director, called him "the most dangerous Negro in America." Most government officials, including President Johnson, agreed and thereby made him the most reviled person in America at the time of his

assassination. But despite the moral blindness of yesterday's politicians, few people today can deny that Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black preacher of nonviolence and love, was America's most effective radical and its most courageous prophet.