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Martin Luther King Jr.

Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929. Dr. King grew up as the son of a leading minister in Atlanta, Georgia, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. His mother, Mrs. Alberta Williams King, assisted her husband in the care of his congregation. Because of their efforts and interest in behalf of the congregation and the community, his parents were known as 'Momma' and 'Daddy' King. His community, centered on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta also influenced him. By the 1930s when he was a child, it was the center of business and social life in Black Atlanta and the major center for the Black Southeast. The community was so successful that nationwide, it was known as "Sweet Auburn". The residential neighborhoods of the community, and especially the one where Dr. King was born were known for the diversity of the backgrounds of the residents. Though all Black, the neighborhoods had business people, laborers, college-educated, uneducated, rich, poor and successful all living close to each other.

As a boy, Dr. King experienced many of the same things most children do. He helped and played games with his older sister Christine and his younger brother A. D. He played baseball on vacant lots and rode his bicycle in the streets. He went to school at David T. Howard Elementary, three blocks from his home. He attended the Butler Street YMCA down Auburn Avenue. When the family moved to the house on Boulevard, he was attending Booker T. Washington High School, working a newspaper route, attending his first dances, and planning to attend college. But, Dr. King's primary memories of his childhood were of the sting of segregation.

In 1941 Daddy King moved the family to a brick home. Here King continued his development and education until he graduated from Morehouse College in 1948. Dr. King still lived in this home when he attended College here in Atlanta, starting at the age of fifteen. After graduation he left for graduate work at Crozer Theological Seminary, then in Chester, Pennsylvania (now Colgate Rochester divinity School/Bexley Hall/Crozer Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York), and at Boston University. He became pastor at The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama in 1954 and served there until 1960. From 1960 until 1968 he was co-pastor, with his father, of Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, where his grandfather, Rev. A. D. Williams had also been pastor.

Starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-1956, Dr. King was also the foremost leader of the Civil Rights Movement. His dedication to the tactics of non-violent resistance led to successful campaigns in Montgomery, AL, Birmingham, AL, and Selma, AL as well as encouraging African-Americans throughout the South to campaign for their own freedom. After 1965, He expanded his work to include actions in the North, opposition to the War in Vietnam, and planning for a campaign to aid poor people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 by James Earl Ray.

<http://infousa.state.gov/life/people/mlk.html>

President Obama's Proclamation on Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday

January 13, 2012

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., FEDERAL HOLIDAY, 2012

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
A PROCLAMATION

On a hot summer day nearly half a century ago, an African American preacher with no official title or rank gave voice to our Nation's deepest aspirations, sharing his dream of an America that ensured the true equality of all our people. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired a movement that would push our country toward a more perfect Union.

At a time when our Nation was sharply divided, Dr. King called on a generation of Americans to be "voices of reason, sanity, and understanding amid the voices of violence, hatred, and emotion." His example stirred men and women of all backgrounds to become foot soldiers for justice, and his leadership gave them the courage to refuse the limitations of the day and fight for the prospect of tomorrow. Because these individuals showed the resilience to stand firm in the face of the fiercest resistance, we are the benefactors of an extraordinary legacy of progress.

Today, Dr. King is memorialized on the National Mall where he once spoke, a symbol of how far our Nation has come and a testament to the quiet heroes whose names may never appear in history books, but whose selflessness brought about change few thought possible. Dr. King's memorial reminds us that while the work of realizing his remarkable dream is unending, with persistence, progress is within our reach.

On the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, we celebrate the man who fought for the America he knew was possible. Dr. King's faith in a God who loves all His children and a Nation grounded in the promise of equality would not let him rest until victory was won. As we work to meet the challenges of our time—from fixing our schools so every child gets a world class education to ensuring all Americans have access to strong and secure economic opportunity let us draw strength from Dr. King's stirring affirmation that "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." In his memory, let us continue climbing toward that Promised Land, one more fair and more just for all people.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 2012, as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday. I encourage all Americans to observe this day with appropriate civic, community, and service

projects in honor of Dr. King, and to visit www.MLKDay.gov to find Martin Luther King, Jr., Day of Service projects across our country.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twelve, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-sixth.

BARACK OBAMA

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/13/presidential-proclamation-martin-luther-king-jr-federal-holiday-2012>

The Power of Nonviolent Action

By Stephen Zunes



People-power movements, such as this one in 1989 in Czechoslovakia, have helped bring down scores of authoritarian regimes.

Armed insurgencies impose great human costs. Nonviolent “people power” movements succeed by calling attention to official repression and winning support from the undecided.

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This article appears in the March 2009 issue of *eJournal USA*, *Nonviolent Paths to Social Change* (PDF, 783 KB).

Nonviolent action campaigns have been a part of political life for millennia, challenging abuses by authorities, spearheading social reforms, demanding an end to colonial rule, and protesting militarism and discrimination.

India’s Mohandas Gandhi and the United States’ Martin Luther King Jr., who were both brilliant strategic thinkers as well as great moral leaders, are perhaps the best-known leaders of such movements. Not only were they committed to nonviolent action as the most effective means of waging their respective struggles; they also held to a deep faith-based commitment to nonviolence as a personal ethic. In many respects, however, Gandhi and King were unusual in their personal commitment to principled nonviolence, as the vast majority of nonviolent movements and their leaders have not been pacifists but embraced nonviolent action as the best strategic means to advance their struggles.

Indeed, primarily nonviolent struggles in recent decades have not only led to significant political and social reforms advancing the cause of human rights, but have also even toppled repressive regimes from power and forced leaders to change the very nature of their governance. As a result, nonviolent resistance has been evolving from an ad hoc strategy associated with religious or ethical principles into a reflective, even institutionalized, method of struggle.

Indeed, the past 30 years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge in nonviolent insurrections against autocratic rulers. Primarily nonviolent “people power” movements have been responsible for advancing democratic change in nearly 60 countries during this period, forcing substantial reforms in many countries. Other struggles, while eventually suppressed, have nevertheless posed serious challenges to other despots.

In contrast to armed struggles, these nonviolent insurrections are movements of organized popular resistance to government authority that, either consciously or by necessity, eschew the use of weapons of modern warfare.

Unlike conventional political movements, nonviolent campaigns usually employ tactics outside the mainstream political processes of electioneering and lobbying. Tactics may include strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, the popular contestation of public space, refusal to pay taxes, destruction of symbols of government authority (such as official identification cards), refusal to obey official orders (such as curfew restrictions), and the creation of alternative institutions for political legitimacy and social organization.

Why Nonviolence Works

For many years there was an assumption that autocratic regimes could be overthrown only through popular armed struggle or foreign military intervention. Yet there is an increasing awareness that nonviolent action can actually be more powerful than violence. A recent academic study of 323 major insurrections in support of self-determination and freedom from autocratic rule over the past century revealed that major nonviolent campaigns were successful 53 percent of the time, whereas primarily violent resistance campaigns were successful only 26 percent of the time. (Maria J. Stephan and Eric Chenoweth. “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security*, vol. 33, no. 1, Summer 2008.)

There are several reasons why insurgents have turned away from armed struggle to embrace nonviolent action. One reason is a growing awareness of the increasing costs of insurgency warfare. Technology has given status quo powers an increasing advantage in recent years in defeating or at least neutralizing armed insurgencies. Even when an armed revolutionary movement is victorious, large segments of the population are displaced, farms and villages are destroyed, cities and much of the country’s infrastructure are severely damaged, the economy is wrecked, and there is widespread environmental devastation. The net result is an increasing realization that the benefits of waging an armed insurrection may not be worth the costs.

Another factor endorsing nonviolence is the tendency, once in power, for victorious armed movements against dictatorships to fail in establishing pluralistic, democratic, and independent political systems capable of supporting social and economic development and promoting human

rights. These shortcomings often result in part from counterrevolution, natural disasters, foreign intervention, trade embargoes, and other circumstances beyond a victorious popular movement's control.

However, the choice of armed struggle as a means of securing power tends to exacerbate these problems and creates troubles of its own. For one, armed struggle often promotes the ethos of a secret elite vanguard, downplaying democracy and showing less tolerance for pluralism. Often, disagreements that could be resolved peaceably in non-militarized institutions lead to bloody factional fighting. Some countries experienced military coups or civil wars not long after armed revolutionary movements ousted colonialists or indigenous dictators. Others became overly dependent on foreign powers for weapons to keep them in power.

There is also an increasing awareness that armed resistance tends to upset undecided elements of the population, who then seek security in the government. When facing a violent insurgency, a government can easily justify its repression. But force used against unarmed resistance movements usually creates greater sympathy for the government's opponents. Some have compared this phenomenon with the martial art of aikido, in that the opposition movement leverages the power of state repression to advance the movement's ends.

In addition, unarmed campaigns involve far more participants beyond the young able-bodied men normally found in the ranks of armed guerrillas, taking advantage of a popular movement's majority support. Unarmed resistance also encourages the creation of alternative institutions, which further undermine the repressive status quo and form the basis for a new independent and democratic order.



King and Gandhi embraced nonviolence both in principle and as strategy.

Armed resistance often backfires by legitimizing the use of repressive tactics. Violence from the opposition is often welcomed by authoritarian governments and even encouraged through the use of agents provocateurs, because it then justifies state repression. But state violence unleashed on unarmed dissidents often triggers a turning point in nonviolent struggles. A government attack against peaceful demonstrators can be the spark that transforms periodic protests into a full-scale insurrection.

Sowing Division

Unarmed resistance movements also tend to sow divisions within pro-government circles. There are often disagreements regarding how to deal effectively with the resistance, since few governments are as prepared to deal with unarmed revolts as they are to quash armed ones. Violent repression of a peaceful movement can often alter popular and elite perceptions of the legitimacy of power, which is why state officials usually use less repression against nonviolent movements. In addition, some pro-government elements become less concerned about the consequences of a compromise with insurgents if their resistance is nonviolent.

Unarmed movements also increase the likelihood of defections and noncooperation by unmotivated police and military personnel, whereas armed revolts legitimize the role of the

government's coercive apparatus, enhancing its self-perception as the protector of civil society. The moral power of nonviolence is crucial in the ability of an opposition movement to reframe the perceptions of key parties: the public, political elites, and the military, most of whom have no difficulty supporting the use of violence against violent insurrections.

The efficacy of nonviolent resistance in dividing supporters of the status quo is apparent not only in rendering government troops less effective, but also in challenging the attitudes of an entire nation and even foreign actors, as in the South African struggle against apartheid. Pictures of peaceful protesters — including whites, members of the clergy, and other “upstanding citizens” — broadcast on television worldwide lent legitimacy to antiapartheid forces and undermined the South African government in a way that the armed rebellion was unable to do. As nonviolent resistance within the country escalated, external pressure in the form of economic sanctions and other solidarity tactics by the international community raised the costs of maintaining the apartheid system.

Due to increased global interdependence, the nonlocal audience for a conflict may be just as important as the immediate community. Just as Gandhi played to British citizens in Manchester and London, organizers of the civil rights movement in the U.S. South were communicating to the entire nation, and especially to the administration of President John Kennedy.

Insurgency within the Soviet bloc was disseminated by television broadcasts that spread the news from country to country, legitimating local protests that no longer seemed like isolated events organized by unstable dissidents. The prominent role of the global media during the anti-Marcos people power movement in 1986 was instrumental in forcing the U.S. government to scale back its support of the Philippine dictator. Israeli repression of nonviolent protests by Palestinians during the first intifada of the late 1980s brought unprecedented international sympathy to their struggle against foreign military occupation. As Palestinian-American scholar Rashid Khalidi observed, the Palestinians had “succeeded at last in conveying the reality of their victimization to world public opinion.”

As a proactive ingredient in nonviolent resistance, the creation of alternative structures provides both a moral and a practical underpinning for efforts aimed at bringing about fundamental social change. Parallel structures in civil society may render state control increasingly impotent, as they did throughout Eastern Europe leading up to the events of 1989.

In the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos lost power in 1986 not through the defeat of his troops and the storming of the Malacañang Palace, but from the withdrawal of sufficient support for his authority, so that the palace became the only part of the country he could effectively control. On the same day that Marcos was officially sworn in for another term as president in a state ceremony, his opponent — Corazon Aquino, widow of an assassinated Marcos critic — was symbolically sworn in as the people's president. Given that most Filipinos saw Marcos's election as fraudulent, the vast majority offered its allegiance to President Aquino rather than to President Marcos. The transfer of allegiance from one source of authority and legitimacy to another is a key element of a successful nonviolent uprising.

In the course of a successful nonviolent revolution, and with adequate popular participation, political authority may be wrested from the state and invested in institutions of civil society as these parallel institutions grow in effectiveness and legitimacy. The state may become increasingly impotent and irrelevant as parallel nongovernmental institutions take over an increasing portion of the tasks of governing a society, providing services to the populace, and creating functional equivalents to the institutions of the state.

Indigenous Roots

Citing the financial support provided by some outside foundations funded by Western governments to some opposition groups that later took part in the so-called color revolutions among nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, some authoritarian regimes have denied the popular legitimacy of these pro-democracy movements by claiming they were simply “soft coups” plotted by the United States or other Western powers. Such outside funding cannot cause a nonviolent liberal democratic revolution to take place, however, any more than Soviet financial and material support for leftist movements in previous decades could cause an armed socialist revolution to take place. One Burmese human rights activist, referring to his country’s centuries-old tradition of popular resistance, noted how the very idea of an outsider having to orchestrate the Burmese people to engage in a nonviolent action campaign is like “teaching a grandma to peel onions.”

Successful revolutions, whatever their ideological orientation, are the result of certain objective conditions. Indeed, no amount of money could force hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to face down heavily armed police and tanks and put their bodies on the line unless they had a sincere motivation to do so.

Foreign powers have historically promoted regime change through military invasions, coup d’etats, and other kinds of violent seizures of power that install an undemocratic minority. Nonviolent people power movements, by contrast, make regime change possible through empowering pro-democratic majorities.

There is no standardized formula for success that a foreign government or a foreign nongovernmental organization could put together, because the history, culture, and political alignments of each country are unique. No foreign government or NGO can recruit or mobilize the large numbers of ordinary civilians necessary to build a movement capable of effectively challenging the established political leadership, much less of toppling a government.

As a result, the best hope for advancing freedom and democracy among oppressed nations of the world comes not from armed struggle and not from the intervention of foreign powers, but from democratic civil society organizations engaged in strategic nonviolent action.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

<http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2009/03/20090309100818ebyeessedo0.8527338.html#ixzz1hvb4ayFa>

Nonviolent Thought Through U.S. History

By Ira Chernus



Nonviolent Vietnam War protests in the 1960s followed the example of the civil rights movement.

Rooted in 16th century Europe, the intellectual traditions of nonviolent thought and action were developed in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries and traveled abroad to Asia and Africa.

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This article appears in the March 2009 issue of eJournal USA, Nonviolent Paths to Social Change (PDF, 783 KB).

When people set out to create social change, they have to decide whether to use violence to achieve their aims. Some who opt for nonviolence may have no objection to violence in principle. They just believe that violence will not succeed in gaining their goals, or they are afraid of getting hurt, or they can't persuade others to join them in violence. There is the nonviolence of convenience, or pragmatic nonviolence.

But over the centuries there have been many who might have gained their goals through violence — who had the means, the courage, and the strength to do violence — yet freely decided not to do violence under any circumstances. They followed the way of principled nonviolence. Though many have been inspired to adopt principled nonviolence for emotional and cultural reasons, they have also been moved by the rich intellectual tradition that offers logical arguments on behalf of nonviolence.

That intellectual tradition runs like an underground stream through U.S. history. Its roots go back to the Anabaptist Christians of Europe in the 16th century, the era when Protestant Christianity began. The Anabaptists rejected violence because they were committed to staying separated from the mainstream society and its many conflicts. Some of their descendants came to the United States, where they established what are known as the historic peace churches.

The distinctive American contribution came when other Christians, who were deeply involved in the conflicts of society, decided on principle to pursue political and social change using only nonviolent means. The process began in colonial times, before the United States declared its independence from Britain, among members of the Society of Friends, known as Quakers. Their strict commitment to nonviolence led some of them to oppose the payment of taxes for war, the enslavement of African Americans, and the persecution and displacement of Native American peoples. But the Quakers were primarily a religious group, whose beliefs led them to nonviolence.

The great turning point came in the 1820s and 1830s, when a group of people from different religious backgrounds began to demand the abolition of slavery in the United States. These abolitionists were nearly all Christians, and not all of them were committed to pursuing their goal nonviolently. Those who were, however, created the first group that formed around a goal of political-social change and then chose nonviolence as their means. They believed in God as the supreme ruler of the universe. Therefore, they said, no human should ever exercise authority over another human. On that basis they denounced slavery. But since violence is always a way of exercising authority, they were led logically to renounce violence, too.

The same line of thinking influenced the great essayist Henry David Thoreau to go to jail rather than pay taxes to a government that supported war and slavery. In his famous 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau explained that he would never obey an unjust law, regardless of what punishment he received, because people should follow their own conscience rather than passively follow the government’s demands. Thoreau’s main goal was to maintain his own moral virtue and his freedom to act on the truth as he saw it. But he did point out that if enough people refused to obey unjust laws, they could “clog the machinery” of the state.

Tolstoy and Gandhi



Abolitionist Wendell Phillips delivers an antislavery speech on Boston Common in April 1851.

The writings of the abolitionists and Thoreau inspired the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy to become an ardent exponent of Christian nonviolence. His writings, in turn, helped to shape the ideas of the greatest of all nonviolent activists, the leader of India’s independence movement, Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi. In the 20th century, the ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi came back to the United States and inspired many Americans,

who often did not know that so much of the theory of nonviolence had originated in their own country.

For Gandhi, nonviolence was more a matter of intention than actual behavior. He defined “violence” as the intention to coerce another person to do something the other person does not want to do. Nonviolent actions such as boycotts, blockades, and disobedience to laws may look coercive, but if done in a true spirit of nonviolence, they are merely ways of following the moral truth as one sees it. They leave others free to respond in any way they choose. A follower of Gandhian nonviolence says, in the spirit of Thoreau, “I am doing what I feel I must do. Now you do whatever you feel you must do. You may jail me, beat me, or even kill me. But you cannot take away my freedom to be true to my conscience.”

Gandhi recognized that he was calling all people to act on their subjective view of truth. No one can know the whole truth, he said, and we must be open to the possibility that we will later see that we were wrong. That is why we must never aim to impose our own views on others. But we must take a firm stand — even unto death — on the truth as we see it now. Only then can we discover for ourselves what the truth is in any given situation.

Since principled nonviolence means non-coercion, people committed to nonviolence believe they are never trying to make a situation turn out the way they want it. They are working not for selfish purposes but for the good of the whole world as they see it. In fact, according to Gandhi, they should never be concerned about the outcome of their actions at all. They should only be sure that they are doing the morally right thing at every moment. Following the moral truth is both the means and the end of nonviolence; a right process is the goal. Therefore, nonviolence should not be judged by its ability to produce results.

The most famous exponent of nonviolence in the United States was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the great spokesman for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. King agreed with Gandhi that nonviolent actions must always be taken out of concern for the well-being of all people, even those who are unjust and oppressive. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” he proclaimed, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Unlike Gandhi, though, King was concerned about the results of his actions. He judged the strategies of the civil rights movement not only by their intrinsic moral virtue, but also by their effectiveness in ending discrimination against black people. He wanted to provoke conflict and win political victories.

But as long as one is working nonviolently for justice and equality, King argued, the conflict will yield greater justice and peace for everyone. So in his view, there is no conflict between success for oneself and benefit for society: “We are in the fortunate position of having our deepest sense of morality coalesce with our self-interest.” Even when our acts involve unyielding confrontation and pressure, he said, as long as we are motivated by selfless love offered equally to both sides in the conflict, we are working to harmonize the opposing sides and improve life for all. On that point, Gandhi certainly would have agreed.

Results From Nonviolence

The civil rights movement demonstrated that nonviolence can produce results, if one chooses to judge by that standard. In the 1960s, the nonviolent movement to end the Vietnam War — largely inspired by the successes of civil rights activists — played a significant role in persuading the U.S. government to remove its troops from Vietnam.

Up to the 1960s, most Americans who committed themselves to principled nonviolence were moved by Christian religious beliefs. But the protest movement against the Vietnam War brought in many who were not Christian. The Jewish Peace Fellowship (founded in 1941) grew significantly. An emerging Buddhist peace movement was guided by the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn and, later, the Dalai Lama.

There were also many more Americans with no religious affiliation who were drawn to nonviolence. They could find inspiration in the writings of the feminist Barbara Deming. Nonviolence is necessarily coercive, she wrote. But it forces people to stop doing only things that they have no moral right to do. It leaves intact their freedom to do whatever they have a right

to do. So nonviolence is the most effective way to make lasting social and political change because it is least likely to antagonize the people being forced to change.

Since the 1960s, the United States has seen a growing interest in principled nonviolence applied to many political issues, though it still counts only a very small minority of the population among its adherents.

Nonviolence movements in the United States have also helped to spawn similar movements around the world. They have achieved major improvements in their conditions of life — most notably, in the overthrow of totalitarian regimes in places from Eastern Europe to the Philippines. Nonviolent activists helped to end long-standing and bitter conflicts in Northern Ireland, Guatemala, and East Timor, among other places. They are now active on numerous fronts in conflict zones around the world. In the long view of history, the United States is at the center of an ongoing global process of nonviolent social and political change.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

<http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2009/March/20090309110018ebyessedo3.197879e-02.html#ixzz1iOwFJYma>

Martin Luther King Jr: the March, the Man, the Dream

Hastily organized civil-rights march called for "Sort of a Gettysburg Address"



The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. addresses the crowd at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963.

This article originally appeared in American History magazine, August 2003.

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King: The March The Man The Dream

By David J. Garrow

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is the most famous portion of the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. But King's speech was less heralded during the balance of his own lifetime than it has become since his death by assassination on April 4, 1968. Exploring how and why the fame of "I Have a Dream" is almost entirely posthumous allows us now, 40 years later, to understand better just how different King's oration looked from inside the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s than it does to many Americans today.

The idea of a 1963 March on Washington was not originally Martin Luther King's; instead it was A. Philip Randolph, a longtime trade union activist and the senior statesman among African-American civil rights leaders, who first suggested such an event early that year. Indeed, Randolph had planned a similar mass descent upon Washington two decades earlier, in 1941, before canceling the demonstration after President Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed to stronger federal anti-discrimination policies.

What Randolph envisioned in early 1963 was a two-day gathering aimed at drawing attention to "the economic subordination of the American Negro." As sketched out by Randolph's close aide Bayard Rustin, "a broad and fundamental program of economic justice" and in particular "the creation of more jobs for all Americans" would be the March's substantive goal. "Integration in the fields of education, housing, transportation and public accommodations"--at that time the Civil Rights Movement's most visible aims--"will be of limited extent and duration so long as fundamental economic inequality along racial lines persists," Rustin asserted.

Randolph and Rustin imagined as many as 100,000 protesters besieging Congress on one day in May and then a public mass rally the following day. As weeks went by in early 1963, their target date shifted to mid-June, then October, but neither of the two largest civil rights groups--the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), headed by the sometimes cautious Roy Wilkins, and the National Urban League (NUL), led by Whitney Young--offered support or encouragement when informed of Randolph's plan.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were too busy and preoccupied during the early months of 1963 with planning a major upcoming protest campaign in Birmingham, Ala., to react in any fashion to Randolph's incipient idea. SCLC's Birmingham demonstrations got underway in earnest in April 1963, but more than four weeks went by before those protests climaxed with internationally distributed scenes of Birmingham policemen and firemen letting loose with snarling German shepherds and high-powered fire hoses against African-American marchers and onlookers.

SCLC's Birmingham campaign was aimed at winning desegregated facilities and new job opportunities in the city's downtown department stores, but Birmingham's vituperatively racist public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, was committed to doing everything he could to obstruct any possible negotiated accord between the downtown business community and the African-American protesters. Up until May of 1963, President John F. Kennedy's administration

had sought to keep civil rights issues on the back burner, notwithstanding violent flare-ups when Southern segregationists had attacked "Freedom Riders" seeking to desegregate interstate buses in May 1961 and federal officials implementing court-ordered integration of the University of Mississippi in October 1962.

The Birmingham protests, however, drew the Kennedy administration into daily, face-to-face attempts to arrange a truce in a local crisis that had rapidly spiraled into a major national news story and then an international embarrassment to the United States. A negotiated accord ending Birmingham's mass protest marches eventually was reached, but furious segregationists sought to derail the settlement with terror bombings and other acts of retaliation.

Birmingham, and the worldwide news coverage its violence received, catapulted the Southern civil rights struggle to greater national prominence than it had ever before attained. Martin Luther King, speaking to his close friend and adviser Stanley Levison on June 1 over a wiretapped phone line, told Levison, "We are on the threshold of a significant breakthrough and the greatest weapon is the mass demonstration." (J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation, believing Levison to be a secret Communist who might be manipulating King, had obtained Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's approval for the wiretapping a year earlier. The transcripts of those wiretaps were released to me, pursuant to the federal Freedom of Information Act, in the mid-1980s.) Because of Birmingham, King told Levison, "We are at the point where we can mobilize all of this righteous indignation into a powerful mass movement" that could pressure the Kennedy administration to finally take decisive action on behalf of black civil rights.

More specifically, King told Levison that they should publicly announce a "march on Washington," for "the threat itself may so frighten the President that he would have to do something." Given the standoffish attitude that the Kennedy brothers had manifested toward King and the movement from January 1961 up through May 1963, neither King nor his colleagues had any expectation whatsoever that the Kennedys would change their stance absent widespread objections.

King's hope was that the president could unilaterally issue an executive order nullifying segregation, and a week after his wiretapped conversation about a march King went public, saying that such an event could feature "sit-in" protests at the U.S. Capitol. "Dr. King Denounces President on Rights" was The New York Times headline on the resulting news story.

But neither King nor the press knew that privately, for more than two weeks, the president, his attorney general brother and their closest civil rights advisers had been secretly putting together an outline for a dramatically far-reaching civil rights bill that the administration would place before Congress. On the evening of June 11, John F. Kennedy went on nationwide television to announce that proposal and to tell the American people that the civil rights struggle confronted them "primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution."

Kennedy's remarkable address deeply impressed King. "He was really great," King told Levison in yet another wiretapped phone call. Most immediately, King added, Kennedy's speech meant

that their March on Washington now ought to target Congress, not the president. King publicly amplified that thought a week later in Birmingham: "As soon as they start to filibuster, I think we should march on Washington with a quarter of a million people."

But two important entities were unpersuaded of the political wisdom of any such march. One was the two mainline civil rights groups that previously had rebuffed Randolph, the NAACP and the NUL. The other was the Kennedy administration, which quickly invited King, Randolph, Young and other civil rights leaders to a private meeting with the president on June 22. "We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol," John Kennedy told them. "It seemed to me a great mistake to announce a march on Washington before the bill was even in committee. The only effect is to create an atmosphere of intimidation--and this may give some members of Congress an out."

A. Philip Randolph tried to rebut the president's worries, but Kennedy was adamant, saying, "To get the votes we need, we have, first, to oppose demonstrations which will lead to violence, and, second, give Congress a fair chance to work its will." The president did not explicitly ask for cancellation of the March, but his message was clear. King told reporters that "we feel a demonstration would help the President's civil rights legislation" rather than hurt it, but NAACP leader Roy Wilkins was noncommittal, and in private he told his colleagues that only "quiet, patient lobbying tactics" should be employed.

Two days later, at a decisive planning meeting, Wilkins expressed worries about any assemblage that might feature a "tinge of Harlem," but the NAACP grudgingly agreed to endorse a one-day Washington event on Wednesday, August 28. Yet other civil rights supporters remained extremely worried about the March; African-American Congressman Charles C. Diggs Jr., of Detroit, warned King that in Washington there was increasing concern about "disciplinary problems" at such a demonstration, and that the announcement of the August 28 date had made "a lot of people nervous."

In early July, the March organizers announced that no sit-ins or civil disobedience would be part of the August 28 gathering, and worries about what would occur began to recede. On July 17, President Kennedy, choosing to embrace the inevitable, publicly endorsed the March, and administration officials quietly began assisting March planners in innumerable ways. King, echoing Randolph's original theme, told journalists the March would "arouse the conscience of the nation over the economic plight of the Negro," but the Urban League's Whitney Young voiced the new consensus that had resulted from Kennedy's metamorphosis: The March would be "an all-inclusive demonstration of our belief in the President's program."

As August 28 drew close, planners agreed on an afternoon rally at the Lincoln Memorial where speeches by March leaders would be interspersed among musical performances by noted entertainers. King would speak last, and four days before the March he told Al Duckett, a black journalist who was ghostwriting a forthcoming King book on the Birmingham campaign (eventually titled *Why We Can't Wait*), that his August 28 oration needed to be "sort of a Gettysburg Address."

But given how hectically frantic King's daily schedule usually was, only in the early morning hours of August 28 itself did King finish his final revisions on an advance text of a speech. When typed out and mimeographed for advance distribution to the press, it came to less than three legal-size, double-spaced pages. Yet for King to produce any sort of an advance text for a speech was almost unprecedented, since whether at civil rights rallies or in Sunday morning church sermons, Martin Luther King Jr. almost always spoke extemporaneously, often with no outline or notes whatsoever in front of him. As Drew Hansen writes in his new book *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation*, "King did not so much write most of his speeches as assemble them, by rearranging and adapting material he had used many times before," material that King the preacher knew by heart.

After master of ceremonies A. Philip Randolph introduced King as "the moral leader of our nation," King addressed the huge late afternoon crowd of more than 250,000. He began by commending his listeners for joining "what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation." Then King began to make his way through his advance text almost verbatim, making reference to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, promises that remained unfulfilled for black Americans, King noted. Speaking metaphorically; King compared those promises to a "bad check" that the United States should now make good on. Using one of his favorite rhetorical devices, an anaphora featuring the recurring phrase "Now is the time," King called for America to live up to those promises. He made no direct reference to Congress or to Kennedy's pending civil rights bill, but he did identify discriminatory evils that federal legislation could eliminate. After quoting the prophet Amos on justice and righteousness, King was close to the end of his prepared text. He later recalled that moment:

I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point, and just all of a sudden, I decided--the audience response was wonderful that day, you know--and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used--I'd used it many times before, that thing about "I have a dream"--and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don't know why, I hadn't thought about it before the speech.

King had indeed used it before--in Albany, Ga., and in Rocky Mount, N.C., in the fall of 1962, and in both Birmingham and in Detroit a few months earlier--but on none of those occasions had it had anywhere near the impact that it did on August 28. "I have a dream," King began, again introducing an echoing phrase. He quoted from the Declaration of Independence, alluded to the segregationist doctrines of Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, and then reiterated his "dream" that one day even Alabama would achieve interracial harmony. He ended his "I have a dream" repetition by quoting from the Bible's Book of Isaiah, and then, in his concluding lines, returned to the closing that appeared in his advance text. Adding several lines from a traditional American patriotic song, King expanded on its call to "let freedom ring" from every mountainside by appending some notable Southern mountains to its list of American peaks. He ended with a line he often used as a closing: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

As Drew Hansen notes in *The Dream*, "had King not decided to leave his written text, it is doubtful that his speech at the march would be remembered at all," for up until the beginning of his "dream" anaphora, King's oration had been impressive but not memorable. But once that

spontaneous inspiration took hold, King shifted forcefully into his voice as a preacher, rather than just a public speaker, and for the first time a national American audience was exposed to King's real sermonic power. It was a gift that King had polished in black Southern churches for more than a decade, a gift that movement colleagues had encountered from the onset of the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott forward, but only on August 28 did such a huge crowd, plus a live national television audience, hear the extemporaneous genius that made King such a remarkable preacher.

"I Have a Dream" was the signature touchstone of the August 28 March, but the hugely influential success of the March lay in its impressive turnout and in its utterly friendly and easygoing tone, far more so than in King's address. Ten months later Kennedy's bill, championed in Congress by the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, was signed into law as the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, and one year after that the other bookend legislative achievement of the Southern civil rights struggle, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, also became law.

But in the years after 1965, the glow of the 1963 March, and of the entire 1963-65 civil rights apex, rapidly receded. King himself quickly sensed the deteriorating political scene, and even in mid-1965 he woefully complained about how "often in these past two years I have had to watch my dream transformed into a nightmare." That nightmare formulation recurred often in King's speeches and sermons during 1966 and 1967, and as Drew Hansen rightly observes, "between 1963 and 1968, few people spent substantial time talking or thinking about what King had said at the march." Indeed, by the time of his assassination on April 4, 1968, King's speech "had nearly vanished from public view."

Yet the tragedy of King's assassination quickly returned his 1963 speech to the popular eye. "Within a few weeks of King's death," Hansen explains, "the 'I Have a Dream' speech had regained all the public visibility it had lost since 1963." Indeed, it "gradually came to dominate public memory of King's legacy," thereby raising the significant danger that its upbeat and optimistic tone would distract most if not all attention from the more radically challenging and harshly critical parts of King's legacy that were most obvious during his 1967-68 public attacks on American economic inequality and American foreign policy.

But 40 years after the March on Washington, there is no gainsaying that Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" has entered American public culture as "the oratorical equivalent of the Declaration of Independence," as Hansen puts it. If its fame threatens to swamp the balance of King's legacy, and if its stature directs historical memory only toward the brightest and not the bleakest days of the 1960s black freedom movement, it nonetheless remains the most notable oratorical achievement of the 20th century--a "sort of a Gettysburg Address" indeed.

<http://www.america.gov/st/pubs-english/2003/August/20050711151842pssnikwad0.3846247.html>

Epilogue

An assassin ends King's career, but not the forces King led

This article is excerpted from the book Free At Last: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement, published by the Bureau of International Information Programs. View [the entire book](#) (PDF, 3.6 MB).



Today's hugely diverse America is one legacy of the civil rights movement.

On March 21, 1965, as civil rights advocates and their supporters gathered in Selma, a local Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader warned the press that the “irresponsibility” of the more militant activists might cause the movement enormous harm. The Reverend Jefferson P. Rogers was referring to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, whose leadership was growing increasingly impatient with the gradualist strategy of Martin Luther King and the mainstream civil rights movement. Nearly every broad-based social movement faces similar tensions, but the years and decades that followed would prove the wisdom of the strategy pursued by Thurgood Marshall, King, and the others. The great triumphs of the civil rights movement were evidence that, in a nation of laws, the key to progress lay in establishing the real legal equality of African Americans — in public facilities, in places of education, and, most of all, at the voting booth.

But this truth was not yet apparent. By May 1966, Stokely Carmichael, veteran of numerous voter registration drives, had established himself as the new head of SNCC. In a speech at Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael raised a call for “Black Power.” Where Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King Jr. had sought integration, Carmichael instead sought separation. Integration, he said, was “an insidious subterfuge, for the maintenance of white supremacy.” Meanwhile, the Black Panther Party (some accounts trace the name to a visual emblem for illiterate voters used in an Alabama voter registration drive), founded in Oakland, California, in October 1966 by activists Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, employed armed members — “Panthers” — to shadow police officers whom they believed unfairly targeted blacks. While the party briefly enjoyed a measure of popularity, particularly through its social services programs, armed altercations with local police resulted in the death or jailing of prominent Panthers, turned many Americans against its violent ways, and fragmented the Panther movement. It petered out in a maze of factionalism and mutual recriminations.

The year 1968 was one of political upheaval throughout much of the Western world. In the United States, that year would see the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who as attorney general had provided timely assistance to civil rights activists. And it would see the end of King's remarkable career.

It was a measure of the civil rights movement's accomplishments in securing legal equality that King dedicated his last years to fighting for economic equality. On April 3, 1968, he campaigned in Memphis, Tennessee, on behalf of striking — and primarily black — sanitation workers. King's last address drew strongly on his lifelong study of the Bible. It would prove prophetic:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead.
But it really 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 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.*

An assassin's bullet took King's life the very next day. He was 39 years old. The medical examiners said he died with the heart of a 60 year old, because King had for so long carried the burden of so many. Some 300,000 Americans attended his funeral.

The murder of Martin Luther King Jr. set off riots in Washington, D.C., and in more than 100 other American cities. At that moment, the short of vision and the faint of heart might have questioned King's life work. But the Promised Land that King described was in many ways far closer than it seemed on those angry, fire-lit nights

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