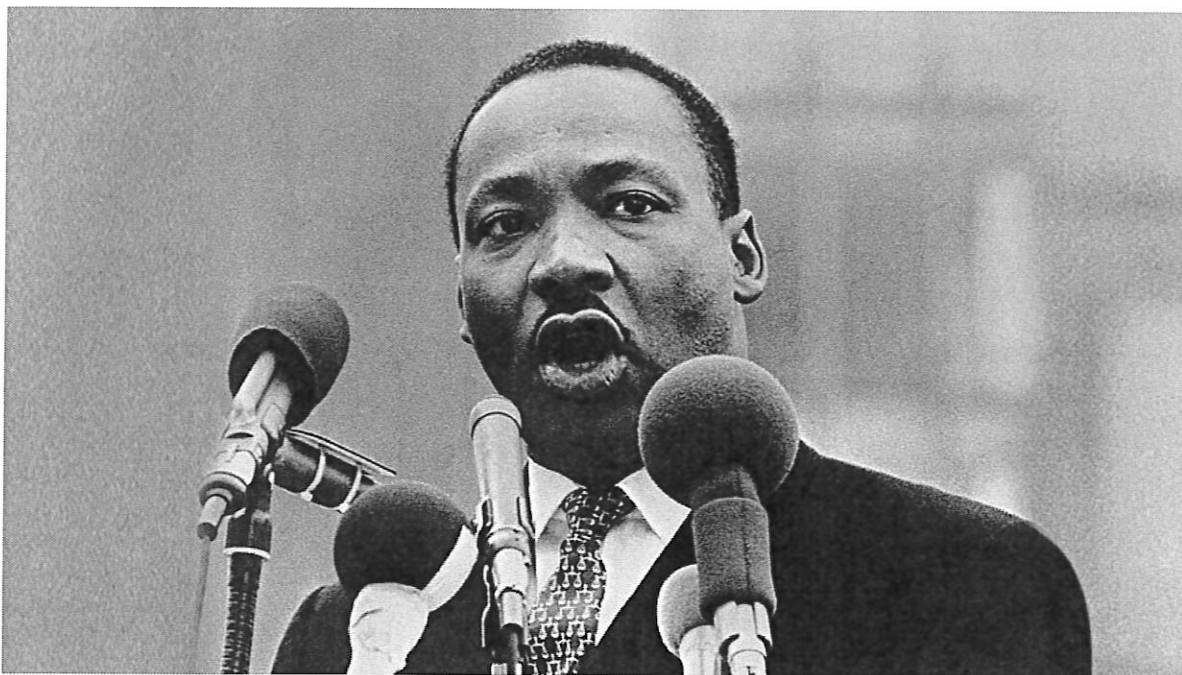


Civil Rights Leaders: Martin Luther King Jr.

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Martin Luther King Jr. Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. A Baptist minister and civil rights activist, he had an enormous impact on race relations in the United States. Through his activism, he played a key role in ending the segregation of African-American citizens in the South and the creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King was assassinated in April 1968 and continues to be remembered as one of the greatest African-American leaders in history.

Early Years And Spiritual Growth

Originally named Michael King Jr., Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929. He was the middle child of Michael King Sr. and Alberta Williams King. The King children grew up in a secure and loving environment.

Martin Luther King Jr. entered school at age 5, skipped two grades in high school, and entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, at age 15, in 1944. He was a popular student, but he was unmotivated and floated through his first two years.

In 1948, King attended the Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. He graduated first in his class in 1951, after having been elected student body president.

While working on his doctorate at Boston University, King met Coretta Scott, a singer and musician. They were married in June 1953 and had four children, Yolanda, Martin Luther King III, Dexter Scott and Bernice. In 1954, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama.

Bus Boycott And Southern Christian Leadership Conference

On December 1, 1955, 42-year-old Rosa Parks boarded a bus to go home from a day at work. She sat in the first row of the "colored" section in the middle of the bus. The bus driver demanded that Parks and several other African-Americans give up their seats. Three other African-American passengers reluctantly gave up their places, but Parks remained seated. The driver asked her again to give up her seat and again she refused. Parks was arrested and jailed.

After Parks was arrested, King was chosen to lead a boycott of the Montgomery bus system, meaning no black residents would ride the bus. The one-day bus boycott would eventually expand to 381 days of walking to work, harassment, violence and intimidation for Montgomery's African-American community. In early 1957, the city of Montgomery gave in and ended the law mandating segregated public transportation.

In January 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. and more than 60 ministers and civil rights activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to coordinate their civil rights efforts. In the South at that time, African-Americans were prevented from voting in most places. The organization felt the best way to give African-Americans a voice was to make sure they could vote. In February 1958, the SCLC began registering black voters in the South.

"I Have A Dream"

Through the late 1950s and early 1960s, King led various protests, including marches and demonstrations. In the spring of 1963, he organized a demonstration in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. City police turned dogs and fire hoses on entire families of demonstrators, including children. King was jailed along with many others. The event drew nationwide attention but King was criticized for taking risks and endangering children. From his jail cell in Birmingham, King eloquently spelled out his theory of nonviolence: Nonviolent action seeks to create a crisis, so that a community is forced to confront the issue and deal with it.

On August 28, 1963, the historic March on Washington drew more than 200,000 people. It was here that King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, emphasizing his belief that someday all men could be brothers. This speech included the famous line, "I have a dream that my four 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."

King's protests strongly affected public opinion. All over the country people began questioning the South's segregation (or "Jim Crow") laws and the discriminatory treatment of African-American citizens. This led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in public places. That same year King received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Assassination And Legacy

By 1968, King was becoming discouraged at the slow progress of civil rights in America and began to take up other causes, as well. In Memphis, Tennessee, while standing on a balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed by a sniper's bullet. The killing sparked riots and demonstrations in more than 100 cities across the country. In 1969, his killer, James Earl Ray, pleaded guilty was sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s life had an earth-shattering effect on race relations in the United States. Years after his death, he is the most widely known African-American leader of his era. His life and work have been honored with a national holiday in his name. Schools and public buildings have been named after him, as well as a memorial in Washington, D.C. King was a complicated man: flawed but still a visionary leader who was deeply committed to achieving social justice through nonviolent means.