

Case Study Activist Movement in a Partly-Free Country

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Fighting for Equal Rights in America

Vision and Motivation

Although slavery in the United States ended in the late 19th century, institutionalized racism continued to oppress African Americans even decades later. By the mid-20th century, blacks were still forced to use separate public utilities and schools from the superior ones reserved for whites; they suffered routine discrimination in employment and housing, as well as abuse and lynching from some whites, and they were unable to fully exercise their right to vote.

For decades, civil rights activists had been fighting these laws and social customs to secure equality for all Americans. These activists had won some significant victories; among the most notable was the

1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which held that state laws requiring black students and white students to attend different schools were unconstitutional.¹ However, these victories could not dismantle the systemic racism that plagued the country. It was in this environment, seeing the possibility of an America where black and white citizens were truly equal, that Martin Luther King, Jr. joined in the fight for civil rights for black Americans.



Goals and Objectives

A Baptist minister by training, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sought to raise the public consciousness of racism, to end racial discrimination and segregation in the United States. While his goal was racial equality, King plotted out a series of smaller objectives that involved local grassroots campaigns for equal rights for African Americans. In 1955, King became involved in his first major civil rights campaign in Montgomery, Alabama, where buses were racially segregated.

It was there that Rosa Parks, an African American woman, refused to vacate her seat in the middle of the bus so that a white man could sit in her place. She was arrested for her civil disobedience.² Parks' arrest, a coordinated tactic meant to spark a grassroots movement, succeeded in catalyzing the Montgomery bus boycott. Parks was chosen by King as the face for his campaign because of Parks' good standing with the community, her employment and her marital status. Earlier in 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year old African American girl, had been arrested for the same crime; however, King and his civil rights compatriots did not feel that she would serve as an effective face for their civil rights campaign. Rosa Parks helped contribute to the image that King wanted to show the world, a crucial tactic in his local campaigns.³

With Parks in jail as a victim of Montgomery's racism, King was able to develop an effective response to her arrest that involved the entire community. King mobilized Montgomery's African American community to boycott the city's public transportation, demanding equal rights for all citizens on public transportation there. After a year-long boycott, a United States District Court ruling in *Browder v. Gayle* banned racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses.⁴ In many ways, the Montgomery bus boycott kicked off a national struggle to eliminate racial discrimination, with King leading the way.

The success of the Montgomery campaign led Dr. King and fellow African American civil rights activists to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, whose mission was to harness the moral authority and organizing power of black churches to conduct non-violent protests for civil rights reform. With King as its leader, the SCLC's initial focus was to lead localized campaigns of desegregation in Southern cities like Albany, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; and St. Augustine, Florida that mirrored the Montgomery campaign. In each of the

cities, King and thousands of SCLC activists worked towards specific goals: ending segregation in just one area, such as diners, buses, schools, or shops. Despite the asymmetrically more powerful police and local government officials who had institutionalized policies of segregation for years, King's nonviolent tactics of civic activism forced the issue of segregation onto the national agenda.⁵

By drawing nation-wide attention to segregation, King became a core organizer, one of the "Big Six", of the famous 1963 March on Washington, which demanded political and economic justice for all Americans. It was a public opportunity for King and his cohorts to place their concerns and grievances before the nation's capital, as expressed by King in his renowned "I Have a Dream" speech. The March on Washington not only led to the passage of significant civil rights legislation, but it also allowed King to advocate for other human rights causes like poverty and workers' rights.

Leadership

Born in 1929, King grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, a city plagued by racial segregation. King benefited from both a secular and religious education, receiving a PhD in systematic theology from Boston University in 1955.⁶ Shortly after he began his career as a pastor in 1954 at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the Montgomery civil rights campaign thrust King into the epicenter of the civil rights movement.⁷

After successfully ending the laws that upheld segregation in Montgomery's public transportation system, King sought to create an umbrella organization to tackle the issue of segregation in other communities. In early 1957, King invited more than 60 African American church leaders to a series of meetings to discuss additional desegregation campaigns, out of which came the SCLC. Leading the SCLC until his assassination in 1968, King utilized the national organization to lead local and national campaigns to end systematic racism across the United States.⁸

The SCLC differed from other civil rights groups like the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), in that it was established as an umbrella organization of

affiliated churches and community organizations and therefore did not recruit individuals into forming local chapters. As such, the approach of King and the SCLC allowed a much broader range of African Americans to become involved in the civil rights struggle through boycotts, sit-ins, and other peaceful protests.

King often played a leadership role as the public “face” of civil rights campaigns, and as such, he was careful to maintain a public image that would be acceptable to America’s white majority. Diametrically opposed to the militant and divisive image that Malcolm X, the public face of The Nation of Islam, portrayed to the world, King carefully cultivated his image so that people thought of him as a moderate, not as a radical extremist. In many ways his moderate image enabled him to actively recruit a critical mass of white Americans to join the movement; King not only embodied the hopes and dreams of African Americans, but also those of white progressives across the country. He also worked to put a united face on the civil rights movement, serving as a bridge-builder between different activist groups at a time when Americans were increasingly interested in ideas of liberation and equality. He was never seen as fully belonging to any of the various factions that threatened to split the civil rights movement, and was particularly effective behind the scenes in bringing together black leaders who otherwise would have been unwilling to work together.⁹

As a civic leader and human rights defender, King drew heavily upon the writings and actions of Gandhi for inspiration. King felt such a strong connection to Gandhi that he visited India in 1959; the trip, according to King, deeply affected his understanding of civil resistance. King explained, “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.”¹⁰ King was so dedicated to Gandhi’s nonviolent tactics of civil resistance that he surrounded himself by civil rights activists like Bayard Rustin, who had studied Gandhi’s teachings, so that they could incorporate his teachings into King’s activism.¹¹

Civic Environment

King and his fellow civil rights fighters faced enormous and often brutal opposition from local officials and police forces in Southern cities, civil rights opponents, and white supremacist groups

like the Ku Klux Klan. Civil rights protestors were frequently arrested and jailed; King was arrested 30 times for his civil rights activities.¹² Police forces in many Southern cities did not hesitate to use violence against protestors, and some Alabama police forces even collaborated with the Klan to allow vicious mob attacks on Freedom Riders. Meanwhile, the Klan bombed the homes of civil rights activists including King himself and assassinated activists such as Medgar Evers. However, these brutal actions actually galvanized support for the civil rights movement, as they attracted increased national publicity and mobilized whites who had previously been indifferent to the plight of African Americans.

In addition to the threat of these groups, King was under constant surveillance by FBI agents who were interested in his ties to Communists.¹³ Because King was a charismatic leader with an ability to mobilize African Americans, the FBI viewed King as a threat to the status quo and attempted to blackmail him by threatening to reveal his alleged extramarital affairs.¹⁴ King, however, did not yield to these attempts to damage his credibility.

Although many state governments were hostile to the civil rights movement, the civic environment of the United States was nonetheless favorable for the movement in many ways. Post-slavery amendments to the American Constitution provided a legal basis for equality that had not yet been realized in practice, and the democratic nature of American society gave King and his followers some measure of freedom of association. While unsympathetic media outlets in the South had little interest in giving King a platform on which to spread his ideas, the national media was largely sympathetic to his goals.¹⁵

Message and Audience

From the launch of his first civil rights campaign in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, King emphasized the importance of equality among all races, whether on a bus in Alabama, a restaurant in Georgia, or a voting booth in Mississippi. Moreover, regardless of the issue or the place, King strove to deliver that message utilizing methods of non-violent civic activism that included city-wide economic boycotts, sit-ins, speeches, and public marches. In addition to tactics of mass mobilization, King used his tremendous charisma and skills as an orator to

combat segregation; his ["I Have a Dream"](#) speech during the 1963 March on Washington is revered as one of the most powerful speeches in American history.

King expertly tailored his message according to its intended audience. As an ally in the Evangelical movement for social justice put it, "He could, in turn, be raucous, smooth, erudite, eloquent, vulgar, and even salacious [without being] a chameleon or a hypocrite."¹⁶ One of King's many biographers, Jonathan Rieder, remarked that King "had an uncommon ability to glide in and out of black, white, and other idioms and identities in an elaborate dance of empathy. Straddling audiences, he blurred not just the lines between them but their very meaning."¹⁷ In Montgomery, developing a response to the unlawful imprisonment of Rosa Parks, King helped to lead a citywide boycott of public transportation. African Americans refused to use public transport until city officials agreed to change the rules to make them less humiliating. The boycotters' demands were modest and did not even include desegregation. They asked for courteous treatment on buses; the hiring of black bus drivers to service bus routes predominantly used by black passengers; and seating on a first-come, first-served basis with whites in the front and blacks in the back of the bus.¹⁸

The boycott received strong support from the black community, and since they made up the majority of public transport users, the boycott had a noticeable effect on revenues. The boycotters endured fines, arrests, and even physical attacks, but on November 13th, 1956, the Supreme Court finally ruled that racial segregation laws for buses were unconstitutional. In just over a year, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was ended.¹⁹

Eight years later, in March 1963, King and the SCLC launched a campaign to end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, where they hoped to replicate the results of Montgomery. Instead of focusing on a specific issue like public transportation, King wanted to put an end to economic policies in Birmingham that promoted segregation and discriminatory practices against African Americans. Knowing that this would require more intense civic action, King organized the Birmingham campaign to be more aggressive than previous ones. In what became known as "Project C", with the C standing for Confrontation, King and his cohorts of civic activists launched economic boycotts against businesses who refused to hire people of all races and desegregate their facilities, and began a series of marches through the city and peaceful sit-ins at libraries and

restaurants that he knew would provoke the arrest of civil rights activists. Explaining his strategy, King said, "The purpose of...direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."²⁰

In response to the protests, Birmingham police not only arrested large numbers of nonviolent activists, but they attacked many others using clubs, dogs, and high-pressure water jets. King, who was arrested during the initial stages of Project C, used his time in jail to write his famous ["Letter from Birmingham Jail,"](#) in which he argued that true civil rights could not be achieved without nonviolent direct actions of civil disobedience. King wrote that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and made the case that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."²¹ The letter, which was later published in many magazines and books, still serves as one of the best examples of civic activist writing in American history. The letter, alongside Project C, led to significant gains in Birmingham by the end of Spring 1963; many of the discriminatory practices in Birmingham were abolished, and the city became notably less segregated.²²

In the months after the end of the Birmingham campaign, King became intimately involved in the organization of the historic August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The organizers intended to highlight the status of African Americans in the South; however, in order to give the march a more widely accepted audience, it was organized under the auspices of civil rights, labor, and religious organizations. In expanding its message beyond the scope of African American civil rights to universal labor issues, the march took on a life of its own, culminating in the gathering of a quarter of a million people in front of the Lincoln Memorial for King's keynote address. Drawing inspiration from both the Bible and the United States Declaration of Independence, King outlined his hopes for racial harmony and the prospect of equality in the United States: "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.' Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."²³

King's speech was met with great applause and admiration from the march's attendees, as well as from Americans throughout the country. The success of this speech and the march as a whole

led to the passage of significant civil rights legislation; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the National Voting Rights Act of 1965 legally ended segregation throughout the country. While the passage of civil rights legislation brought King's dream much closer to reality, there was still much work to be done at the community level in terms of implementation, and King spent the next three years working tirelessly towards that goal.

For his tremendous efforts in working towards desegregation, King was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize and named Time Magazine's Man of the Year in both 1963 and 1964, while posthumously receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004, having a national American holiday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, named after him, and receiving a myriad of other prestigious national and international awards.

Outreach Activities

By carefully shaping his message and image, King was able to win support from a number of organizations within the United States that might otherwise not have supported him. King often used points of cultural reference that would be well-known to his audience, whether white or black, secular or religious.²⁴ To the American Jewish Congress, for example, King proclaimed, "My people were brought to America in chains. Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of a common struggle for centuries, not only to rid ourselves of bondage, but to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility."²⁵

At times, however, King chose to compromise in order to win the support that he needed. King played a key role in changing the tone of the March on Washington in order to make it less stridently critical of the government.²⁶ The March had originally been conceived as a condemnation of the federal government's failure to address the needs and concerns of African Americans, but at the request of President John F. Kennedy, King persuaded the other organizers to take a less aggressive approach.²⁷ This change in tone inspired criticism from some civil rights such as Malcolm X, who dismissed the event as a "Farce on Washington,"²⁸ but it improved relations between activists and the federal government and led to concrete change quickly.²⁹

On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated as he stood on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee, while on a trip advocating for black sanitary workers' rights. His death led to panic and riots across the country, but did not derail the civil rights movement from fighting for the equality of African Americans. In the decades since his assassination, activists have continued to work to end racial discrimination in the United States. Their work built upon King's remarkable legacy: a largely nonviolent movement which, despite impassioned and often brutal opposition, tore down discriminatory laws to help create a country true to its ideals of equality and justice.

Learn More

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