

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, GA. His tenure as a leader of the American Civil Rights Movement, from December 1955 until his assassination in Memphis, TN, on April 4, 1968 corresponded with the greatest progress towards racial equality in the 350 years of American history to that point.

Born into an American South still bound by strict racial codes and Jim Crow laws, Dr. King frequently witnessed the sting of racism first hand from a young age. King followed in his father's footsteps, first to Morehouse College, then into the Baptist ministry. Taking inspiration from the teachings of Jesus Christ as well as the Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King led a grassroots movement of nonviolent resistance, including boycotts, sit-ins, peaceful marches and protests, and civil disobedience that, coupled with his powerful and inspiring words, was a powerful moral force in the effort to achieve the elusive goal of racial equality for African Americans in the United States and bring us closer to his vision of a society where all men and women are judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character".

Dr. King's achievements in the cause of Civil Rights were many. In 1955, Dr. King relocated to Montgomery, AL, to serve as the spokesperson for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a role that thrust him into the national spotlight. Two years later, King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization dedicated to providing leadership and guidance to the Civil Rights movement and a role he would serve in until his assassination. In 1963, King led protests in Birmingham, AL, then known as the "most segregated city in America". The brutality of the city's police response, most remembered by infamous televised images of young blacks being assaulted by police dogs and fire hoses, sparked national outrage that helped galvanize support for unprecedented new civil rights legislation. His arrest during the protests resulted in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" outlining his philosophy of nonviolence, which became one of the most famous letters of resistance in history. Later the same year, Dr. King led the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom", delivering his "I Have a Dream" Speech- one of the most famous and highly regarded speeches in history- to a crowd of over a quarter million people on the National Mall from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In 1964, at the age of only 35, Dr. King became the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1965 Dr. King led the march from Selma to Montgomery, AL, for voting rights which was again met with police violence and further galvanized support for the Civil Rights movement.

His leadership of the Civil Rights movement also helped to inspire the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal to discriminate against blacks or other minorities in hiring, public accommodations, education, or transportation, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated the remaining barriers to voting for African-Americans. After 1965 Dr. King shifted his focus to economic justice and international peace, which included speaking out against the Vietnam War and leading the "Poor People's Campaign," which was to assemble a multiracial coalition of impoverished Americans who would advocate for economic change.

Dr. King's leadership of the Civil Rights movement ended in tragedy on April 4th, 1968, when he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN. Dr. King's body was returned to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, where his funeral ceremony was attended by leaders of all races and political parties. Though struck down violently like his inspiration Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King continues to inspire people struggling for justice worldwide. King's "I Have a Dream" speech and "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" are among the most revered

words ever spoken in the English language. King is the only non-president to have a national holiday dedicated in his honor, and is the only non-president memorialized on the Great Mall in the nation's capital, and is memorialized in the name of hundreds of statues, parks, streets, squares, churches and other public facilities around the world. One of the greatest nonviolent leaders for change in world history, perhaps the most inspiring words of King were those spoken in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Oslo, Norway in 1964: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant".