

Martin Luther King:
A Peaceful Ideology Contradicted by Violence
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“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that,”¹ said Martin Luther King Jr. during his Loving Your Enemies speech. These words represent King's ideology on peaceful protest. Through his inspiring speeches and peaceful protest, King impacted people all over the world, including both supporters and adversaries. King's peaceful protest inspired a triumphant Civil Rights Movement that legalized equal rights for black men and women. But in the end, the peace he advocated for was sadly contradicted with hate and violence which led to his tragic death.

Ever since King was a child he was surrounded with preaching and speaking out about life or religion and which translated to his later life. King's grandfather was the first of his family to serve as pastor followed by King's father and then him. King graduated from a segregated public school at the age of 15. He later attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. After three years of study, King was elected class president in a predominantly white class. King attended Boston University where he earned his doctorate, receiving the degree in 1955. After graduating he became involved in his first non-violent movement known as the Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

Kings Peaceful Philosophy

King's ideology of non-violent protest and peace was as much his own personal motivation as it was influenced by important figures in his life. One such inspiring figure was Mohandas K. Gandhi.² Gandhi was recognized by the London Times as the most

¹ “Peace & Inspiration: Great Quotes.” *The Peace Alliance*,

² “Gandhi, Mohandas K.” *Gandhi, Mohandas K. | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 2 Oct. 1869

influential person India had in generations. King first learned about Gandhi's peaceful philosophy during his time at Crozer Theological Seminary. King argued that, "The Gandhian philosophy is the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."³ Throughout the Bus Boycott there were regular church meetings where King would teach the idea and methods of demonstrating peaceful protest that were inspired by Gandhi. At the Holt Street Baptist Church, King spoke to thousands of people encouraging the movement and giving people confidence in what they were fighting for. King was preaching his philosophy of peace. In King's philosophy he taught about the Triple Evils.⁴ The Triple Evils are the three different forms of violence: poverty, racism, and militarism. King believed that to counteract these evils you needed to develop a non-violent state of mind. During these meetings he would teach how to practice what you preach and it played a big role in keeping people engaged in his non-violent movement. King's teachings were the basis of his non-violent method of protest which he first demonstrated in Montgomery, Alabama.

Montgomery Bus Boycott

Martin Luther King Jr. was president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) when the Bus Boycott⁵ started. The Bus Boycott began when a black woman by the name of Rosa Parks sat in the front of a segregated public bus and

³ "Gandhi, Mohandas K." *Gandhi, Mohandas K. | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 2 Oct. 1869

⁴ "The King Philosophy." *The King Center*

⁵ "Montgomery Bus Boycott." *Montgomery Bus Boycott | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 Dec. 1955

refused to move to the “colored” section in the back. After Rosa Parks’ arrest the black community came together to protest the segregation on public transportation. The boycott was well organized by King and his peaceful philosophy. The Bus Boycott lasted 13 months and was the first significant act of non-violent protest that was successful in the Civil Rights Movement. The Bus Boycott was taken to the Supreme Court where it was ruled unconstitutional to have segregation on public buses. This was just the first of many triumphs King would have throughout the Civil Rights Act. Contradicting this peaceful movement, King’s house was bombed and his family was put in danger. King spoke out to settle the crowds and move on with the movement, “Be calm as I and my family are. We are not hurt and remember that if anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place.”⁶ Even after this violent act that threatened King and his family, he maintained his peaceful vision.

In 1957 King first made an appearance on the cover of Time Magazine where he was recognized as the face of the peaceful Civil Rights Movement. By this time King was widely regarded as the voice and advocate of nonviolence and equal rights in America, but Martin Luther King wasn’t the only person trying to gain equality for blacks. There were other groups and organizations but they all had different ideas to attack this issue. Some were taking action along the lines of King’s peaceful philosophy but some were more militant and extreme.

Same Fight Different Approach

⁶ “Montgomery Bus Boycott.” *Montgomery Bus Boycott | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 Dec. 1955

Malcolm X was another influential black leader also fighting for equal rights during the same time as King, but he was taking a different approach.⁷ Although these two influential black leaders were fighting for same thing, they had very different plans to tackle the issues surrounding civil rights. Interestingly enough their childhoods clearly reflected the different paths they took. King was raised in a stable middle class household and was surrounded by preaching family members and the power of speech while Malcolm X was surrounded by violence and poverty growing up in the midwest. Malcolm X and King would constantly butt heads which was unfortunate for if they could collaborate who knows what they could have accomplished. Having Malcolm X as one of his greatest critics, King rejected multiple offers for a meeting. Malcolm X constantly criticized King over his non-violent approach. Malcolm X argued that to gain equality for blacks the community should be using “any means necessary.” Malcolm X and King only met once in Washington, D.C. before Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, less than a year after they met.

Involvement In The Political World

Martin Luther King was involved in just about every aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. He was a leader vocally, physically, and politically. The only action King would not participate in was violence. Prior to King meeting with Malcolm X, King took action to back the movement more politically, and met with Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President at the time, to discuss segregation in America and civil liberty.⁸ President

⁷ Maranzani, Barbara. “Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Only Met Once.” *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 7 Mar. 2019

⁸ “LBJ and MLK.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration

Lyndon Johnson signed off on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, demolishing official segregation and later signed on the Voting Rights act, overturning racist laws against voting.

The March on Washington, officially known as The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, was the catalyst for the Presidential signing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.⁹ On August 28, 1963, King participated in the Washington March. The march was organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, they gathered an interracial crowd estimated at over 200,000 people to protest for equal rights. During the March on Washington thousands of people marched to the Lincoln Memorial where Martin Luther King delivered the “I Have a Dream” speech. This address was heard throughout America and inspired only more supporters.

In 1964, King was named man of the year by Time magazine as the face of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁰ He was the first African American to receive this honor. This was not his first time being featured in Time magazine, he was first recognized for the Bus Boycott at the beginning of his involvement in the Civil Rights Act. Although it was a great honor and King was being congratulated by famous and influential figures around the world, the article featured some rather offensive remarks that did not go unnoticed. Even though the article was honoring him, the author made comments on King’s sense of humor and his use of metaphors saying that some of his metaphorical language was “downright embarrassing.” King peacefully responded to the hate and wrote a letter to

⁹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “March on Washington.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 13 Mar. 2019

¹⁰ “Time Magazine’s ‘Man of the Year.’” *Time Magazine’s “Man of the Year” | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 3 Jan. 1964

founder of Time Magazine thanking him for the honor. King spoke regarding the honor saying, "For it does much to help grind away the granite-like notions that have obtained for so long that the Negro is not able to take his place in all fields of endeavor and that he is lazy, shiftless and without ambition."¹¹ Later that same year Martin Luther King went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize. King received this prestigious international award for demonstrating his non-violent ideology in the face of racism, threats, and violence. In his Nobel speech on December 11, 1964 King spoke about nonviolence compared to violence.

"The word that symbolizes the spirit and the outward form of our encounter is nonviolence, and it is doubtless that factor which made it seem appropriate to award a peace prize to one identified with struggle. Broadly speaking, nonviolence in the civil rights struggle has meant not relying on arms and weapons of struggle...Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral...Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue."¹²

In this quote King stresses how the power of peace and love can leave a greater impact than relying on violence and hate. This award was a great recognition of the struggle it took to rely on nonviolence to accomplish Civil Rights. King went on to donate the award money toward the Civil Rights Movement.

The March From Selma to Montgomery

King continued to demonstrate his peaceful philosophy. King lead the Voting Rights march, later known as "Bloody Sunday," across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This

¹¹ "Time Magazine's 'Man of the Year.'" *Time Magazine's "Man of the Year" | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 3 Jan. 1964

¹² "The Nobel Peace Prize 1964." *NobelPrize.org*

was the beginning of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.¹³ The six hundred people marching and peacefully protesting voting rights were met with deadly violence from local police and white racist groups. Finally after much tragedy the protesters reached their goal arriving in Montgomery after three days of brutal racism and violence. Martin Luther King and all the people protesting for equal voting rights, opened the world's eyes to the challenges African Americans have to face in America. The tragic losses of protesters and civil rights activists were not taken for granted as the march resulted in triumph, alerting political figures and influencers around America to the need for a Civil Rights Act.

The Assassination

On the evening of April 4, 1968 at approximately 6:07 PM, Martin Luther King was tragically shot and killed. King was standing on the second floor deck at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee when James Earl Ray shot and killed him. King was originally in Tennessee to help aid the The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike.¹⁴ The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike was a protest for better pay and working conditions. The majority of workers were African American and could not gather enough support to make a significant impact. The leader of the act was a friend of King's and asked for some support. King joined arms with the movement and participated in the march in support of the strike. It resulted in violence and chaos. King returned to his home in Atlanta before returning to Tennessee for the last time.

¹³ Editors, History.com. "Selma to Montgomery March." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 28 Jan. 2010

¹⁴ Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 Feb. 2019

The night before his assassination, King delivered the “Mountaintop Speech” at Bishop Charles Mason Temple.¹⁵ It was a rainy night and King was feeling ill. King was going to call it off and reschedule but there was a larger turnout than expected. Ralph Abernathy, one of King’s best friends, went to deliver the speech instead. When he saw the amount of people, he phoned King and persuaded him to go. King, feeling ill, improvised most of the speech but his power and skill with words was like no other. King excited the crowd, delivering one of the most memorable and powerful speeches of his time. King spoke about death as something he no longer fears saying, “I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the lord.” This was King’s last speech before his tragic death the evening after. His death led to violent riots across the country causing havoc and unrest around America.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King inspired a nation, becoming the face of a powerful peaceful movement and is now recognized as one of the most inspirational people in history. King’s peace was met with violence but King persevered and led the movement to achieve civil rights. King spoke the movement into existence with the message of peace and love, educating millions while he was threatened, attacked, arrested, and tragically killed. In his career, King spoke over 2500 times teaching his philosophy and directing the Civil Rights Movement to demolish racial segregation.¹⁶ King was met by so much hate and violence along the way to accomplish his goal, but he did not give up. Even

¹⁵ “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” *“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 3 Apr. 1968

¹⁶ “The Nobel Peace Prize 1964.” *NobelPrize.org*

though King's life ended in tragedy, his legacy of peace and love would not die with him, making it his greatest triumph.

Work Cited

Primary

“The King Philosophy.” *The King Center*, thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/.

This website was devoted to explaining MLK’s ideology surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. This website was helpful to further my understanding about Martin Luther King and his mindset throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

“LBJ and MLK.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/02/28/lbj-and-mlk/.

This website was on Martin Luther King and his involvement with President Lyndon Johnson and his involvement in the political world. This helped me learn about the relationship between MLK and LBJ and their collaboration throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

“THE SOUTH: Attack on the Conscience.” *Time*, Time Inc., 18 Feb. 1957, content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,809103,00.html.

This was a Time magazine article with MLK’s first appearance. This was one of the first times King was recognized as the face of the Civil Rights Movement. This was an interesting primary source to help me learn about what was going on at the time and teach me about his early acts of nonviolent protest.

“The Nobel Peace Prize 1964.” *NobelPrize.org*, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/.

This source was a transcript of Martin Luther King’s Nobel Lecture. I found some great quotes to back up my thesis statement and give greater meaning to my writing.

Secondary

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "March on Washington." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 13 Mar. 2019, www.britannica.com/event/March-on-Washington.

This website summarized the March on Washington and then went further into detail. It helped me learn about the goal and organization process of the March.

Editors, History.com. "Selma to Montgomery March." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 28 Jan. 2010, www.history.com/topics/black-history/selma-montgomery-march.

This website is on the Selma to Montgomery March, it included both moments of triumph and tragedy and talked about what achievements this march led up to. I learned about MLK's involvement and how the march rose awareness to the struggle in America for blacks.

"Gandhi, Mohandas K." *Gandhi, Mohandas K. | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 2 Oct. 1869, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/gandhi-mohandas-k.

This article talked about Martin Luther King's relationship with another influential figure at the time, Gandhi. I learned about the impact Gandhi had on King and how Gandhi influenced King's ideology.

Maranzani, Barbara. "Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Only Met Once." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 7 Mar. 2019, www.biography.com/news/martin-luther-king-jr-malcolm-x-meeting.

This website was on Martin Luther King and Malcolm X's conflicted relationship. I learned how these two influential figures contradicted each others ideologies and the one time they met.

"Montgomery Bus Boycott." *Montgomery Bus Boycott | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 Dec. 1955,
kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/montgomery-bus-boycott.

This source had information on the influence of the boycott and the actions King and others took to execute the peaceful movement gracefully. I learned about the start of the movement and how previous events had an effect on the boycott. I learned about the steps King took to rally people to join him in nonviolent protest.

"The Nobel Peace Prize 1964." *NobelPrize.org*,
www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/biographical/.

This website went over King and his winning of the peace prize. I learned about his acceptance speech and even some of the criticism King took afterwards. This also further helped my understanding of Kings challenges even after winning such a coveted award.

"Peace & Inspiration: Great Quotes." *The Peace Alliance*,
peacealliance.org/tools-education/peace-inspirational-quotes/.

This was just a source where I gathered great quotes from inspirational figures. I learned about some of MLK's speeches through these quotes.

"Time Magazine's 'Man of the Year.'" *Time Magazine's "Man of the Year" | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 3 Jan. 1964,

kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/time-magazines-man-year.

This was an article on MLK's winning of "Man of the Year" and had information on the article and what he was recognized for. I learned about the other time he was featured in Time magazine as well.

Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Encyclopædia Britannica*,

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 Feb. 2019,

www.britannica.com/topic/assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King-Jr.

This source included information on the lead up to King's assassination as well as the tragic moment itself. I learned about the original reason King was in Tennessee as well as the speeches and iconic moments before the assassination.