

Thomas Friedman: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Historical Perspective (1994)

A Young King (0:00)

[King:] *America is essentially a dream. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can live together as brothers. The substance of the dream is expressed in these profound words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

For centuries, the principles upon which America was founded did not apply to African Americans. For 300 years Africans were kidnapped and shipped to the Americas in enormous numbers, to be bought, sold, and worked like cattle.

After the Civil War the blacks of North America were officially free from slavery, but well into the twentieth century most black people were still not free. They were not free to live where they chose, to work at decent jobs, to get a quality education. African Americans were not free to vote, to change the laws that oppressed them. They were not even free to eat, travel, shop or play where they wished. America was a racially and economically segregated society, and the captives of segregation were the former slaves and their descendants.

In 1929, less than a lifetime after the end of slavery, Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta. His father and grandfather were preachers. They used language and music to educate the minds and elevate the spirits of their congregations. Encouraged to learn and express himself, King became an accomplished public speaker like his father. By the age of fourteen he had moved quickly through school, skipping both the ninth and twelfth grades, and entered Morehouse College, an all-black institution, at the age of fifteen. Before he graduated from college he had already chosen his life's work, and was ordained a minister when he was just eighteen. King began graduate studies in theology, first at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, then at Boston University.

While in Boston, he met Coretta Scott, a music student and, like King, a Southerner. They were married in 1953. Coretta had moved North to seek opportunities for education and employment not available to blacks in the South; but when King was offered a job in Montgomery, Alabama, the couple decided their greatest service could be rendered in the South. The first of the couple's four children, Yolanda, was born in Montgomery in November 1955, and at the age of 26 King received his Ph.D. from Boston University.

While he was in school, Martin Luther King studied the work of Mahatma Gandhi, who was leading India's fight for freedom from Great Britain. Gandhi knew that armed insurrection would justify British attack. His solution was nonviolent passive resistance, in which vast numbers of Indians boycotted British goods and disobeyed what they felt were unjust laws. Relentless nonviolent mass confrontation eventually forced the British to abandon their claim to India. Martin Luther King saw that Gandhi's nonviolent approach to the struggle for freedom in India could work in the struggle for equal rights in America.

The Movement Begins (4:17)

The year was 1955. King's first job as a minister was at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, just across the street from the Alabama State Capitol. Black bus riders, who paid the same fare as whites, were required by law to give up their seats to white riders and move to the back of the bus as the whites boarded. When all seats had been taken away by whites, the black riders had to stand.

When a black woman called Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, she was arrested.

[King:] *We, the Negro Citizens of Montgomery, have been engaged in a nonviolent protest against injustices and indignities experienced on city buses.*

On Monday, December 5th, 1955, there were no black passengers on the buses of Montgomery. That night a committee was formed to carry on the momentum of the one-day boycott. Martin Luther King was elected as president.

[King:] *We go back to the buses. Let us be loving enough to turn an enemy into a friend.*

At the age of 26, in his first action as leader, King gave an electrifying speech calling for an act of refusal to cooperate with what he deemed an evil system.

[King:] *We will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.*

In response to the repressive forces of segregation, King evoked the Christian doctrine of love. This meant maintaining compassion for the white people of Montgomery while fighting their discriminatory system.

[Clyde Craddock Owen:] *Alabama state law requiring segregation of races on buses still stands.*

For Dr. King, the key to victory would be never resorting to violence. The white citizens of Montgomery, however, had a different agenda.

[Clyde Craddock Owen:] *All federal agents operating in Alabama are hereby directed to strictly adhere to all presently existing segregation laws in our state, or suffer the consequences.*

More and more, blacks began car-pooling to ensure that the bus boycott would succeed.

[King:] *We the Negro Citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, do now and will continue to carry on our mass protest.*

It is trite, but urgently true, that if America is to remain a first-class nation she can no longer have second-class citizens.

Death threats against King came almost daily.

[King:] *He loves the person and hates the evil deed. And I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies." And I'm happy that He didn't say, "Like your enemies," because it's pretty difficult to like some people. It's difficult to like people bombing your home, and threatening your children, and kicking you about. But Jesus says, "Love them," and love is greater than liking. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men.*

[...]

[Reporter:] *What did he say to you when he came up to you?*

[King:] *He only said, "I want to see you." I told him earlier in the courthouse that he could speak at our meeting tonight if he wanted to, and I invited him and I told him that he could have fifteen minutes. So I asked him if he were planning to come, and he said, "I want to see you about that. Can I step over?" And I said, "Yes." He came over and started hitting me. And then, after they put him away he started kicking me.*

[Reporter:] *Are you injured in any way? You feel any...*

[King:] *I don't think so. I just feel a slight headache. I'm sure that will pass away soon.*

[Reporter:] *Will you press charges against this person?*

[King:] *No, I don't plan to.*

[...]

[King:] *And now we have to stop and try to define the meaning of love in this area, and interestingly enough, Greek philosophy comes to our aid at this point. Agape is more than friendship. Agape is not some thin affection. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When one rises to love on this level, he loves men not because he likes them, but he loves every man because God loves him.*

[...]

[Joe Azbell:] *You've had some rather personal trying experiences yourself. Are you afraid?*

[King:] *No, I'm not. My attitude is that this is a great cause, that this is a great issue that we are confronted with, and that the consequences for my personal life are not particularly important. It is the triumph of the cause that I'm concerned about.*

In early 1956 Dr. King was arrested for the first time.

[King:] *Ultimately, along the way of life, an individual must stand up and be counted, and be willing to face the consequences, whatever they are. And if he is filled with fear, he cannot do it.*

A few months into the 1956 bus boycott, King's home was bombed. Many wanted to make a violent retaliatory strike against the white community.

[Clyde Sellers:] *I have just issued orders to the chief police and the police department to continue to make arrests in all violations of the segregation*

laws, and as long as I'm police commissioner of the city of Montgomery, I intend to follow these rules.

To the angry black citizens of Montgomery King invoked the words of Jesus, "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword." We must meet violence with nonviolence. We must meet hate with love.

[King:] *And so he rises to the level of hating the system rather than the individual who is caught up in that system. He loves the person and hates the evil deed.*

[...]

We feel that this protest which we are involved in is constitutional. And to deny us that right would be to deny our constitutional right as citizens of the United States of America.

As the black leaders had hoped, the Montgomery bus boycott achieved national attention. Finally, on November 13th, 1956, a year after the arrest of Rosa Parks, the Supreme Court declared bus segregation illegal. Dr. King had demonstrated his skills as a leader, and had experienced his first triumph in the fight for equality.

Passive Resistance (11:34)

[King:] *This is the way that we will get out of this dark night of oppression, and make of this nation a better nation. It means that we can stand up and allow the opposition to know that we will not accept injustice. We will stand up against it with our lives. We will never stoop down to the level of violence and hatred, and we will come to that point and we will be able to convince him that a new world is emerging.*

The next year, 1957, King and others formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This important group trained people in the methods and principles of nonviolent resistance, thus creating a core of leaders for the expanding the civil rights movement which would soon reach enormous nationwide proportions.

That same year, 1957, Dr. King made his first national address from a civil rights rally in Washington.

Later in 1957, a second child was born to Martin and Coretta Scott King.

Throughout the late 1950s King stood at the forefront of the movement.

[King:] *We feel that we are right. We have a legitimate right, a legitimate protest.*

Like many black leaders, he was arrested numerous times for activities in violation of what were deemed repressive laws throughout the South. King would later write, "I was proud of my crime. It was the crime of joining my people in a nonviolent protest against injustice. It was the crime of seeking to instill within my people a sense of dignity and self-respect. It was the crime of desiring for my people the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was, above all, the crime of seeking to convince my people that non-cooperation with evil is just as much a moral duty as cooperation with good."

[King:] *And we feel also that one of the great glories of American democracy is that we have the right to protest for right. This is a nonviolent protest. We are depending on moral and spiritual forces, using the method of passive resistance. Even if we have to receive violence, we will not return violence.*

Late in 1958 King was stabbed in the chest by a deranged assailant as he autographed copies of his first book, *Stride toward Freedom*.

[King:] *And the pathetic aspect of this experience is not the injury to one individual. It demonstrates how a cloud of hatred and bitterness so permeates areas of our nation that inevitably deeds of extreme violence must erupt.*

After a lengthy recovery Martin and Coretta Scott King departed on a month-long visit to India in early 1959. King wrote of this visit that he left India more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

[King:] *God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men, and brown men, and yellow men; God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society.*

1960 was critical year for the movement.

[King:] *The clock of destiny is ticking out. The hour is late. We must act now before it is too late.*

The signs of oppression were still everywhere to be seen and heard throughout America. Earlier that year a handful of college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, were driven out of anger and frustration to challenge the practice of denying service to blacks. The black students occupied the lunch counter at Woolworth's, where they were ordered to leave.

[King:] *This problem must be solved in the United States because segregation and discrimination are morally wrong.*

Within a few days students were filling the seats at lunch counters throughout the city, and a new term, as well as a new tactic in the struggle for civil rights, was born: the sit-in. King welcomed the spontaneous new direction in civil rights activities, and became involved in the student movement early, realizing the importance of supporting a younger generation in the struggle for equality. With King's influence the student movement quickly grew in stature throughout the South and the nation, largely under the direction of the newly formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as SNCC.

From this time forth a great deal of the civil rights movement's energy will come from the students. But in later years the younger factions will also provide the greatest internal challenge to the nonviolent basis for the movement.

A Nation Takes Notice (16:34)

[John F. Kennedy:] *I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience. This nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It is founded on the principle that all men are created equal. Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. But are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes? Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise.*

1960 was a presidential election year, and in John F. Kennedy many African Americans saw a chance for the first meaningful gov-

ernment action in the cause of equal rights and equal justice. America's black leadership strongly supported Kennedy.

[King:] *And I would say that there are some things that we must continue to do in order to make the American dream a reality and save our nation in this hour.*

On Election Day most groups were divided evenly between Kennedy and his opponent, Richard Nixon. Only black Americans voted overwhelmingly for JFK. Kennedy won, but only by an extremely narrow margin. However, the hoped-for comprehensive national civil rights legislation was slow in coming. President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, at first did not think new civil rights legislation was possible because Congress was conservative, like much of America, and would not support it. The events of the next three years would change the president's mind and the attitudes of millions of white Americans.

In 1961, as the civil rights movement spread, more whites joined in demonstrations against discrimination.

To fight segregation in travel between the states, groups of black and white Freedom Riders began traveling together by bus throughout the South, challenging discriminatory laws. Their actions were often met with white violence.

In May 1961 King and his followers were trapped in a Montgomery church by white racists until freed by federal marshals under orders from Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

[King:] *You've read some people say now you have to change the hearts of men; that's the only way you can solve it, and I guess that's true. Yet it may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. I guess it is true that the law can't make a man love me—religion and education must do that—but the law can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's quite important too.*

The federal government was beginning to react. In 1961 segregation was officially ended in interstate travel.

The Price of Freedom (19:42)

Advances in civil rights were not without their ever increasing cost in human lives.

In 1962, when James Meredith was admitted by court order as the first black student of the University of Mississippi, riots occurred in which two people were killed.

In June 1963, Medgar Evers, head of the Mississippi Chapter of the NAACP, the oldest civil rights organization in America, was shot and killed outside his home. The alleged murderer was not brought to trial until 1993.

But the pressure for change continued, and the pressure was never greater than in 1963. Early in the year Dr. King and other black leaders decided to focus on what they called the most segregated big city in the United States: Birmingham, Alabama.

[King:] *He could call out the State Militia, he could call out the National Guard, and kill hundreds and hundreds of innocent people, and argue that they are inciting a riot. They know how to handle violence, but they've proved over and over again that they don't know how to handle nonviolence.*

The black leaders planned a highly visible demonstration of the demands for equality. On April 12th, 1963, two weeks after the birth of his fourth child, Dr. King, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and a thousand others marched toward downtown Birmingham. The marches were in deliberate violation of an order by Police Commissioner Bull Connor expressly forbidding demonstrations. The mass arrests began. As expected, King and Abernathy were arrested and jailed along with many others. King was held for twenty-four hours in solitary confinement, until President Kennedy personally interceded with Birmingham officials. Two days later King's brother, the Reverend A. D. King, was arrested for leading another large demonstration.

Police Commissioner Bull Connor was on public record as being strongly opposed to the civil rights movement. His police met the demonstrators with a show of force rarely seen in America. Police dogs attacked unarmed and unprotected marchers. The Fire Department was called in to help suppress the fire of freedom. The force of water from their hoses was like a battering ram. Even from a distance, the people were knocked off their feet by the power of the blasts.

This kind of response to peaceful black struggle for equal rights was not new, but now the confrontations were broadcast across the nation on television. America saw firsthand that the demonstrators remained nonviolent while the police were unrestrained in the use of

life-threatening force. Never before was Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence more effective as millions of Americans began to realize that the blacks were being victimized by the laws of the land rather than being protected by the law.

Like other Americans, President Kennedy watched on television the familiar spectacle of police violence against Dr. King and his followers. For the upper-class President from New England it was a shocking education in the realities of life for black America.

During the eleven days King spent in prison he wrote and smuggled out the famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, in which he reiterated his philosophy of nonviolence civil disobedience. "For years now we have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.' Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

On May 2nd, 1963, a large group of black children joined the Birmingham protest. After a speech by King they moved toward downtown. Again the police began making arrests. The same buses that transported the children to segregated schools were now being used to hold them to segregated prisons. Before the day was over almost a thousand children were in jail. A day later another thousand children joined the march. This time the authorities resorted to violence. The marchers were blasted with fire hoses, beaten with clubs, attacked by police dogs, and gassed. At last, on May 10th, 1963, under pressure from the federal government and from outraged world opinion, the leaders of Birmingham accepted the demands of the freedom marchers.

There was little time for celebration, however. That night, both King's motel room and his brother's home were bombed.

Progress in Washington (25:08)

Having witnessed the abuse of power by Alabama authorities to the humiliating images of American violence and injustice being spread throughout the world, President Kennedy had seen enough.

[John F. Kennedy:] *The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.*

Kennedy agreed to push landmark civil rights legislation through Congress.

[John F. Kennedy:] *We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives. It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the facts that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame, as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right, as well as reality.*

Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law.

In June Dr. King and civil rights leaders met with the President to announce plans for a march on Washington in support of the Civil Rights Act. President Kennedy thought such a move would be disastrous for the cause, but the leaders knew the march would draw hundreds of thousands of people.

The historic March on Washington took place in August 1963. As King and the others predicted, enormous numbers, black and white, gathered to show the time had come to end the discriminatory treatment of black Americans.

[King:] *As we struggle we do not struggle alone, though sometimes it's difficult, particularly for those who are struggling in the Deep South facing all of the violence, and all of the suffering. There is something that consoles us along the way: we are convinced that our cause is right. I return to Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, not in despair, not in bitterness; I return knowing that we are moving into a bright day of freedom.*

*We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, someday.*

*Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, someday.*

[Reporter:] *Dr. King, one of the foremost fighters for civil rights is one of many speakers who remind the gathering that this march must not be counted a final victory or defeat.*

[King:] *We, throughout struggles, throughout suffering, throughout sacrifice, will be able to achieve the American dream. This will be the day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:*

Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

The day was a landmark in American history, and the highpoint was a speech by Dr. King that stands as one of the most important, beautiful, eloquent, and stirring orations in the English language. King's words made many Americans feel free for the first time in their lives. It was indeed the most important civil rights demonstration in history, with millions around the country and around the world sharing its spirit through television coverage.

A Time of Turmoil (29:35)

The momentum for the Civil Rights Act could not be stopped, even though white terrorists would try many more times. In September, less than a month after the march, a black church was bombed in Birmingham during Sunday services. Four young girls were killed.

As always, King deplored the violence, but he urged his followers not to stoop to violence themselves. As Dr. King had written in 1958, "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind."

But Freedom Marchers and civil rights advocates were not the only ones to experience violence in a nation that felt like if it was inspired

by hope, but in danger of being torn apart by hatred. As President Kennedy at last committed himself to passage of the Civil Rights Act, his popularity dropped dramatically.

President and Mrs. Kennedy arrived by plane in Dallas. They began a motorcade in open limousines into the heart of the city. And there in Dallas J. F. Kennedy was shot and killed. The nation and the world were in shock. A sense of betrayal permeated much of America. Dreams were shattered. The first president in a century to hear the demands of black America and respond with a message of hope had died, just as Lincoln had died almost one hundred years earlier. For the millions of Americans, black and white, who had seen Kennedy as their champion in the fight for justice, the future was suddenly obscure, and a trail of tears.

Martin Luther King said, "In mourning President Kennedy, we mourn a man who became the pride of the nation, but we also mourn for ourselves, for we know now that we are sick."

A year later, King would write, "While the question 'Who killed President Kennedy?' is important, the question 'What killed him?' is more important. It is a climate when men express their disagreement through violence and murder. It is the same climate that murdered Medgar Evers in Mississippi, and six innocent children in Birmingham, Alabama. So in a sense we are all participants in that horrible act that tarnished the image of our nation. We have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes."

Prophetically, King said of the assassination of Kennedy, "This is going to happen to me. I'll never see my fortieth birthday."

Soon the most turbulent year of the civil rights movement would be over. Under the new president, Lyndon Johnson, America would become involved in a major war in Vietnam. The country would be divided as never before. New forces in the civil rights struggle would emerge, including many who thought King obsolete in his insistence on peaceful protest and his belief in the inevitable unity of all races in one brotherhood of man. But for Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, of which he was the conscience, the greatest achievements were yet to come.

[Lyndon Johnson:] *His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety, and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation.*

President Johnson, a Southerner, was much cooler toward King and the civil rights agenda than Kennedy had been; but he pledged to complete Kennedy's work on the Civil Rights Act. He knew even better than Kennedy how to achieve consensus on legislation.

[Lyndon Johnson:] *There have been many pressures upon your President and there will be others as the days come and go. But I pledge to you tonight that we intend to fight this battle where it should be fought—in the courts, and in the Congress, and the hearts of men.*

One of Johnson's first and greatest achievements was passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This bill was the most important civil rights legislation signed into law since the fifteenth constitutional amendment of 1870. It guaranteed the right to vote to all male citizens without regard to race, color, or previous enslavement. The new federal law of 1964 prohibited discrimination for reasons of color, race, religion, or national origin, in public schools and employment.

Dr. King, for his leadership, was named *TIME Magazine's* 1964 man of the year. And later in 1964 he became the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Prize for peace.

But passage of the Civil Rights Act did not mean that the struggle was over. Violence against the movement continued to rage. Bombings, burnings, and killings were regular events throughout the South. In August 1964 three civil rights workers were murdered on their first day in Mississippi. James Chaney was 21; Michael Schwerner was 24; Andrew Goodman was only 20. Years later, a sheriff and six others would be found guilty of the three slains, but only after King had published an exposé of the pattern of murder and official conspiracy in Mississippi. Television news brought the drama of the investigation and the heartbreak of the discovery of the murders into the homes of millions. As more white victims began to fall in the struggle for freedom more of white America began to take serious notice. For Martin Luther King, winning the world's most respectable prize, the Nobel, did not mean he was about to retire to the life of an elder statesman. In May 1964 he was arrested during a demonstration in St. Augustine, Florida. There would be more arrests on behalf of the cause.

[King:] *We're going to the jails of Jackson, Mississippi, and transform these jails from dungeons of shame to havens of freedom and human dignity.*

[...]

I know sometimes how discontent we get, and we have a right to get discontent; and how frustrated we get in the process sometimes. But I submit to you this evening that this way of nonviolence will help us not to seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. We will not substitute one tyranny for another [...]

A Call to Arms (37:00)

[...] for black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy.

But many in the civil rights movement were not as forgiving as King, and they were becoming increasingly impatient. Malcolm X was growing in stature, and more people were responding to his message of Black Nationalism, or black separatism. A new generation of leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Bobby Seale, and Huey Newton were eager for more decisive change, and they often expressed their anger at the continuing outrages through a call to take up arms.

In 1964 for the first time King experienced violence directed against him by blacks, as he had many times by whites. During an appearance in Harlem, he was assaulted by black Muslims. Though King realized consensus in the movement would be increasingly difficult to achieve, he pressed on with his program of civil disobedience, peaceful resistance, and what he called noncooperation with evil. And where many of the more militant factions were speaking of whites as the enemy, King repeatedly insisted that the brotherhood of man transcended all races, religions, political, social, and economic differences.

After passage of the Civil Rights Act, King's next major objective was the achievement of full voting rights. In Alabama only one out of every 100 black residents was able to register to vote. This was due to a testing scheme similar to grandfather clauses and poll taxes, which were rigged by state and local government officials. Thus, it was almost impossible for blacks to register.

[Lyndon Johnson:] *I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races, and all regions and all parties.*

To call attention to Alabama's voting rights inequities, King decided to lead a march from Selma to the Capitol in Montgomery. As usual, the authorities unwittingly aided this cause by forbidding the

march. In early February 1965 at a voting rights demonstration King was arrested again. A week later he met with President Johnson to urge passage of national voting rights legislation.

While King was in jail, Malcolm X visited Coretta King in a show of support. Both King and Malcolm knew that if the nonviolent movement did not succeed, the alternative would be militancy. However, on February 21st, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City. The militant faction of the civil rights movement had its first martyr.

Perhaps Alabama's white population was encouraged by the murder of an important black leader. Many whites were frightened at the prospect of the black majority voting sympathetic leaders into office. An attempted march from Selma to Montgomery was met with massive police resistance, arrests, violence, and the murder of a white clergyman. The marches turned back. As before, every assault and death focused more national attention on Selma.

[Lyndon Johnson:] *What happened in Selma was an American tragedy. The blows that were received, the blood that was shed, the life of the good man that was lost, must strengthen the determination of each of us to bring full and equal and exact justice to all of our people.*

Dr. King himself received many death threats during this period, but he said he would rather die at the highways of Alabama than make a butchery of his conscience.

As the demonstrators prepared for another march to present demands to Governor George Wallas, President Johnson lobbied Congress in favor of the Voting Rights Bill. Finally, under federal protection, the march was able to proceed over five days to the Alabama State Capitol. There King told tens of thousands of supporters that "the battle is in our hands."

The march gave much-needed support to President Johnson's push for voting rights legislation. At last, on August 6th, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Another fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution was at last won by America's African American citizens. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act, Martin Luther King's struggle had achieved its last great success. From this time forth, he would broaden his focus to include issues of

poverty, employment, and peace throughout the United States and the world.

[King:] *Dr. Abernathy, Reverend and I have just had a fruitful, meaningful dialogue with President Johnson to discuss some of the vital and important issues of our nation in the area of civil rights. I might say that in the very beginning I congratulated the President for the passage of the new voting bill, knowing that he had worked so passionately and unrelentingly for this bill, and made very clear to him that this would be a great step forward in removing all of the remaining obstacles to the right to vote.*

[Reporter:] *But the time is right for an easing of demonstrations, perhaps a moratorium on racial strikes. How do you feel about this?*

[King:] *Well, I think that in some areas there will be an easing of demonstrations, where there is a real compliance with the 1964 bill and with the new voting bill. That is, if this bill is implemented, I think in those areas there will be a decrease in demonstrations. On the other hand, the problems of the mobs are growing every day, and I think in those communities there will be an increase of demonstrations and attention to their problems and house and jobs and the schools, and I think this will be the only way that the Negro community and their allies in the white community will be able to bring these issues out in the open, so that the communities involved will not be able to ignore the problem.*

Violence and War (44:21)

In early 1966 Dr. King began a major action in Chicago. There he moved into a slum dwelling with the intention of organizing the poor. This was a courageous and controversial effort for King and Southern leaders, who were focusing on the North for the first time.

Later in 1966 civil rights worker James Meredith led a march through the South. Meredith had integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 without injury. This time he would not be so lucky. The movement received another blow when Meredith was shot along the route of his march. Dr. King and other leaders decided to return to the South to continue Meredith's march. But during the march King encountered hostile Black Power militants, who wanted to respond to violence like the assault on Meredith with violence of their own. To this younger generation of activists, King's nonviolent approach

seemed out of touch with the angry mood of black America. Typically, King expressed sympathy, patience, and understanding for his black opponents.

Later that same year, Los Angeles was shattered by the Watts Riots. In five days of violence, 35 people were killed, and hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property was destroyed.

Then in July, 1967, Detroit and Newark experienced devastating riots of their own. Dozens were killed. Thousands were left homeless. The nation seemed on the verge of insurrection. Perhaps peace was impossible in the United States, while we had a half million troops fighting in Vietnam.

In this turbulent social and political climate, King realized he could no longer remain silent on the war. Despite the counsel of major advisers who warned that voicing opposition to the war would alienate some of the civil rights movement's strongest allies, King spoke out powerfully against America's involvement in Vietnam. "I knew," he wrote, "that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government."

[King:] *The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve. It demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese people. The situation is one in which we must be ready to just turn sharply from our present ways.*

[...]

The New Testament says, "Repent." It is time for America to repent now, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

[...]

As we counsel young men concerning military service we must clarify for them our nation's role in Vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of conscientious objection.

[...]

And I say this morning, that it is my hope, every young man in this country who finds this war objectionable and abominable and unjust, will file as a conscientious objector.

[...]

Now let me tell you this truth about it. They must see Americans as strange liberators. Do you realize that the Vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence in 1945 after a combined French and Japanese occupation. And incidentally, this was before the Communist revolution in China. They were led by Ho Chi Minh. And this is a little-known fact, and these people declared themselves independent in 1945. They quoted our Declaration of Independence in their document of freedom, and yet our government refused to recognize them. And who are we supporting in Vietnam today? It's a man by the name of General Ky, who fought with the French against his own people, and who said on one occasion that the greatest hero of his life is Hitler. This is who we are supporting in Vietnam today.

King was criticized from many sides for his stand on the war. Major segments of the mainstream American press virtually wrote his obituary as a national leader. President Johnson, who was pursuing the war as vigorously as he pursued the Civil Rights Act, felt personally betrayed by King and by all of black America. But within one year of King's speech, the tide of public opinion had turned so strongly against the war that Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for a second term as President.

From Leader to Martyr (50:33)

Martin Luther King was arguably the most important and effective American leader to take a moral stand against our involvement in Vietnam.

In late March 1968, Dr. King led a demonstration of 8000 people in Memphis, Tennessee. This time, the demonstrators turned violent.

[King:] *Somebody must have sense enough to meet hate with love. Somebody must have sense enough to meet physical force with soul force. And yet at the same time win the hearts and souls of those who have kept these conditions alive. We've been trampled over so long. I know the temptation that comes to all of us. We've seen the viciousness of lynching mobs with our own eyes. I understand why there are some who have been a little misguided, and they've ended up feeling that the problem can't be solved within. And so they talk about racial separation rather than racial integration. I must say to them in patient terms that black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy.*

Determined to show the world that nonviolence is not dead, King scheduled another march. Working with many of the factions involved in the earlier violence, King convinced them to participate without resorting to dangerous physical confrontation. On April 3rd, he delivered a speech that made reference to the war abroad and the war at home in the same terms. "Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence."

Dr. King went on to add on words that would be prophetic: "We've got some difficult days ahead. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. 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 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!!"

[King:] *God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men, but God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers. No, we need not hate. We need not use violence. There is another way, a way as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth, as modern as the techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi. There is another way, a way as old as Jesus saying, "Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that spitefully use you," as modern as Gandhi saying through Thoreau, "Noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good." There is another way, a way as old as Jesus saying, "Turn the other cheek."*

And when he said that, he realized that turning the other cheek might bring suffering sometimes. He realized that it may get your home bombed sometimes. He realized that it may get you stabbed sometimes. He realized that it may get you scarred up sometimes, but he was saying in substance that it is better to go through life with a scarred-up body than a scarred-up soul. There is another way. This is what we've got to see.

One day later, on April 4th, 1968, Dr. King stepped out into the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, where he had been meeting with Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, and others. From across the way,

a single shot was fired. Martin Luther King fell dead, murdered at the age of 39. James Earl Ray was convicted of the murder of Martin Luther King.

King was a man with extraordinary gifts; a dreamer with a vision of equality he shared so generously for the good of humanity; a hero of magnificent courage, eloquence, and inspiration; a father of four young children; a leader with a lifetime of yet untapped potential.

[King:] *We will be the participants in a great building process that will make America a new nation. And we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. This is our challenge. This is the way we must grapple with this dilemma, and we will be a great people.*

And let us have faith in the future—I know it’s dark sometimes. And I know all of us begin to ask, “How long will we have to live with this system?” I know all of us are asking, “How long will prejudice blind the visions of men and darken their understanding and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne? When will wounded justice lying prostrate on the streets of our cities be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men? Yes, when will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night?”

200,000 Americans, black and white, walked slowly through the sun-bathed streets of Atlanta following the mule-drawn sharecropper’s farm wagon that carried his casket. In the aftermath of King’s death, riots broke out in over one hundred cities. Soldiers marched across America against their own people. Tens of thousands were arrested.

Ashes to ashes.

King’s Legacy (56:53)

Martin Luther King provided a more constructive call to arms when he said, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.” With America still immersed in violence and injustice, what has survived of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King?

In 1955, before Martin Luther King heated public life, in much of the United States Americans of African descent could not even vote.

King’s work had made it possible for Edward Brooke to be elected the first black U.S. senator. In 1967 Thurgood Marshall was sworn in as the first black Supreme Court justice. That same year Carl Stokes and Richard Hatcher were elected the first black mayors of major U.S. cities. In 1968 Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to Congress. In 1992 Carol Moseley Braun became the first black woman elected to the United States Senate.

But if this seems like too little too late, remember that the legacy of Dr. King remains a call to personal action for profound and immediate positive change.

[King:] *Now there’s a little song that we sing in our movement down in the South. I don’t know if you have heard it. It has become the theme song. “We shall overcome.”*

We shall overcome.

Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome.

You know, I’ve joined hands so often with students and others behind jail bars singing it, We shall overcome.

Sometimes we’ve had tears in our eyes when we joined together to sing it, but we still decided to sing it, We shall overcome.

Oh, before this victory’s won, some will have to get thrown in jail some more, but we shall overcome.

We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.”

We shall overcome.

Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome.

And with this faith we will go out and adjourn the counsels of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism and we will be able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. And this will be a great America! We will be the participants in making it so.

And so as I leave you this evening I say, Walk together children! Don’t you get weary!

End Credits (59:31)

[King:] *Ralph Waldo Emerson said, in a lecture back in 1871, that “If a man can write a better book or preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the*

world will make a beaten path to his door.” This will become increasingly true.

We are going to have to take advantage of new opportunities. We must set out to do our life’s work so well that nobody could do it better. We must set out to do a good job. We must not seek merely to do a good Negro job. If you are setting out to be merely a good Negro doctor, a good Negro lawyer, a good Negro teacher, a good Negro preacher, a good Negro skilled laborer, a good Negro barber, a good Negro beautician, you have already flunked your matriculation exam for entrance in the university of integration. We must get ready.