



The Civil Rights Movement and the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.



Martin Luther King, Jr.

[The Dream Is Alive, by Gary Puckrein](#)

[Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Excerpts from Statements and Speeches](#)

[Two Centuries of Black Leadership: Biographical Sketches](#)

[March toward Equality: Significant Moments in the Civil Rights Movement](#)

[Return to African-American History page.](#)

THE DREAM IS ALIVE

by Gary Puckrein

- [The Dilemma of Slavery](#)
- [Emancipation and Segregation](#)
- [Origins of a Movement](#)
- [Equal Education](#)
- [Montgomery, Alabama](#)
- [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)
- [The Politics of Nonviolent Protest](#)
- [From Birmingham to the March on Washington](#)
- [Legislating Civil Rights](#)
- [Carrying on the Dream](#)

The Dilemma of Slavery

In 1776, the Founding Fathers of the United States laid out a compelling vision of a free and democratic society in which individual could claim inherent rights over another.

When these men drafted the Declaration of Independence, they included a passage charging King George III with forcing the slave trade on the colonies. The original draft, attributed to Thomas Jefferson, condemned King George for violating the "most sacred rights of life and liberty of a distant people who never offended him." After bitter debate, this clause was taken out of the Declaration at the insistence of Southern states, where slavery was an institution, and some Northern states whose merchant ships carried slaves from Africa to the colonies of the New World.

Thus, even before the United States became a nation, the conflict between the dreams of liberty and the realities of 18th-century values was joined. But the Declaration of Independence was only the beginning of a long battle to end slavery in the United States. As the distinguished 19th-century black abolitionist Frederick Douglass said: "No one can tell the day of the month, or the month of the year, upon which slavery was abolished in the United States. We cannot even tell when it began to be abolished. Like the movement of the sea, no man can tell where one wave begins and another ends. The chains of slavery with us were loosened by degrees."

The mass migration of Africans to North American shores began in 1619—just 12 years after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent British colony. The first blacks were not regarded as slaves. They were looked upon as indentured servants—as bondsmen for a period who could look forward to freedom after a term of years. Many whites came to America under similar circumstances. One of the first blacks to arrive, Anthony Johnson, received his freedom in a few years. He became a landowner and a man of wealth, who at one time was himself an owner of "indentured servants."

By 1661, however, the black, unlike the white indentured servant, was regarded as a bondsman for life, and this was the beginning of slavery in the United States.

Africans came to the United States as slaves in shackles and chains. Denied those rights which others could take for granted, black Americans committed themselves to the quest for freedom and dignity guaranteed to all Americans. Ironically, the black struggle was an extension of the dream of the Founding Fathers who envisaged a new republic where all men are equal in the eyes of the law.

Black America produced generation after generation of leaders who kept this basic dream alive under extreme hardships and against the views of the majority. The 19th century produced leaders like Paul Cuffe, Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells-Barnett; in the 20th century the names of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Farmer, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and Martin Luther King Jr. stand out.

From the beginning, slavery and the second-class treatment of blacks raised moral questions that white America found difficult to answer. How could a free society deny equal rights to some of its members? Blacks well understood the ethical dilemma that their subjugation posed; over the decades they used this understanding to push America toward a realization of its founding principles. The first great struggle toward that realization was the war against slavery.

Emancipation and Segregation

Although its origins are complex, the immediate cause of the Civil War (1861-1865) was not the practice of slavery in the South, but the attempt of the Southern states to secede from the Union. In addition, the North refused to permit the expansion of slavery into the new territories of the West. As the bloody conflict became prolonged, however, Northern war aims shifted to the elimination of the institution of slavery itself, as well as the preservation of the Union.

The Emancipation Proclamation, signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, proclaimed all slaves to be free in those states that were in rebellion. The Emancipation Proclamation was a historic political step, but it did not provide a permanent legal basis for the elimination of slavery. Two years later, eight months after the end of the Civil War, on December 18, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. It reads: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Although the amendment was hailed in the halls of Congress and by the forces that had worked so long in the abolitionist movement, many Americans expressed a note of caution. A leading newspaper said in an editorial: "We are now to concentrate the whole of American law, justice, conscience, sense of consistency and duty, and bring all to bear on the work of making the freedman in every sense a free man and citizen."

Abraham Lincoln did not live to see the final emancipation of blacks from slavery. Eight months before the adoption of the 13th Amendment, an assassin's bullet ended his life.

America in the last half of the 19th century was not prepared to treat blacks as equals, particularly in the Southern states where slavery had once predominated. Southern whites forced a common front against blacks, and total and complete disenfranchisement of the freed blacks became the universal aim of the

South. By 1890, blacks had been denied political rights so successfully that the Atlanta newspaperman, Henry W. Grady, said, "The Negro as a political force has dropped out of serious consideration."

The South achieved this goal by pressuring the federal government not to enforce civil rights laws. The next step was a series of laws passed by the states called the Black Codes or "Jim Crow" laws. These laws were supposed to define the rights of blacks but in practice limited them.

Jim Crow laws were extended to all forms of public activity-frequently under the force of law, but also as a matter of custom and tradition. Public accommodations were strictly segregated; blacks were barred from white hotels, restaurants and theaters. Trains, depots and wharves were also segregated. In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of "separate-but-equal" transportation laws in the famous Plessy v. Ferguson case. Thereafter, the Jim Crow principle was applied with inexorable logic. Free access to the marketplace was denied blacks. Most important of all, in many Southern states the greatest liberty was denied to blacks-the right to vote.

The period that stretched from 1900 to World War 11 represented a subtle but basic turning point in the black American experience. When the era opened, conditions seemed almost hopeless, and blacks were indeed a downtrodden people.

Origins of a Movement

At the turn of the century, dissatisfied with the absence of racial equality, a group of Northern black intellectuals began to agitate anew for a restoration of civil rights.

W.E.B. Du Bois became the most prominent black spokesman of this group. In 1905, he led a meeting to inaugurate an organized program of public agitation for black rights. In 1909, Du Bois and other conference participants joined with white liberals to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The new organization declared itself against forced segregation. It was for equal educational opportunities and complete enfranchisement of black Americans. It adopted tactics of agitation and court action to realize these goals. The organization's major objective during its first half century of existence was to secure legislation and court decisions establishing equality for blacks in voting, civil rights, housing and education. It campaigned against all forms of private and public discrimination, especially in federal employment and military sense. The programs of the NAACP were made more effective by an important change in demographic patterns.

By 1890, because of the industrial revolution, blacks in the South were being replaced in the fields by machines. Slowly but inexorably large numbers of blacks drifted north to find work. The migration was spurred by World War I which created new jobs in the defense industries of the North.

The crowding of blacks into formerly white areas of the North created new problems. As the war drew to a close, whites became alarmed at the rising rate of unemployment caused by the war's end and the influx of blacks eager to work. Riots broke out in many cities. They were ugly and cruel and focused Northern attention on the injustices still being inflicted on black Americans.

Increasingly, blacks perceived city hall, the state capital and the federal government as appropriate targets for their efforts. They sought ways to harness and use their political strength to encourage

government at all levels to do more for black America. In Northern cities blacks were urged to vote. Even in the South they became more active politically-but always under severe restraint and sometimes under the threat of violence.

Interracial reform, even with the help of activist white liberals moved very slowly, and it took the extensive disruptions of World War II to shatter established patterns of segregation. Thoughtful whites became painfully aware of the contradiction in fighting the racist philosophy of Nazism in Europe while permitting racial discrimination at home.

In this context of changing international trends and shifting American opinion, the campaign for black rights broadened. The NAACP piled up victory upon victory in the courts. It successfully attacked racially restrictive covenants in housing, segregation in interstate transportation and discrimination in publicly owned recreational facilities.

Blacks fought gallantly in World War II and grew impatient with the intransigence of the opponents of civil rights. They became bolder and more aggressive and began to press for their rights with relentless vigor. They had proved themselves in battle, and they wanted America to live up to the ideals for which they had fought and died. Ironically, it was only after World War II that the armed forces were desegregated.

Equal Education

In the summer of 1950, a group of lawyers associated with the NAACP, in collaboration with social scientists and educators, attempted a bold, all-out frontal assault on educational segregation. Thurgood Marshall, counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, presented five cases to the Supreme Court in 1952 involving a challenge to segregated public education.

In a landmark 1954 case called *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Chief Justice Earl Warren said, "In the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate education facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated ... are ... deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment."

Many states took quick action to abide by the Supreme Court decision but others, notably in the South, either ignored the decision or sought ways to evade implementing it. While the federal government allowed each state much discretion in setting the goals for desegregation, it left no doubt that further segregation in public educational facilities would not be tolerated. When Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, opened in September 1957, the state national guard was called out to prevent blacks from entering the school. President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered federal troops into Little Rock to enforce the court order, and black children went to the school under the watchful eyes of federal troops. State-supported resistance to desegregation did not end with the Little Rock case, but over the years the courts have consistently ruled in favor of desegregation. Although racial integration of schools remains a concern, today the fight for desegregation has been largely replaced by the fight for quality education.

Montgomery, Alabama

Just one year after the landmark Supreme Court decision desegregating public schools, a small and apparently insignificant human drama took place which capitulated the civil rights movement from the courts into the streets.

On a cold day in December 1955, Rosa Parks finished her workday as a seamstress and waited for a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, to take her home. She had worked hard that day and was tired. She wanted nothing more than to sit down in a warm bus and rest until she got home. But the laws of Alabama decreed that whites had preference for the seats in the front of the bus.

When a white male boarded the bus, the driver asked Mrs. Parks move to the rear. Fed up with the "Southern way of life," she replied, "I don't think I should have to move." The driver had a policeman arrest her, thereby launching the modern-day civil rights movement.

Blacks, under the leadership of a local minister named Martin Luther King Jr. organized a boycott of the Montgomery bus company. For 12 months, makeshift car pools substituted for public transportation. At first the bus company scoffed at the black protest, but as the economic effects of the boycott were felt, the company sought a settlement. Meanwhile, legal action ended the bus segregation policy. On June 5, 1956, a federal district court ruled that the bus segregation policy violated the Fourteenth Amendment, which forbids the states from denying equal rights to any citizen. Later that year, the Supreme Court affirmed the judgment. The boycott ended, and it thrust into national prominence a person who clearly possessed charismatic leadership, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

King was born on January 15, 1929, the second of three children. His father was a Baptist minister. He attended public elementary and high schools as well as the private Laboratory High School of Atlanta University. King entered Morehouse College at age 15 in September 1944 as a special student. He received a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1948. In the fall of that year, King enrolled at Crozier Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, and received his Bachelor of Divinity degree three years later. King was awarded a doctorate by Boston University in 1955. While attending Boston University, he met Coretta Scott whom he married in June 1953. Early in 1954, King accepted his first pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. He had been a resident in Montgomery less than one year when Parks defied the ordinance regulating segregated seating on municipal transportation.

King, urged by prominent black Baptist ministers in the South to assume a larger role in the struggle for black civil rights following the successful boycott, accepted the presidency of the newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In January 1960, he resigned his Montgomery pastorate and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where the SCLC had its headquarters.

The Politics of Nonviolent Protest

Unlike the great majority of civil rights activists who have regarded nonviolence as a convenient tactic. King followed Gandhi's principles of pacifism. In King's view, civil rights demonstrators, who were beaten and jailed by hostile whites, educated and transformed their oppressors through the redemptive character of their unmerited suffering.

King entered the civil rights struggle at the same time that the federal government was beginning to reaffirm the principles of equality. In 1957 President Eisenhower presented a four-point proposal for protecting civil rights. Passed by Congress and signed by the president, the proposal became the first civil rights law to be enacted by the U.S. government since the 19th century. It authorized the federal government to bring civil suits in federal court when any person was denied or threatened in his or her right to vote. It elevated the civil rights section of the Department of Justice to the status of a division, with an assistant attorney general in charge. It also created the United States Commission on Civil Rights, which has authority to investigate allegations of denials of the right to vote, to study and collect information concerning legal developments constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws and to appraise the laws and policies of the federal government with respect to equal protection. The nation was slowly moving closer to a fuller realization of the dream of its Founding Fathers, but for black Americans the pace was not quick enough, and they challenged local laws and customs to force change.

On February 1, 1960, four black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, entered a variety store, made several purchases, sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee. They were refused service, but undaunted they remained in their seats until the store closed.

This was the beginning of the sit-in movement. In the spring and summer of 1960, young people, white and black, participated in similar peaceful forms of protest against segregation and discrimination. The movement spread quickly in the South and to several places in the North. Segregated libraries, beaches and hotels became the targets of the demonstrators.

The SCLC helped the students organize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), at a meeting held at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, to coordinate the protests. As a direct result of the sit-ins, lunch counters across the South began to serve blacks, and other public facilities were desegregated.

An important interplay of action and response developed between government and civil rights advocates. And it was this interplay that did so much to quicken the pace of social change.

By the summer of 1960, the question of the status of blacks had become a major political issue. The two major political parties, facing the presidential campaign of 1960, recognized the significance of the black vote in a close election. There were already more than one million registered black voters in 12 Southern states. In at least six of the eight most populous states in the country, blacks potentially held the balance of power in closely contested elections. In their platforms in 1960, both major parties made strong stands for racial justice and equality. The election of 1960 was close, the closest presidential election of the century, and when the votes were counted, blacks had reason to believe that they shared in the victory of John F. Kennedy.

Soon, civil rights advocates were applying new pressures to secure equal fights for blacks. In May 1961,

the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an interracial direct action group founded in 1942, sent black and white activists called "freedom riders" into the South aboard buses to test segregation laws and practices in interstate transportation. In many cities the interracial teams were attacked on highways and in bus stations by angry segregationists.

From Birmingham to the March on Washington

The most critical direct action demonstration began in Birmingham, Alabama, on April 3, 1963, under the leadership of Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The demonstrators demanded fair employment opportunities, desegregation of public facilities and the creation of a committee to plan desegregation.

For a month the demonstration was notable merely because of the large number of participants, including many schoolchildren, and the large number of arrests. King himself was arrested and, while imprisoned, wrote his celebrated "Letter from a Birmingham jail" to fellow clergymen critical of his tactics of civil disobedience (see excerpts, page 14). King was arrested more than seven times during his many civil rights campaigns throughout the South.

On May 3, the Birmingham police attacked the marchers with dogs and high-pressure water hoses. The police action made front-page news across the country and triggered sympathetic demonstrations all over the nation.

During the week of May 18, the Department of Justice counted 43 major and minor demonstrations, 10 of them in Northern cities. The Birmingham demonstration did not bring the concessions that the marchers sought, but the protest was enormously important because it compelled the American people to face the problem of discrimination in a way they had never done before. For the first time in American history, the president appeared before the nation and declared that race discrimination was a moral issue. A few days later he submitted a new and broadened civil rights program to Congress. The bill containing President Kennedy's recommendation occupied much of the attention of Congress during the summer of 1963. As Congress and the nation debated the proposed civil rights bill, black activists planned a mammoth peaceful demonstration of Americans from all walks of life aimed at hastening progress and showing interracial agreement.

In 1962, A. Philip Randolph, a noted civil rights activist and labor leader, sent out a call to black groups to participate in a "March on Washington" to protest the slow pace of desegregation. His call was greeted with mixed reactions. In the wake of Birmingham and its galvanizing effect on the black community, many were eager to participate in a mass effort that they hoped would show their impatience. Dr. King argued that a march would dramatize the issue at hand and mobilize support from all parts of the country.

Those who discounted the appeal of the march were astounded to discover that it was receiving broad support from many sectors of American life. All of the major civil rights groups were joined by religious, labor and civic organizations in planning and executing the gigantic demonstration. On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 Americans from many religious and ethnic backgrounds converged on Washington, staging the largest demonstration in the history of the nation's capital. The orderly procession moved from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, where A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, Walter Reuther (a labor leader) and others addressed the throng. King electrified the demonstrators with an eloquent articulation of the American dream and his hope that it would be

fully realized.

A mesmerizing speaker, King gave what was later acknowledged to be one of the greatest speeches in American history at the March on Washington. Entitled "I Have a Dream," the speech outlined his hopes for a time when his "four little 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."

In one of the most famous passages from the speech, King declared:

"When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all 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'"

Legislating Civil Rights

Many were chagrined that the March on Washington did not bring about the immediate passage of President Kennedy's civil rights program as they had hoped. Civil rights supporters were further shaken by the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th president of the United States, was quick to make known his strong support of Kennedy's civil rights program, and through his efforts the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. The most far-reaching and comprehensive law in support of racial equality ever enacted by Congress, the legislation gave the attorney general additional power to protect citizens against discrimination and segregation in voting, education and the use of public facilities. It outlawed discrimination in most places of public accommodation; established a federal Community Relations Service (to help individuals and communities solve civil rights problems) and a federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; and extended the life of the Commission on Civil Rights. The U.S. Office of Education was empowered to provide technical and financial aid to assist communities in the desegregation of schools. Finally, it required the elimination of discrimination in federally assisted programs, authorizing termination of programs or withdrawal of federal funds for noncompliance. While some blacks criticized the act for not going far enough, others were delighted that a semblance of equality might now be attainable.

Carrying on the Dream

In 1964, in recognition of his work and leadership, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. Accepting the award on behalf of the civil rights movement, Dr. King said, "Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood."

King continued working to integrate housing, jobs and schools to make the dream of racial equality a reality. In March 1965, he led a celebrated 87-kilometer march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery-in the face of hostility from state officials and attacks by white Southerners-to dramatize the need for a federal voting rights bill. This landmark legislation, the Voting Rights Act, was passed by Congress in 1965. It permitted federal examiners to register voters in localities where discrimination had occurred. In subsequent years, black voting in the South-and the numbers of black elected officials-increased

enormously.

A year later, James Meredith, the first black to enter the University of Mississippi, was wounded during a lone march across the state of Mississippi. King immediately went to Mississippi and, joined by hundreds of others, completed Meredith's march. In Mississippi, King faced a split in the ranks of the civil rights movement as younger, more militant members first raised the cry of "black power" and rejected his philosophy of non-violence. Despite this shift toward militancy on the part of black groups in the late 1960s, King never wavered in his commitment to the principles and practice of nonviolence to achieve his aims of social justice and human dignity.

With the successful implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King increasingly devoted his time to the issue of poverty in the United States. He began to organize a "Poor People's March on Washington" to dramatize the need for jobs, education and better living conditions for the nation's poor. Tragically, on April 4, 1968, he was assassinated by a sniper as he stood on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support a strike of sanitation workers.

As a result of his efforts, and those of the thousands of Americans -black and white-who labored alongside him, America has moved boldly toward the vision of a society where all people are equal in the eyes of the law, no matter the color of their skin.

It was in recognition of King's prodigious achievements that, on November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill making the third Monday in January a federal holiday in honor of the birth of Dr. King. For the first time, the nation honors a black American; the dream is alive and shaping the destiny of the country.

Responding to the president at the signing ceremony establishing the federal holiday, Coretta Scott King, now director of the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, said:

"In his own life's example, he symbolized what was right about America, what was noblest and best, what human beings have pursued since the beginning of history. He loved unconditionally. He was in constant pursuit of truth, and when he discovered it, he embraced it. His nonviolent campaigns brought about redemption, reconciliation and justice. He taught us that only peaceful means can bring about peaceful ends, that our goal was to create the love community."

NOTE: Author Gary A. Puckrein is the publisher of "American Visions," a magazine of Afro-American culture published by the Smithsonian Institution.

[Continue to](#) next section

[Return to](#) table of contents

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.:

EXCERPTS FROM STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

- [Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963](#)
- [I Have a Dream Speech, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963](#)
- [Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1964](#)

Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

"In justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.... In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action....

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.... I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood....

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all...."

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law....

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained....

The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides -- and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will

seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this is normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action...."

I Have a Dream Speech, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963

"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...."

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plain of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force; and the marvelous new militance, which has engulfed the Negro community, must not lead us to a distrust of all white people. For many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we talk, we must make a pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back....

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. 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." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little 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....

When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all 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."

Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1964

"I must ask why this prize is awarded to a movement which is beleaguered and committed to unrelenting struggle: to a movement which has not won the very peace and brotherhood which is the essence of the

Nobel Prize.

After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I received on behalf of that movement is profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.

Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood.

If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love....

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life which surrounds him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. 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.

I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men...."

[Continue to](#) next section

[Return to](#) table of contents

TWO CENTURIES OF BLACK LEADERSHIP: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Paul Cuffe (1759-1817)

Paul Cuffe, a free black from Massachusetts, was a shipowner and advocate of sending free blacks voluntarily back to Africa. Cuffe's efforts helped encourage the American Colonization Society to found settlements in what was to become Liberia. Altogether, some 15,000 American blacks moved there during the colonization effort.

Richard Allen (1760-1831)

Born a slave, Richard Allen began his career as a clergyman with the conversion of his master. Shrewd and hardworking, Allen bought his freedom and moved to Philadelphia. After being rebuffed at white churches, he formed an independent black Methodist church. In 1816, he became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first national organization of its kind. During this era, it was said, Allen's house was never shut "against the friendless, homeless, penniless fugitive from the house of bondage." Allen is also reported by his contemporaries to have had "greater influence upon the colored people of the North than any other man of his times."

Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

Born into slavery on a Maryland farm, Frederick Douglass became the foremost African-American abolitionist in the United States. At the age of 21, he escaped to Massachusetts where he became a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

In 1847, Douglass founded a newspaper, *The North Star*, whose masthead read: "Right is of no sex -- Truth is of no color -- God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren."

During the Civil War, Douglass recruited black regiments for the North and spoke eloquently for black suffrage and civil rights.

Sojourner Truth (Isabella) (1820-1883)

Born a slave in New York, Sojourner Truth escaped just before the state abolished slavery. Becoming a preacher-prophet, she adopted the name "Sojourner Truth." By 1843, she began touring America denouncing slavery and championing equal rights for blacks and women before religious, abolitionist and women's organizations.

Truth visited President Abraham Lincoln at the White House in 1864, then remained in Washington to help runaway slaves. Her last years were spent urging Congress to allocate land and money for freed blacks in the West.

Harriet Tubman (c. 1821-1913)

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Maryland. At age 25, she escaped to freedom. She was to become the most famous conductor on the "Underground Railroad," a secret network of hiding places where

fugitive slaves found sanctuary on their way north. All told, she made 19 trips back to the South, helping more than 300 slaves escape to freedom.

During the Civil War, Tubman worked for the Union as a nurse, a spy and a scout. At one time \$40,000 was offered for her capture. Her later years were given to establishing an old-age home for impoverished blacks.

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Booker Taliferro Washington, the most influential African-American leader at the turn of the century was born a slave in Virginia and freed with the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1881, Washington became head of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, where he advocated industrial and agricultural training for African-Americans. Under his leadership the school became one of the nation's leading black universities.

After delivering his famous "Atlanta Compromise" speech in 1895, Washington was recognized as the chief spokesman for black Americans. Advocating the dignity of common labor, Washington steered blacks toward careers in agriculture, mechanics and domestic service. In 1900, Washington organized the National Negro Business league which emphasized skill, thrift and black capitalism.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

A prominent author, editor and educator, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois obtained a doctorate from Harvard in 1895. In the course of his long career -- as editor of the Crisis, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), sociology professor and lecturer -- Du Bois embraced such differing ideologies as equalitarian democracy, pan-Africanism, economic and cultural self-determinism, Marxism and socialism. Throughout his life, he remained a steadfast critic of a society which tolerated discrimination, and he advocated equal opportunity and education as the keys to black advancement. In 1961, at age 93, Du Bois moved to Ghana.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1869-1931)

The demand for the arrest and punishment of lynchers -- white vigilantes who executed blacks became a major crusade at the turn of the century. An outstanding figure in this movement was Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who in 1895 compiled the first statistical pamphlet on lynching, The Red Record.

Wells taught school in Memphis, Tennessee, until she became editor and part-owner of a newspaper, the Memphis Free Speech, which circulated throughout the Mississippi Delta. In 1892, after exposing those who had lynched three young black businessmen in Memphis, her offices were destroyed.

Fleeing to Chicago, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett. Both became active in the National Equal Rights League.

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979)

Asa Philip Randolph was one of the most influential labor and civil rights leaders of the 20th century. In 1925, Randolph founded and was elected president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which fought a successful battle for recognition by the railroad companies.

In 1941, Randolph threatened President Franklin D. Roosevelt with a mass march on Washington to

protest the exclusion of blacks from jobs in defense industries. This led to the establishment of the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee. Randolph also encouraged President Harry S Truman to desegregate the military in 1948.

As an elder statesman of the civil rights movement, he was a principal organizer of the March on Washington in 1963.

Roy Wilkins(1901-1981)

Roy Wilkins joined the NAACP as assistant secretary in 1931 and became executive director in 1955. Wilkins and more than 700 others were jailed in the spring of 1963 after a mass demonstration against segregation in public facilities in Jackson, Mississippi.

Early in his administration, President Lyndon B. Johnson conferred with black leaders, including Wilkins, to enlist support for the civil rights program begun under President John F. Kennedy.

Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993)

Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Supreme Court justice, attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C. Admitted to the bar in 1933, he worked with the Baltimore, Maryland, branch of the NAACP and later established its Legal Defense Fund.

As chief attorney for the NAACP, Marshall earned a reputation as an exceptional lawyer, winning 32 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. Marshall's primary target was segregation in all its manifestations: interstate travel, housing laws, voting rights and education. The most celebrated of his victories, the landmark *Brown v. the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education* in 1954, ended legal segregation in public schools.

Marshall was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals in 1962 by President Kennedy. He then became the first black to become solicitor general of the United States. In 1967, President Johnson named him the first black Supreme Court justice. He served until 1991, remaining an unceasing advocate for the equality of all Americans.

James Farmer (1920-1994)

In 1942, James Farmer founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during a sit-in at a Chicago restaurant that refused to serve blacks. Farmer directed the organization toward nonviolent protest - sit-ins, boycotts, marches and Freedom Rides. These early demonstrations, protesting segregation in public facilities, were met with hostility and violence. By the 1950s, as a result of direct action by CORE and the NAACP, public facilities in the North opened to blacks.

In 1961, Farmer traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, in support of a new round of Freedom Rides. Other civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., joined the cause as it gathered momentum.

As black militancy gained strength within CORE, Farmer resigned as national director in 1966 and turned to teaching. During the Nixon administration he was assistant secretary of health, education and welfare.

Whitney M. Young, Jr. (1921-1971)

Following a distinguished career as a teacher, Whitney Moore Young Jr. was named executive director of the National Urban League in 1961. The league was formed in 1910 to improve the living conditions and employment opportunities for urban blacks.

Young was one of the black leaders who advised President Johnson on the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Young served on numerous private and federal commissions related to social welfare. Elements of his "domestic Marshall Plan" were incorporated in the federal antipoverty program during the 1960s.

Benjamin Hooks (1925-)

Throughout his career Benjamin Hooks, a lawyer and ordained Baptist minister, has addressed a range of political, economic and social problems confronting African-Americans and other minorities. In 1965, he was appointed a Memphis Criminal Court judge.

He gained further prominence when he was named to the Federal Communications Commission in 1972. The first black to serve on the commission, he was instrumental in paving the way for blacks to own and operate radio and television stations.

In 1977, Hooks became executive director of the NAACP, the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, a post he held until early 1993.

Malcolm X (1925-1965)

The life and philosophy of Malcolm X have profoundly influenced the thinking of black Americans. Born Malcolm Little, Malcolm X spent much of his childhood in foster homes and state institutions. Arrested at the age of 21, he was given a 10-year sentence. While in jail, he became interested in the Nation of Islam, the Black Muslim sect led by Elijah Muhammad, who advocated separation of the races. Paroled in 1952, he adopted the name Malcolm X, and became a leader of the Black Muslim movement.

His eloquence drew a strong following but his popularity and forceful personality led to disputes and ultimately his expulsion from the movement in 1963. He then founded his own organization.

Following a pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm modified his views and accepted the possibility of working with people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. He was assassinated in 1965 during a speech in New York City. Malcolm X's influence has grown since his death, largely through his autobiography and, most recently, a film.

Ralph Abernathy (1926-1990)

Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest associate, was a prominent figure in the civil rights movement for three decades. In 1955, he helped organize the association to supervise a city-wide bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. following the arrest of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger.

In 1957, a group of Southern black ministers from 11 states met with King and Abernathy to establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), King was elected president and Abernathy, secretary-treasurer. Under their leadership. the SCLC organized nonviolent marches, sit-ins, boycotts, prayer pilgrimages and voter registration drives protesting segregation in the South. After King's death, Abernathy became president of the SCLC, heading it until 1973.

Andrew Young (1932-)

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Andrew Jackson Young graduated from Howard University and later was ordained as a minister.

While working on a voter-registration project, he met Martin Luther King Jr. and joined the SCLC where he became one of King's most trusted aides. He was active in desegregation campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama, and Chicago, Illinois, and in the 1963 March on Washington. Young became SCLC executive director in 1964 and, after King's death, executive vice president under Ralph Abernathy.

Elected to Congress in 1972, he was reelected twice. President Jimmy Carter named him ambassador to the United Nations in 1977. In 1981, he was elected mayor of Atlanta and was reelected overwhelmingly in 1985. Young is co-chairman of the Atlanta Committee for the 1996 Olympic Games.

Colin Powell (1937-)

General Colin Powell was named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, making him the highest-ranking black officer in U.S. history.

Powell served two tours in Vietnam in the 1960s. He worked with the deputy secretary of defense in the late 1970s and became senior military assistant to the secretary of defense in 1983. After commanding the V Corps in Frankfurt, Germany, Powell was named President Reagan's assistant for national security affairs in 1987.

Known for his thorough preparation and professionalism, Powell played a major role in the 1991 Gulf War to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the restructuring of the U.S. military following the end of the Cold War.

Jesse Jackson (1941-)

Jesse Louis Jackson, the most prominent black leader in the United States today, was a college student when he became a field director for CORE. In 1966 Jackson was chosen by Martin Luther King Jr. to head the SCLC's Operation Breadbasket, which sought to create job opportunities for blacks in Chicago, Illinois.

Ordained a Baptist minister in 1968. Jackson left the SCLC in 1971 to found Operation PUSH People United to Save (later Serve) Humanity -- in Chicago. PUSH worked to open up job opportunities for blacks and encouraged black-owned business.

In 1983, Jackson launched a nationwide voter registration drive; a year later he declared his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. Jackson expanded his political following through a "Rainbow Coalition" of blacks, Hispanics and disadvantaged whites, and won even wider support for his presidential candidacy in 1988.

In recent years, Jackson has remained a highly visible and eloquent advocate for a wide range of civil rights and human rights issues.

[Continue to](#) next section.

[Return to](#) table of contents.

MARCH TOWARD EQUALITY: SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1941

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs executive order banning discrimination in employment by government defense contractors.

1942

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is organized in Chicago, Illinois.

1946

President Harry S. Truman establishes President's Committee on Civil Rights, which declares racial discrimination to be a national problem.

U.S. Supreme Court bans segregation in interstate bus travel.

1947

CORE and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) sponsor the first Freedom Ride. Freedom Riders travel through the South to test Supreme Court decision banning segregation in interstate bus travel.

Jackie Robinson breaks baseball's color barrier when he is hired to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first black to play major league sports in half a century.

1948

Supreme Court rules that federal and state courts cannot enforce laws which bar persons from owning property based on race. President Truman orders the integration of all units of the U.S. armed forces.

1949

Members of CORE stage a sit-in at segregated facilities in St. Louis, Missouri.

1954

In *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court orders that blacks be admitted to public schools on a racially non-discriminate basis "with all deliberate speed." This over turns the doctrine of "separate but equal" facilities by acknowledging that "separate educational facilities are

inherently unequal."

1955

Successful boycott of municipal bus lines, in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King Jr., overturns local ordinance requiring blacks to sit in the back of buses. Similar gains are made in other Southern cities.

1957

President Dwight D. Eisenhower sends federal troops to enforce the right of nine black students to enroll at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in the first use of federal troops to protect black civil rights in the South since shortly after the Civil War.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is established with Martin Luther King, Jr. as its first president.

Congress passes a civil rights law creating the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and a civil division in the Department of Justice.

1960

Black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College start sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. Sit-ins at segregated public restaurants and lunch counters soon spread throughout South.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is founded at Shaw University Raleigh, North Carolina.

1961

Freedom Riders deliberately violate "white only" rules at drinking fountains, lunch counters, rest rooms and waiting rooms in bus and train stations in the South.

President John F. Kennedy establishes Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.

Thurgood Marshall is appointed to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Black students are admitted to the University of Georgia in accordance with federal court orders.

1962

Several black civil rights organizations join to teach blacks in Mississippi how to register to vote. The effort is largely unsuccessful because public officials continue to apply poll taxes, reading tests and other arbitrary barriers.

James Meredith, a black student, enrolls at the University of Mississippi under protection of federal

troops.

President Kennedy orders an end to discrimination in public housing built with federal funds.

1963

Four black children are killed in Birmingham, Alabama, when segregationists bomb a Baptist Church.

Peaceful March on Washington attended by 250,000 people from around the country culminates in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I have a Dream" speech.

President Kennedy sends federal troops to enforce right of black students to enroll at the University of Alabama.

Medgar Evers, a field secretary for the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), is assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi.

1965

Voting Rights Act permits federal examiners to supersede local officials and register black voters in certain circumstances. By 1967, more than half of eligible blacks are registered in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina, enabling more black candidates than before to be elected to office.

Riots erupt in Watts, a ghetto neighborhood of Los Angeles, California.

President Lyndon Johnson begins "War on Poverty," a series of programs to provide job training, housing, education, health care and other social benefits for the poor.

1967

Thurgood Marshall becomes the first black Supreme Court justice.

Riots occur in Detroit, Michigan; Newark, New Jersey and other large cities.

First black mayors of major U.S. cities are elected in Cleveland, Ohio and Gary, Indiana.

1968

Martin Luther King, Jr. announces plans for the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., demanding employment for all Americans.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders issues the Kerner Commission report stating that America is "moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal." The commission recommends sweeping programs in housing, job creation and training, education and welfare.

Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated. Urban riots erupt across the country. Ralph Abernathy succeeds King as head of SCLC and begins the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Supreme Court prohibits discrimination in rental and sale of all housing.

1970

President Richard M. Nixon creates Office of Minority Business Enterprise to help blacks succeed in business ventures.

1971

Supreme Court rules that busing children outside their neighborhoods to desegregate schools is constitutional.

Congressional Black Caucus is organized.

Jesse Jackson founds People United to Save (later Serve) Humanity (PUSH).

1972

Equal Opportunity and Employment Act is passed, encouraging preferential hiring and promotion of minorities and women.

1974

Detroit, Michigan, establishes an affirmative action hiring program in an attempt to balance the racial composition of the local police force.

1978

Supreme Court decision in the Allan P. Baakke case legalizes the concept of "reverse" discrimination.

1982

The Voting Rights Act is strengthened and extended for 25 years.

1983

President Ronald Reagan signs legislation designating Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday.

1989

L. Douglas Wilder is elected governor of Virginia, becoming the first black to be elected governor of a state.

1992

Riots break out in South-Central Los Angeles, following a jury's acquittal of white L.A. police officers who had been videotaped in the beating of a black motorist.

Carol Moseley Braun becomes the first black woman elected to the U.S. Senate.