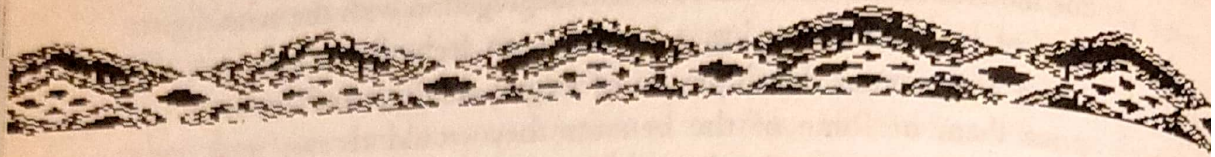


Martin Luther King, Jr.

(1929-1968)



The grandson of a slave, and the son and grandson of Baptist ministers, Martin Luther King, Jr., rose to international prominence during the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. King was born in Atlanta and entered Morehouse College there at the age of fifteen. Ordained at eighteen, he continued his education at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and at Boston University. In 1953, he married Coretta Scott, a student at the New England Conservatory of Music, and in 1955 he received a Ph.D. in theology. King was the new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat to a white passenger on a public bus in Montgomery in December 1955, and the destiny of the twenty-six-year-old minister took shape.

Elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, King directed the year-long boycott of public transportation, already demonstrating his rare personal courage and skills as an orator and leader. After the house where he lived with his wife and two-month-old baby was bombed, he dispersed an angry crowd gathered outside his home with the challenge that they meet violence with nonviolence. Appealing to a sense of justice that he would rely on throughout his career, King argued that victory would be achieved "because the arm of the moral universe is long, but it bends to justice." In November 1956 the Supreme Court ruled that the city's segregation laws were unconstitutional. In 1957 King visited India, where he continued to study the philosophy of nonviolence espoused by Mahatma Gandhi, whose writings he had first been drawn to in the seminary. Later that year, King and other activist black ministers organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which would be at the forefront of social protest throughout the next decade.

It was during the massive desegregation campaign in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, that King's role as a leader in the civil rights struggle was firmly established. When King and hundreds of other protestors were arrested, a group of eight local white clergymen characterized their efforts as "unwise and untimely." But as television cameras framed the standoff between demonstrators and police officials armed with fire hoses and trained

dogs, the moral weight of King's cause became evident. Over Easter weekend, Dr. King wrote his now famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" included here, an extraordinarily well-reasoned expression of the doctrine of nonviolent resistance. King then helped organize the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs, and on August 28, 1963, more than twenty years after A. Philip Randolph had launched his own March on Washington movement,[†] 250,000 activists gathered peacefully in the nation's capital. The "I Have a Dream" speech that follows was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and has become one of the most well known orations of the twentieth century. King continued his work in the March from Selma to Montgomery, the Chicago Freedom Movement, and in dozens of speeches and numerous volumes, including *Stride to Freedom* (1958), *Strength of Love* (1963), *Trumpet of Conscience* (1967), and *Why We Can't Wait* (1967), King sought to persuade his critics of the rightness of his cause. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Citing the distance he felt America still must travel, he said in his acceptance speech, "I feel as though this prize has been given to me for something that has really *not* yet been done."

King's leadership of the civil rights movement was not entirely unchallenged, however, and his methods and goals were less successful in attracting followers and achieving results in the urban North. And at the same time that disenchanted activists looked to the more militant philosophies of Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party,[†] King himself began to focus on a larger agenda after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In early 1968 he launched the Poor People's Campaign, which sought to include lower-income whites and minorities in the nation's economic prosperity. His outspokenness against the Vietnam War—prompted, he argued, "because my conscience leaves me no other choice"—dismayed some of his followers who saw the focus of the civil rights movement diluted. The shift also troubled the Johnson administration, and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI took to bugging King's phone conversations and attempted to openly discredit him.

In the summer of 1967, major riots broke out in Newark and Detroit and the movement became increasingly fractured. When King supported a sanitation workers' strike in Memphis the next year that turned violent, his detractors pounced. In a speech delivered April 3 at the Mason Temple, he argued: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. 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," he

concluded. "I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." The following day, King was shot by James Earl Ray as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He died hours later, at the age of thirty-nine.

King's death was profoundly felt throughout the nation and marked a turning point in race relations. While tens of thousands of mourners followed his simple coffin, led through the streets of Atlanta by a team of Georgia mules, riots erupted in more than a hundred cities across the nation. "The murder of King changed the whole dynamic of the country," activist Kathleen Neal Cleaver recalled. "Because once King was murdered, in April '68, that kind of ended any public commitment to nonviolent change. It was like 'Well, we tried that, and that's what happened.'" Others, like King's colleagues Ralph Abernathy and Jesse Jackson, were determined that the dream would not die with the dreamer, but King's death, writes Michael Harrington, nonetheless represented "the end of the beloved community."

Because of the repeated threats of violence he faced, King had seemed to make peace with his own death. Two months before he was assassinated, he preached to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta of how he wanted to be remembered. "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."

In November 1983, the anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., in January, became a national holiday by federal law.