

The movement made
martin rather than
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“ Martin Luther King is one of America’s most controversial figures. “ 1 Contemporary and modern historians are “ bitterly divided in their assessment of him” 1, and the extent to which his words and actions contributed to the betterment of black Civil Rights. Anthony Badger maintains that: “ no person was more important” 6 than King, a view popularly held by those outside the movement throughout the 20th century; whilst Ella Baker controversially claimed: “ the movement made Martin” 3, representing opposition to the traditional idea that King was a “ saintly figure to many.

Primarily it is the notion that “ King was led rather than leading” 1, causing debate over whether a Martin Luther King myth has been allowed to evolve. Though, once more counter-argument suggests “ the wisdom of his strategy and tactics” 1 to be his significant contribution to the movement. The role of King must be assessed not only in light of his contemporaries within the Civil Rights struggle, but also those who came before and after, taking into account his achievements in light of theirs.

Modern movements toward Civil Rights are agreed to have begun with the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-6. Rosa Parks’ arrest proliferated a year-long boycott to desegregate Montgomery buses, for which King has gained much credit - for mobilising the black community and organising the movement. However, John White advocates that: “ Robinson and Nixon shrewdly recognized that Montgomery’s blacks could be more effectively organized for mass protest” 2, supporting Michael Eric Dyson’s belief that “ without the spur of grass-roots leaders like E. D. Nixon, the ministers... might never have acted.

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Thus, such arguments demonstrate that King not only failed to initiate the movement, but was led by others into action. Vivienne Sanders identifies that: “ Local officials and the bus company... deserve credit [as] spiteful reactions... inspired ordinary blacks to continue the boycott, even when the church leaders temporarily faltered. “ 1 However, White has suggested that despite the fact that he did not ignite black action, his contribution was essential, citing “ King’s inspirational direction of the Montgomery bus boycott, and the events which followed from it” 2, as pivotal.

While it seems “ victory had been the result of collective thought and collective action” 7, the boycott was a reflection of King’s ability to lead, shown by his prompt development of the SCLC initiative. SCLC represented King’s first efforts as a Civil Rights leader, where he aimed to consolidate the Montgomery success by supporting other such boycotts. Yet “ similar boycotts in other cities met with little success”, and also “ the MIA was largely ineffective in challenging other forms of discrimination.

White’s analyses would suggest King’s inability act decisively. Sanders credits King for “ mastermind[ing] a pilgrimage to Washington” 1, but also explains how the SCLC lacked the ability to consolidate: “ sustained local campaigns for specific gains proved more difficult for SCLC. “ 1 King’s leadership in this case has been highlighted as lacking organisation or real direction, showing inadequate long-term insight.

However, the difficulties of King’s position as head of a new black Civil Rights group are aptly explained by Sanders: “ As always, one of the greatest organisational problems he face was the local and national black divisions. “

1 Though this would excuse the SCLC's lacking gains on a legislative front, it fails to account for King's inability to mobilise the people of Atlanta, and thus the SCLC's early shortcomings and the failure to achieve its primary objective - encouraging blacks to vote, are evidence enough for revisionists to question King's leadership skills.

Following the dormancy of the movement as a result of SCLC's ineffectiveness, the revived use of ' sit-ins' in Greensboro during 1960 reignited the Civil Rights movement. The initiative of four college students spread throughout the South and resulted in desegregation of many Atlanta's schools and stores. This progress in the light of the fact that " Initially, King had nothing to do with it" 1, illustrates that success seemed more a function of King's absence than his leadership; though Sanders also claims: " King's talk of non-violent protest might have been inspirational.

Overall the sit-ins demonstrated King's initial lack of insight within a leadership role, showing that: " As in Montgomery, King was led rather than leading. " 1 The early trends in the movement would thus suggest that as many historians claim, King's primary weakness was his poor organisation. The organisation CORE illustrated the relative ineffectiveness of SCLC and the flaws in King's tactics when it pioneered the ' Freedom Rides', utilising provocative tactics to attract media attention to the Civil Rights cause.

While " King seemed unable to think up new tactics for gaining attention, CORE's ' Freedom Ride' electrified the civil rights movement. " 1 Farmer cleverly exploited Southern hostilities and the government's need to preserve international image. James Colaiaco claims: " Freedom Rides

supplied an important strategic lesson for King... white racists had to be provoked to use violence against non-violent protestors. “² Thus, King’s ideals of non-violence were revised and made effective by Farmer, showing comparative weakness in King’s strategy.

Yet, Sanders claims that: “one of the characteristics of [King’s] leadership was that he did not mind being led by others, so long as the tactics were working”¹, demonstrating an image of King closer to the traditional, supported by his efforts to unite the individual black groups to ensure progress. Perhaps unfairly, King’s ability is also challenged in view of the SCLC’s contribution to the ‘Albany Movement’. White’s view of the fact that the Albany activists “did not welcome the SCLC presence and were openly critical of King’s ‘charismatic’ leadership style”² demonstrates the inter-organisational pressures SCLC had to operate under.

King’s efforts, however, were also seen as a blunder, as he failed to account for the lack of publicity as a result of an absence of white violence to black protest, exposing King’s reactionary approaches and bad planning. Yet, Lewis defends King, claiming “It was the planning, the organizing, the strategy that he brought with him that brought change”⁹, and believes “it was a miscalculation on the part of a number of people that a spontaneous appearance by Martin Luther King could bring change”, thus implying that King’s responsibility for the failure was not entire.