

Martin luther king and the american civil rights movement research paper examples...

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



ABSTRACT

Martin Luther King was a Baptist minister and Ph. D. in theology who had led the civil rights movement in the South since 1955. He referred to the founding documents and principles of the United States that promised liberty and equality for all, and noted that the country had failed to fulfill these in practice, especially because blacks had suffered centuries of slavery and segregation. His main concern was to secure basic citizenship and voting rights for blacks, and his speaking style was far more like that of a preacher and prophet. A century after slavery was abolished, blacks still faced segregation, discrimination and lack of voting right in many parts of the United States, not only the South. Of course, racism was far more overt there and the civil rights movement had been very successful in exposing it for the world to see, through protests, marches and sit-ins. His central theme was that the nation had to keep the promises made in its founding documents and that “there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights” (King 1963).

Martin Luther King was the son of a Baptist minister in Atlanta, Georgia who followed his father into the same profession, and became the most important leader of black civil rights in 20th Century America. His movement was instrumental in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Acts of 1965, which abolished segregation and disenfranchisement of blacks and other minorities in the United States. For these efforts, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and his methods of nonviolent civil disobedience—which owed much to Mahatma Gandhi’s independence movement in India—have been widely copied throughout the world. Reinhold Niebuhr’s

philosophy of Christian Realism was also a key influence during his time as a student, and politically he was always to the left of mainstream liberalism as well. He also opposed the war in Vietnam, and at the time of his assassination in 1968 was organizing a Poor People's March on Washington DC to demand an end to the war and greater social and economic justice at home.

As a young student in college and divinity school, King was very much influenced by the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. Both men believed that humanity was in a fallen state due to original sin and that liberal optimism about perfecting the world or creating the Kingdom of God on earth was a false hope. For this reason, Niebuhr was not a pacifist and supported the United States in World War II and the Cold War, on the basis that the American empire was the lesser of two evils. Realists like George Kennan called him "the father of us all", while King praised Niebuhr as one of his most important teachers (Patton 1977). As a tough-minded, pragmatic liberal, he strongly condemned Christians who refused to face the great moral, political and economic crises of the 20th Century, and also argued that the morality of the Sermon on the Mount was "not practical in human society" because doing evil was inevitable in a fallen and sinful world (Paulishek, 2007, p. 55). King combined the nonviolent methods of Gandhi with the Christian Realism of Niebuhr from the time he began leading the civil rights movement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, which led to the desegregation of the city's buses. He did not resort to violent methods, however, even when the Ku Klux Klan bombed his house, and also refused to carry a gun or hire armed bodyguards for his own protection, despite many

threats against his life. King was prepared to give his life for the cause of human rights, and finally did in 1968.

For Niebuhr, if not for King, resorting to violence and participating in wars were necessary evils, and sometimes the methods used might be extreme, like carpet bombing cities or using nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As he wrote in *Moral Man in Immoral Society*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and *The Irony of American History*, that Protestant liberalism was too weak and simple in bowing down to modern culture and ideas. The chief heresy in modern society was the same as in all past eras—pride, egoism and the desire to “play God”—and to worship the power of science and technology (Patton 1977). Along with J. William Fulbright, he also warned against the hubris and arrogance of power, and that America was also under God’s judgment like any other nation or empire. Martin Luther King wrote a great deal about Niebuhr in graduate school and sought his assistance when preparing his doctoral dissertation. He was also critical of liberalism, especially the “false optimism characteristic of a great segment of Protestant liberalism”, which he considered well-meaning but ineffectual. He came to doubt the natural goodness of humanity, but also described Gandhi’s nonviolent methods as an effective power strategy for blacks in the U. S., given that they were only 10% of the population and could never hope to win through a violent uprising (Niebuhr Stanford. edu). His criticism of the white clergy and the Southern liberals in general is quite clear in his 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, which is in fact addressed to the white ministers of that city.

After the protests in Birmingham led to the desegregation of stores and

restaurants and more hiring of blacks, King joined other civil rights groups in supporting a March on Washington to demand passage of the Civil Rights Act. His "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963 was delivered at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington before a live audience of over 200,000 and a worldwide television and radio audience of tens of millions. A century after the abolition of slavery, blacks still faced segregation, discrimination and lack of voting rights in many parts of the United States, not only the South. Racism was far more overt then and the civil rights movement had been very successful in exposing it for the world to see, through protests, marches and sit-ins. King's central theme was that "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", but the promise had not been kept, and until it was, there would be "neither rest nor tranquility in America" (King 1963). King also admonished his black listeners not to give into bitterness and hatred, cautioning that "the marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people" (King 1963). Many whites were attending the March on Washington and participating in the civil rights movement so they should not all be considered on the same level as the Southern police, politicians and Ku Klux Klan members who were violently opposed to voting rights and civil rights for blacks. In 1963, though, the U. S. was more economically successful than it had ever been before in its history, at least for most whites, which is why King remarked that "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (King 1963). King's style was

that of a prophet or a preacher rather than a political candidate, especially in his famous "I have a dream" peroration.

Because of the nonviolent protests in the South and the March on Washington, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, which finally ended the system of dual public schools in the Southern states and abolished Jim Crow segregation in hospitals, transportation and public facilities. Only the 1965 Voting Rights Act was of equal importance, and no legislation since that time has had as much of an effect on politics, economics and society in America. It benefitted not only blacks but women, the handicapped, Hispanics, Native Americans and members of other minority groups, who have managed to hold onto most of their gains in spite of the conservative backlash of the last thirty years. In 1964, after a decade of massive resistance, only 2% of blacks in the South and Border States attended integrated schools, but 25% did by 1967 (Gold, 2010, p. 114). Segregated buses, restrooms, train cars, theaters, waiting rooms and restaurants all disappeared after 1964, while it also became illegal to fire women for being pregnant or having small children. These are the most important legacies of the Civil Rights Act. Politically, of course, it was disastrous for the Democratic Party, which was not able to elect a non-Southern president again until 2008. Indeed, Barack Obama was the first North Democrat to carry any state in the South since 1968. Lyndon Johnson was perfectly correct when he told his press secretary Bill Moyers that "I think we just delivered the South to the Republicans for a long time to come", but nevertheless it was the right thing to do (Gold, p. 115). Civil rights did not lead to the end of poverty among blacks and other minorities, although it certainly helped create a black middle class for the

first time in U. S. history. King spent far more time addressing basic economic issues in his 1967 “Where Do We Go from Here?” speech, including the fact that blacks had half the income of whites and double the rate of unemployment, lived in substandard housing, and died in Vietnam at twice the rate of whites relative to their proportion of the population. Blacks attended college at only 5% the rate of whites while “75 percent hold menial jobs” (King 1967). In the ghettos of the North, they were “confined to a life of voicelessness and powerlessness”, which has not really changed since 1967 (King 1967). King called for a guaranteed annual income to raise blacks out of poverty, which would have cost about \$20 billion a year at that time. This was much less than the \$35 billion cost of “an unjust, evil war in Vietnam”, which King wanted to end (King 1967). Yet he also opposed violence and insisted that the riots in Watts in 1965 and in Detroit and Newark two years later accomplished nothing for civil rights or the improvement of economic conditions. Nor did he believe that a violent revolution would ever succeed in the United States, given that even the majority of blacks opposed it.

Blacks still live in segregated ghettos with high levels of unemployment and gang violence, while black poverty and unemployment are still at least double the levels of whites, as they always have been. Nor is there any longer a bipartisan consensus in favor of civil rights as there was in the 1960s. Instead, the Republicans became the party of the white backlash and changed the focus to “the negative side effects of affirmative action rather than about the need for positive measures to end discrimination” (Grofman, 2000, p. 1). Violence and police brutality against blacks certainly continued,

such as the beating of Rodney King by the police in Los Angeles, which led to the most violent riots since the 1960s when the officers were acquitted in 1992 (Hasday, 2007, p. 103). Discrimination in housing also continued, and the 1968 Civil Rights Act that outlawed it has never been effectively enforced. Even its passage was simply a reluctant move by a Congress that was badly shaken by the nationwide rioting after the assassination of Martin Luther King that year.

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