

What role did martin
luther kings play in
the montgomery bus
boycott



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In December Of 1955, a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama took place which was to shape the future for black civil rights. As head of the MIA, an organisation formed to lead the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King played a vital role in this seminal event. But was he a leader or was he lead? Before the protest, king was an unrecognised face in Montgomery and on moving to the town, he had no plans to become involved in the civil rights movement. As a Boy, Martin Luther King Jr, grew up and attended a segregated school in Atlanta, Georgia. This segregated upbringing provided King with a strong driving force for the fight for black rights.

He recalled his white friend's father demanding that he would no longer play with him. ' For the first time, I was made aware of the existence of a race problem.' Both King's parents were NAACP activists who were strongly involved in the church, because of this, King could see how the church and NAACP strengthened the black community. The MIA chose King as their head as he had no record of offences and so nothing for him to be arrested for. It would have been too risky for a member of the NAACP to take on the role as they could easily be arrested or killed.

King was at fist reluctant when approached by the MIA as he had just opened a church in Montgomery and was keen to further his career as minister. He had already rejected an offer to lead the local NAACP, he did, however, allow the church to be used as a meeting place and it was here, following the arrest of Rosa Parks, that the boycott was provided with a location, inspiration and some financial aid. Robinson and the WPC responded to Parks' arrest by calling for a one-day protest of the city's buses on 5

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December. They prepared a series of leaflets at Alabama State College and organized groups to distribute them throughout the black community and on the day ninety percent of Montgomery's black citizens stayed off the buses.

Following this initial success, Nixon and Robinson arranged a meeting with the city's ministers, including Martin Luther King, to discuss the possibility of extending the boycott to a long-term campaign. During this meeting, the MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association) was formed and King was elected its president. The main advantage of having King as the president was the fact that he was new to Montgomery. Rosa Parks recalled, " He hadn't been there long enough to make any strong friends or enemies." King's faith also made him an obvious choice.

As a young and popular minister, who felt ' called by God to serve humanity, his links with the church would provide local support and much needed funding. The help of the church would also attract the right kind of interest and its supporters would be keen to follow King's wishes for a peaceful protest. King lead a non-violent protest in the Montgomery bus boycott which I feel was his most important role in the event. The most major act of terrorism on the black protesters was the bombing of King's home on January the 30th 1956. His wife and their baby daughter escaped without injury.

However King refused to let anger swallow him and he told an angry crowd of blacks waiting at his home that " We must learn to meet hate with love" This non-violent approach encouraged a peaceful protest which is undoubtedly one the keys to its success. King also encouraged unity and co-

operation between the blacks. At the first meeting of the MIA, King said to the black community, " I want to say that in all of our actions we must stick together. Unity is the great need of the hour, and if we are united we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve." The success of the Boycott caused Martin Luther King to become a national icon and he raised lots of media attention.

However, despite his ' Saint-like' reputation, King has proved subject to much disagreement between historians, some who claim he wasn't the great leader he was made out to be. Some even go as far to say that he was jealous of other black leaders. The fact that King had at first been reluctant to take up the post of head of the MIA also strengthens the viewpoint that he was lead, rather than being a leader himself. Another reason for the bad feeling toward King was jealousy from other prominent black leaders.

An example of this is Roy Wilkins who was keen to emphasise the NAACP's importance, and disliked King's direct, non-violent approaches. Even King's colleagues felt that he was basking in the victory and not concentrating on the fact that the protest's success had been the result of collective thought and collective action. He was also accused of poor organisation skills and he was criticised slightly for putting his family in danger. King, by many, was considered to be the focal point of the boycott. He claimed, however, that the movement would have taken place with or without him - " I just happened to be here..

...If M. L King had never been born this movement would have taken place.

One local activist agreed: it was ' a protest of the people..... not a one man show.

.. the leaders couldn't stop it if they wanted to.' Throughout the boycott, King made a number of inspirational speeches, undoubtedly his true talent. King's speeches ' mesmerised' his audiences sparked great admiration and publicity. When first elected as president of the MIA, King had just a few hours to prepare a speech for the mass meeting that was to be held on the evening of December 5th at the Holt street Baptist church.

Considering the quality and feeling behind his speeches, I think that Martin Luther King was a strong leader in the Montgomery bus boycott. However, due to his slight reluctance to enter the role of president of the MIA and the way he was told what to do (preparing the speech etc), I feel that in some ways he was lead. Despite his criticisms, however, I feel it was vital for the protest to have some form of leader, and as King had the great ability to mesmerise his audiences, along with his connections with the church, he was the obvious choice.