

# Martyrdom: an analysis of protest and civil disobedience



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*No one can swim in the same river water twice~Hiro*

For most Americans, the ideological struggle between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were centered on two individuals, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X respectively. It is also generally socially accepted that Martin Luther's philosophy prevailed and as such has been held up as the model for enacting social change in America, although often used to criticize the methods used by activists in the time since. This winner-loser dichotomy also ignored the similarities and resonance each leader found in the other towards the end of their lives. To further explore how effective Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous philosophy has been since his untimely death, this paper will examine several instances of civil disobedience and the effect each had on either government policy, or social attitudes. This paper will start with a distillation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s methods and the intended effects then go on to look at different protests during the Vietnam War era, economic protest in the 1990s, and lastly modern day police reform movements. Hopefully, by examining several different instances, we can form a well rounded picture of how effective these methods are in solving social issues in a modern setting, or how otherwise to approach the problem of enacting change in America.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous ideals in regards to action can be pretty completely found in his *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, written in April of 1963. The text was written after King and his followers were arrested in the City of Birmingham, Alabama, due to their protests in regards to the treatment of Black American citizens in the city. The text itself is a response to King's fellow clergymen, who lodged criticisms against his direction action

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movement, and is a justification for the disruption caused by King's comrades. King explicitly states that the purpose of his nonviolent direct action is to "create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue." While King isn't content to sit back and wait for change to happen, as he says, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed" he recognizes the utility of exercising restraint, which is very in line with his Christian values. It is worth noting that King articulates how many options he and his compatriots have exhausted in trying to deal with the City of Birmingham, and thus breaking the law is his last resort. He elaborates that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws...and unjust law is no law at all." This is an important detail to note as King's nonviolence is often used as an example of the "right" way to protest while forgetting that he simultaneously endorsed civil disobedience as a way to draw attention to issues. King's aim in Birmingham was clearly to intentionally provoke a response from the state, a response that many might see as poorly measured or excessive, thus drawing attention and sympathy for the cause. This is consistent with the concept of martyrdom that exists in the religious texts of not just Abrahamic faiths, but other religions around the world, creating a relatable, noble ideal that many people can connect with and admire. By doing so, King is leveraging Ethos and Pathos to garner support. It is also worth noting that by willingly enduring hardship, King takes advantage of the paradox of authority, a concept that posits that the state's power and legitimacy is derived from being able to utilize force, but each time it does so, it loses legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. Ideally, the state exists to protect its constituents, and by exercising force, fails in its

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duty to do so. Interestingly, by undermining the authority of the state, King pushed people to find the status quo unacceptable, which was the environment that Malcolm X and many of his followers already inhabited at the time, showing that the two were more similar than popularly thought, further reinforced by how the two eventually became friends and hybridized their viewpoints and efforts.

Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Clay, is remembered as one of the greatest athletes ever, and most certainly the most famous prizefighter of all time. What separates Ali from many other notable athletes in history, however, is his willingness to sacrifice his career in the name of civil disobedience. A staunch civil rights supporter, Ali was affiliated with Elijah Muhammad and The Nation of Islam, later following Malcolm X during his split with Muhammad. Ali was heavily influenced by Malcolm X's ideas in regards to the exploitation of Black Americans by sending them overseas to fight in wars, while White Americans waged war on their communities domestically. At this point in his career, Ali was already established as the heavyweight champion of the world at the age of 25, and during a time when boxing was a much bigger sport, he was truly a global icon in his athletic prime. Ali saw the influence he had, and decided to take a stand as a conscientious objector, at a time when there was still a large amount of support for the war. As a result, Ali was arrested, and found guilty of violating selective service laws, resulting in his passport being taken and every state suspending his license, in addition to stripping him of his championship belt. This was eventually overturned by the US Supreme Court, but not until four years later, when Ali was 29, which is a tremendous amount of time for

anyone to be virtually unemployed, and a lifetime for a fighter to be out of competition. Giving up the greatest accomplishment in his field at the peak of his athletic prime brought Ali to the forefront of the anti-war movement, and before long he was going on tour to talk at universities about his philosophy and pacifism. This coincided with a larger change in social opinion to the war, the effects and causes of which will be explored later. Much like Martin Luther King Jr. before him, Ali was fully willing to bear the punishment of the state in a very public forum, exposing the hypocrisy of a nation founded on religious freedom forcing him to betray the teachings of his faith, or failing that, to punish him for keeping true to his faith. By bringing light to this hypocrisy from a position of visibility, he showed that no one was truly safe from the reach of the state.

While it is important to look at the leaders of historical movements, equally, or perhaps even more important, are their followers. The people marching in the streets behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the protestors around the country, all the draft dodgers, each played a small but crucial role in changing how society felt at those times and places. In this section we will examine the result the aforementioned leaders had on a more societal level using two examples, The Chicago Ten and The Kent State Massacre. These two instances are examples of what happens when individuals protest in both a law abiding non-violent manner, and the opposite. Both protests were in regards to the Vietnam War, and generally a display of a growing disillusionment among the American public towards the conflict. The Chicago protest occurred in 1968, while the Kent State Massacre occurred two years later in 1970, partially in regards to concerns that a new Cambodian

offensive would delay the ending of the conflict in South East Asia.

Additionally, both these examples are similar because they both are eventualities of the process and philosophy utilized by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In both instances, groups of citizens had become extremely disillusioned by the lack of progress by the state. This tension had reached a breaking point, resulting in mass organization to express the frustrations of the group. In the case of The Chicago 10, the Democratic National Convention was being held in the city of Chicago at the time, and as such, a political group known as The Yippies organized a festival in the city to disrupt the convention and force the leaders of the Democratic Party to negotiate with them. Due to an issue with securing permits, and tensions stemming from the shooting of a 17-year-old boy by police for curfew violation, a large police force was assembled to contain or disperse the protestors, with things eventually escalating into a riot. Although the protest turned violent, and a lot of police officers and protestors were hurt, no one was killed during the riot. Eight individuals were put on trial for inciting the riot, notably including Black Panther founder Bobby Seale, despite him not being an organizing member of the protest, and only having been in town for two days. Seale eventually was tried separately from the other members of “ The Chicago Eight” and while all were convicted, Seale was the only one to serve time, before having his sentence suspended in 1972. The Kent State Massacre is quite a bit better known so the background will be covered in less detail. In comparison to the Chicago protests, the one at Kent state was a lot more peaceful, while including people who would be considered more respectable by conventional measure. However, the response by the state was much more severe. National Guard were called in to manage the situation and <https://assignbuster.com/martyrdom-an-analysis-of-protest-and-civil-disobedience/>

ended up firing on the crowd, killing several students and wounding more. The discrepancy in how each group acted and was subsequently treated is important for examining the effect each incident had on The Vietnam War. It is also important to note that the Chicago Protests occurred at a time when there was less relative support for the Vietnam War, compared to the Kent State Massacre. Of the two, it should be safe to say that the state's reaction to the Kent State protest was disproportionately more severe, and as thus has become a more notable part of the nation's history. It is widely cited and taught as a major turning point for public opinion against the war. The comparison of both events seems to suggest that at that time, Martin Luther King Jr.'s martyrdom approach, when taken to the extreme, is more successful in shocking the public and exposing hypocrisy. Which is not to minimize the efforts of The Chicago Ten, who were also very influential in shaping anti-war sentiment and drawing attention to the inaction of politicians, which had a definite butterfly effect impact on the Kent State students. Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, these two examples also show that the dichotomy of punishments for protest aren't always exactly straightforward, highlighting one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s main points in his *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. Simply obeying the law does not prevent the law from coming down on you, as evidenced at Kent State.

The next significant direct action protest that should be discussed is the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. Examining this incident will be useful as it is close to modern times, and should show how the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr. have evolved in their implementation and how society's reaction to these ideals have changed. Many of the protestors were environmentalists, anti-

capitalists, anti-globalists, and people concerned with labor issues. The idea of the direct action was to both disrupt the conference, thus delaying policy counter to the goals of the groups involved, while also raising awareness of globalism and trade issues, which at the point in time, did not get much attention from the mainstream media. Much like the protests in Chicago, the initial plan was to occupy much of the streets around the hotels of the delegates and convention center in order to stop people from convening and otherwise cause issues for the easy facilitation of talks. These efforts were largely more successful in the primary phase, due to new methods of communication allowing for more precise organization by the protestors, but much like Chicago and Kent State, it eventually devolved into violence with the arrival of militarized police, the National Guard, and out of state agencies. While many on both sides were injured, and more than 500 of the approximately 40, 000 protestors were arrested, no one died, likely a result of policy and training implemented in the aftermath of the Kent State massacre. So how successful was the direct action? While the “ Battle in Seattle” didn’t end a war, it did achieve the goal of bringing certain issues to the forefront of public consciousness, such as globalization and foreign exploitation of labor, issues that would become hot topic points of conversation in the coming years. This heightened attention has led to it being a major topic for politicians to address and subsequently has likely had a strong effect on policy. The protests also had major ramification for the WTO, as it was the first significant operational roadblock they had encountered, and their subsequent round of negotiations, known as The Doha round and started in 2001, have yet to be concluded, essentially stalling the organization. There was also immediate fallout in local politics, <https://assignbuster.com/martyrdom-an-analysis-of-protest-and-civil-disobedience/>



with the Seattle chief of police resigning immediately, and the sitting mayor losing his next reelection, which many attribute to how his administration reacted to the protests. This example serves to show how as the responses of the state change over time, the actions and tactics of protestors must also evolve, and that similar actions in different points of time can yield very different results.

The last instance for examination is much more recent and refocused on the original issue, rather than extrapolating theory to other examples. At the start of the 2016 NFL season, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick became a national talking point for taking a stand against police brutality by sitting during the pre-game national anthem ceremony. During the last game of the preseason, Kaepernick switched to kneeling for the anthem after a conversation with Seahawks long snapper and former Green Beret Nate Boyer, as a compromise between protesting and minimizing disrespect for the armed forces, which was a key criticism lodged against Kaepernick. The kneeling was part of a general social discussion regarding police brutality after the deaths of Eric Garner and Tamir Rice, although many more victims were included. The protests coincided with the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, and soon spread not only to other teams, but other sports, including such notable figures as US Women's National Team super star Megan Rapinoe and Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton showing support for Kaepernick. The movement and Kaepernick also received backlash in equal measure, with President Donald Trump famously encouraging action against Kaepernick and the NFL, as well as other athletes who joined Kaepernick in his protest. Kaepernick eventually requested a

release from his contract from the 49ers, and after being unable to find a position with any other team, left football to pursue activism, leading many to posit that he had been blackballed from the league as a result of his actions. Kaepernick's story holds many similarities to Muhammad Ali's protest of the Vietnam War, as both were athletes who used their position to bring attention to an issue they felt passionate about, and in doing so were branded traitors or unpatriotic for disrespecting the military, and thus risking their professional careers. It is worth noting that Kaepernick has repeatedly stated he is not disrespecting the military, which is supported by his change in protest style following a meeting with Nate Boyer. It's still a bit early to tell what the complete effect this movement might have in the US, but it is undeniable that Kaepernick contributed heavily to bringing the conversation to a much bigger scale and prolonged the cultural relevancy of the topic. It is also important to note that in comparison to the other examples, police brutality isn't as universally relevant to Americans, namely due to it being primarily a black and Hispanic issue, so the social backlash against this movement has been stronger than the others.

There's a sort of running joke in social science, particularly economics, which states that all theories go to hell once you bring them into the real world and introduce real people. As such, the application or assertion that one particular mode of protest is "right" or more effective, without taking into consideration an exponentially increasing vector of contextual details is minimizing at best. That isn't to say that strategies and philosophy can't be passed down, but to expect things to turn out consistently despite a

constantly changing society is unreasonable. As demonstrated by these examples, the same approach can yield wildly different results.

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