Martin Luther King, Jr., made history, but he was also transformed by his deep family roots in the African-American Baptist church, his formative experiences in his hometown of Atlanta, his theological studies, his varied models of religious and political leadership, and his extensive network of contacts in the peace and social justice movements of his time. Although King was only thirty-nine at the time of his death, his life was remarkable for the ways it reflected and inspired so many of the twentieth century’s major intellectual, cultural, and political developments.

The son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist ministers, Martin Luther King Jr., named Michael King at birth, was born in Atlanta and spent his first twelve years in the Auburn Avenue home that his parents, the Reverend [Michael King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_martin_luther_michael_sr_1897_1984/) and [Alberta Williams King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_alberta_williams_1903_1974/), shared with his maternal grandparents, the Reverend [Adam Daniel (A. D.) Williams](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_williams_adam_daniel_a_d_1861_1931/) and [Jeannie Celeste Williams](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_williams_jennie_celeste_parks_1873_1941/). After Rev. Williams’ death in 1931, his son-in-law became [Ebenezer Baptist Church’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ebenezer_baptist_church/) new pastor and gradually established himself as a major figure in state and national Baptist groups. The elder King began referring to himself (and later to his son) as Martin Luther King.

King’s formative experiences not only immersed him in the affairs of Ebenezer but also introduced him to the African-American [social gospel](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_social_gospel/) tradition exemplified by his father and grandfather, both of whom were leaders of the Atlanta branch of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/) Depression-era breadlines heightened King’s awareness of economic inequities, and his father’s leadership of campaigns against racial discrimination in voting and teachers’ salaries provided a model for the younger King’s own politically engaged ministry. He resisted religious emotionalism and as a teenager questioned some facets of Baptist doctrine, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

During his undergraduate years at Atlanta’s [Morehouse College](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_morehouse_college/) from 1944 to 1948, King gradually overcame his initial reluctance to accept his inherited calling. Morehouse president [Benjamin E. Mays](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mays_benjamin_1894_1984/) influenced King’s spiritual development, encouraging him to view Christianity as a potential force for progressive social change. Religion professor [George Kelsey](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kelsey_george_dennis_sale_19101996/) exposed him to biblical criticism and, according to King’s autobiographical sketch, taught him “that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape” (Papers 1:43). King admired both educators as deeply religious yet also learned men and by the end of his junior year, such academic role models and the example of his father led King to enter the ministry. He described his decision as a response to an “inner urge” calling him to “serve humanity” (Papers 1:363). He was ordained during his final semester at Morehouse, and by this time King had also taken his first steps toward political activism. He had responded to the postwar wave of anti-black violence by proclaiming in a letter to the editor of the Atlanta Constitution that African Americans were “entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens” (Papers 1:121). During his senior year King joined the Intercollegiate Council, an interracial student discussion group that met monthly at Atlanta’s Emory University.

After leaving Morehouse, King increased his understanding of liberal Christian thought while attending [Crozer Theological Seminary](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_crozer_theological_seminary/) in Pennsylvania from 1948 to 1951. Initially uncritical of liberal theology, he gradually moved toward [Reinhold Niebuhr’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_niebuhr_reinhold_1892_1971/) neoorthodoxy, which emphasized the intractability of social evil. Mentored by local minister, [J. Pius Barbour](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_barbour_josephus_pius_1894_1974/), he reacted skeptically to a presentation on pacifism by [Fellowship of Reconciliation](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_fellowship_of_reconciliation_for/) leader [A. J. Muste](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_muste_abraham_johannes_1885_1967/). Moreover, by the end of his seminary studies King had become increasingly dissatisfied with the abstract conceptions of God held by some modern theologians and identified himself instead with the theologians who affirmed [personalism](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_personalism/), or a belief in the personality of God. Even as he continued to question and modify his own religious beliefs, he complied an outstanding academic record and graduated at the top of his class.

In 1951 King began doctoral studies in systematic theology at [Boston University’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_boston_university/) School of Theology, which was dominated by personalist theologians such as [Edgar Brightman](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_brightman_edgar_1884_1953/) and [L. Harold DeWolf](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_dewolf_l_lotan_harold_1905_1986/). The papers (including his [dissertation](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_dissertation_of_martin_luther_king_jr_1955/)) that King wrote during his years at Boston displayed little originality, and some contained extensive plagiarism; but his readings enabled him to formulate an eclectic yet coherent theological perspective. By the time he completed his doctoral studies in 1955, King had refined his exceptional ability to draw upon a wide range of theological and philosophical texts to express his views with force and precision. His ability to infuse his oratory with borrowed theological insights became evident in his expanding preaching activities in Boston-area-churches and at Ebenezer, where he assisted his father during school vacations.

During his stay in Boston, King also met and courted [Coretta Scott](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_coretta_scott_1927_2006/), an Alabama-born Antioch College graduate who was then a student at the New England Conservatory of Music. On 18 June 1953 the two students were married in Marion, Alabama, where Scott’s family lived.

Although he considered pursuing an academic career, King decided in 1954 to accept an offer to become the pastor of [Dexter Avenue Baptist Church](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_dexter_avenue_baptist_church/) in Montgomery, Alabama. In December 1955, when Montgomery black leaders, such as [Jo Ann Robinson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_robinson_jo_ann_1912_1992/), [E. D. Nixon](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nixon_edgar_daniel_1899_1987/), and [Ralph Abernathy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/) formed the [Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_improvement_association/) to protest the arrest of NAACP official [Rosa Parks](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_parks_rosa_1913_2005/) for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, they selected King to head the new group. In his role as the primary spokesman of the year-long [Montgomery bus boycott](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_bus_boycott_1955_1956/), King utilized the leadership abilities he had gained from his religious background and academic training to forge a distinctive protest strategy that involved the mobilization of black churches and skillful appeals for white support. With the encouragement of [Bayard Rustin](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_rustin_bayard_1910_1987/), [Glenn Smiley](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_smiley_glenn_e_1910_1993/), [William Stuart Nelson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nelson_william_stuart_1895_1977/) and other veteran pacifists, King also became a firm advocate of [Mohandas Gandhi’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_gandhi_mohandas_karamchand_1869_1948/) precepts of [nonviolence](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nonviolent_resistance/), which he combined with Christian social gospel ideas.

After the United States Supreme Court outlawed Alabama bus segregation laws in [Browder v. Gayle](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_browder_v_gayle/) in late 1956, King sought to expand the nonviolent civil rights movement throughout the South. In 1957 he joined with [C. K. Steele](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_steele_charles_kenzie_1914_1980/), [Fred Shuttlesworth](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_shuttlesworth_fred_1922/) and [T .J. Jemison](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_jemison_theodore_judson_1919/) in founding the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) with King as president to coordinate civil rights activities throughout the region. Publication of [Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_stride_toward_freedom_the_montgomery_story_1958/) (1958) further contributed to King’s rapid emergence as a national civil rights leader. Even as he expanded his influence, however, King acted cautiously. Rather than immediately seeking to stimulate mass desegregation protests in the South, King stressed the goal of achieving black voting rights when he addressed an audience at the 1957 [Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_prayer_pilgrimage_for_freedom_1957/).

King’s rise to fame was not without personal consequences. In 1958 King was the victim of his first assassination attempt. Although his house had been bombed several times during the Montgomery bus boycott, it was while signing copies of Stride Toward Freedom that [Izola Ware Curry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_curry_izola_ware_1916/) stabbed him with a letter opener. Surgery to remove it was successful, but King had to recuperate for several months, giving up all protest activity.

One of the key aspects of King’s leadership was his ability to establish support from many types of organizations including labor unions, peace organizations, southern reform organizations, and religious groups. As early as 1956, labor unions, such as the [United Packinghouse Workers](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_united_packinghouse_workers_of_america_upwa/) and the United Auto Workers contributed to the MIA and peace activists such as [Homer Jack](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_jack_homer_alexander_19161993/) alerted their associates to the activities of the MIA. Activists from southern organizations such as Myles Horton’s [Highlander Folk School](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_highlander_folk_school/) and [Anne Braden’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_braden_anne_gamrell_mccarty_1924_2006_and_braden_carl_james_1914_1975/) Southern Conference Education Fund were in frequent contact with King. In addition, his extensive ties to the [National Baptist Convention](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_baptist_convention_nbc/) provided support from churches all over the nation; and his advisor, [Stanley Levison](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_levison_stanley_1912_1979/) insured broad support from Jewish groups.

King’s recognition of the link between segregation and colonialism resulted in alliances with groups fighting oppression outside the U.S., especially in Africa. In March 1957, King traveled to [Ghana](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ghana_trip_1957/) at the invitation of [Kwame Nkrumah](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nkrumah_kwame_1909_1972/) to attend the nation’s independence ceremony. Shortly after returning from Ghana King joined the [American Committee on Africa](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_american_committee_on_africa_acoa/) agreeing to serve as vice chairman of an International Sponsoring Committee for a day of protest against South Africa’s [apartheid](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_apartheid_1948_1994/) government. Later at a SCLC sponsored event honoring Kenyan labor leader [Tom Mboya](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mboya_thomas_joseph_1930_1969/), King further articulated the connections between the African-American freedom struggle and those abroad: “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality” (Papers 5:204).

During 1959 he increased his understanding of Gandhian ideas during a month-long visit to India sponsored by the [American Friends Service Committee](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_american_friends_service_committee_1917/). With Coretta and MIA historian [Lawrence D. Reddick](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_reddick_lawrence_dunbar_1910_1995/) in tow, King meet with many Indian leaders, including Prime Minister [Jawaharlal Nehru](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nehru_jawaharlal_1889_1964/). Writing after his return, King stated, “I left India more convinced than ever before that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom” (Papers 5:233).

Early the following year he moved his family, which now included two children,[Yolanda](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_yolanda_denise_1955_2007/) and [Martin Luther King, III](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_martin_luther_iii_1957/), to Atlanta in order to be nearer SCLC headquarters in that city and to become co-pastor, with his father, of Ebenezer Baptist Church. (The Kings’ third child, [Dexter](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_dexter_scott_1961/), was born in 1961; their fourth, [Bernice](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_bernice_albertine_1963/), was born in 1963.) Soon after King’s arrival in Atlanta, the southern civil rights movement gained new impetus from the student-led lunch counter [sit-in](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_sit_ins/) movement that spread throughout the region during 1960. The sit-ins brought into existence a new protest group, the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_sncc/) which would often push King toward greater militancy. King came in contact with students, especially those from Nashville such as [John Lewis](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lewis_john_1940/), [James Bevel](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_bevel_james_luther_1936/) and [Diane Nash](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nash_diane_1938/) who had been trained in nonviolent tactics by [James Lawson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lawson_james_1928/). In October 1960 King’s arrest during a student-initiated protest in Atlanta became an issue in the national presidential campaign when Democratic candidate [John F. Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_john_fitzgerald_1917_1963/) called Coretta King to express his concern. The successful efforts of Kennedy supporters to secure King’s release contributed to the Democratic candidate’s narrow victory over Republican candidate [Richard Nixon](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nixon_richard_milhous_1913_1994/).
King’s decision to move to Atlanta was partly caused by SCLC’s lack of success during the late 1950s. Associate director [Ella Baker](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_baker_ella_josephine_1903_1986/) had complained that the SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship suffered from lack of attention from King. SCLC leaders hoped that with King now in Atlanta, programming would be improved. The hiring of [Wyatt T. Walker](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_walker_wyatt_tee_1929/) as executive director in 1960 was also seen as a step toward bringing efficiency to the organization, while the addition of [Dorothy Cotton](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_cotton_dorothy_foreman_1930/) and [Andrew Young](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_young_andrew_1932/) to the staff infused new leadership after SCLC took over the administration of the Citizenship Education program pioneered by [Septima Clark](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_clark_septima_1898_1987/). Attorney [Clarence Jones](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_jones_clarence_benjamin_1931/) also began to assist King and SCLC with legal matters and to act as King’s advisor.

As the southern protest movement expanded during the early 1960s, King was often torn between the increasingly militant student activists, such as those who participated in the [Freedom Rides](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_freedom_rides/) and more cautious national civil rights leaders. During 1961 and 1962 his tactical differences with SNCC activists surfaced during a sustained protest movement in Albany, Georgia. King was arrested twice during demonstrations organized by the [Albany Movement](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_albany_movement/), but when he left jail and ultimately left Albany without achieving a victory, some movement activists began to question his militancy and his dominant role within the southern protest movement.

As King encountered increasingly fierce white opposition, he continued his movement away from theological abstractions toward more reassuring conceptions, rooted in African-American religious culture, of God as a constant source of support. He later wrote in his book of sermons, [Strength to Love](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_strength_to_love_1963/) (1963), that the travails of movement leadership caused him to abandon the notion of God as “theological and philosophically satisfying” and caused him to view God as “a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life” (Papers 5:424).

During 1963, however, King reasserted his preeminence within the African-American freedom struggle through his leadership of the [Birmingham campaign](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_birmingham_campaign/). Initiated by SCLC and its affiliate, the [Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_alabama_christian_movement_for_human_rights_acmhr1/), the Birmingham demonstrations were the most massive civil rights protest that had yet occurred. With the assistance of Fred Shuttlesworth and other local black leaders and with little competition from SNCC and other civil rights groups, SCLC officials were able to orchestrate the Birmingham protests to achieve maximum national impact. King’s decision to intentionally allow himself to be arrested for leading a demonstration on 12 April prodded the Kennedy administration to intervene in the escalating protests. A widely quoted [“Letter from Birmingham Jail”](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_letter_from_birmingham_jail_1963/) displayed his distinctive ability to influence public opinion by appropriating ideas from the Bible, the Constitution, and other canonical texts. During May, televised pictures of police using dogs and fire hoses against young demonstrators generated a national outcry against white segregationist officials in Birmingham. The brutality of Birmingham officials and the refusal of Alabama governor [George C. Wallace](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_wallace_george_corley_1919_1998/) to allow the admission of black students at the University of Alabama prompted President Kennedy to introduce major civil rights legislation.

King’s speech at the 28 August 1963 [March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_march_on_washington_for_jobs_and_freedom/) attended by more than 200,000 people, was the culmination of a wave of civil rights protest activity that extended even to northern cities. In his prepared remarks King announced that African Americans wished to cash the “promissory note” signified in the egalitarian rhetoric of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Closing his address with extemporaneous remarks, he insisted that he had not lost hope: “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream . . . that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” He appropriated the familiar words of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” before concluding, “when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last’” (King, Call, 82, 85, 87).

Although there was much elation after the March on Washington, less than a month later, the movement was shocked by another act of senseless violence. On 15 September 1963 a dynamite blast killed four young school girls at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. King delivered the eulogy for three of the four girls, reflecting, “They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, and the philosophy which produced the murders” (King, Call, 96).

[St. Augustine, Florida](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_st_augustine_movement/) became the site of the next major confrontation of the civil rights movement. Beginning in 1963 [Robert B. Hayling](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_hayling_robert_b_1929/), of the local NAACP had led sit-ins against segregated businesses. SCLC was called in to help in May 1964, suffering the arrest of King and Abernathy. After a few court victories, SCLC left when a bi-racial committee was formed; however, local residents continued to suffer violence.

King’s ability to focus national attention on orchestrated confrontations with racist authorities, combined with his oration at the 1963 March on Washington, made him the most influential African-American spokesperson of the first half of the 1960s. Named [Time magazine’s “Man of the Year”](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_time_magainzes_man_of_the_year_1963/) at the end of 1963, he was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nobel_peace_prize_1964/) in December 1964. The acclaim King received strengthened his stature among civil rights leaders but also prompted [Federal Bureau of Investigation](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_federal_bureau_of_investigation_fbi/) director [J. Edgar Hoover](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_hoover_j_edgar_1895_1972/) to step up his effort to damage King’s reputation. Hoover, with the approval of President Kennedy and Attorney General [Robert Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_robert_francis_19251968/), established phone taps and bugs. Hoover and many other observers of the southern struggle saw King as controlling events, but he was actually a moderating force within an increasingly diverse black militancy of the mid-1960s. Although he was not personally involved in [Freedom Summer](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_freedom_summer_1964/) (1964), he was called upon to attempt to persuade the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mississippi_freedom_democratic_party/) delegates to accept a compromise at the Democratic Party National Convention.

As the African-American struggle expanded from desegregation protests to mass movements seeking economic and political gains in the North as well as the South, King’s active involvement was limited to a few highly publicized civil rights campaigns, such as Birmingham and St. Augustine, which secured popular support for the passage of national civil rights legislation, particularly the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_civil_rights_act_of_1964/).

The Alabama protests reached a turning point on 7 March when state police attacked a group of demonstrators at the start of a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. Carrying out Governor Wallace’s orders, the police used tear gas and clubs to turn back the marchers after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma. Unprepared for the violent confrontation, King alienated some activists when he decided to postpone the continuation of the [Selma to Montgomery March](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_selma_to_montgomery_march/) until he had received court approval, but the march, which finally secured federal court approval, attracted several thousand civil rights sympathizers, black and white, from all regions of the nation. On 25 March King addressed the arriving marchers from the steps of the capitol in Montgomery. The march and the subsequent killing of a white participant, Viola Liuzzo, as well as the earlier murder of [James Reeb](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_reeb_james_1927_1965/) dramatized the denial of black voting rights and spurred passage during the following summer of the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_voting_rights_act_1965/).

After the successful voting rights march in Alabama, King was unable to garner similar support for his effort to confront the problems of northern urban blacks. Early in 1966 he, together with local activist [Al Raby](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_raby_albert_1933_1988/), launched a major campaign against poverty and other urban problems and moved his family into an apartment in Chicago’s black ghetto. As King shifted the focus of his activities to the North, however, he discovered that the tactics used in the South were not as effective elsewhere. He encountered formidable opposition from Mayor Richard Daley and was unable to mobilize Chicago’s economically and ideologically diverse black community. King was stoned by angry whites in the Chicago suburb of Cicero when he led a march against racial discrimination in housing. Despite numerous mass protests, the [Chicago Campaign](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_chicago_campaign/) resulted in no significant gains and undermined King’s reputation as an effective civil rights leader.

King’s influence was damaged further by the increasingly caustic tone of black militancy of the period after 1965. Black radicals increasingly turned away from the Gandhian precepts of King toward the Black Nationalism of [Malcolm X](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_malcolm_x_1925_1965/), whose posthumously published autobiography and speeches reached large audiences after his assassination in February 1965. Unable to influence the black insurgencies that occurred in many urban areas, King refused to abandon his firmly rooted beliefs about racial integration and nonviolence. He was nevertheless unpersuaded by black nationalist calls for racial uplift and institutional development in black communities.

In June 1966, [James Meredith](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_meredith_james_howard_1933/) was shot while attempting a “March against Fear” in Mississippi. King, [Floyd McKissick](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mckissick_floyd_bixler_1922_1991/) of the [Congress of Racial Equality](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_congress_of_racial_equality_core/) and [Stokely Carmichael](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_stokely_carmichael_1941_1998/) of SNCC decided to continue his march. During the march, the activists from SNCC decided to test a new slogan that they had been using, [Black Power](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_black_power/). King objected to the use of the term, but the media took the opportunity to expose the disagreements among protestors and publicized the term.

In his last book, [*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_where_do_we_go_grom_here_1967/) (1967), King dismissed the claim of Black Power advocates “to be the most revolutionary wing of the social revolution taking place in the United States,” but he acknowledged that they responded to a psychological need among African Americans he had not previously addressed (King, Where Do We Go, 45-46). “Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery,” King wrote. “The Negro will only be free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive manhood his own emancipation proclamation” (King, Call, 184).

Indeed, even as his popularity declined, King spoke out strongly against American involvement in the [Vietnam War](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_the_vietnam_war_1961_1975/), making his position public in an address, “[Beyond Vietnam](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_beyond_vietnam_4_april_1967/),” on 4 April 1967 at New York’s Riverside Church. King’s involvement in the anti-war movement reduced his ability to influence national racial policies and made him a target of further FBI investigations. Nevertheless, he became ever more insistent that his version of Gandhian nonviolence and social gospel Christianity was the most appropriate response to the problems of black Americans.

In December 1967 King announced the formation of the [Poor People’s Campaign](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_poor_peoples_campaign/), designed to prod the federal government to strengthen its antipoverty efforts. King and other SCLC workers began to recruit poor people and antipoverty activists to come to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of improved antipoverty programs. This effort was in its early stages when King became involved in the [Memphis sanitation workers’ strike](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_memphis_sanitation_workers_strike_1968/) in Tennessee. On 28 March 1968, as King led thousands of sanitation workers and sympathizers on a march through downtown Memphis, black youngsters began throwing rocks and looting stores. This outbreak of violence led to extensive press criticisms of King’s entire antipoverty strategy. King returned to Memphis for the last time in early April. Addressing an audience at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple on 3 April, King affirmed his optimism despite the “difficult days” that lay ahead. “But it really doesn’t matter with me now,” he declared, “because I’ve been to the mountaintop [and] I’ve seen the Promised Land.” He continued, “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.” (King, Call, 222-223). The following evening the [assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/) took place as he stood on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. A white segregationist, James Earl Ray, was later convicted of the crime. The Poor People’s Campaign continued for a few months after his death under the direction of Ralph Abernathy, the new SCLC president, but it did not achieve its objectives.

Until his death King remained steadfast in his commitment to the radical transformation of American society through nonviolent activism. In his posthumously published essay, “A Testament of Hope” (1969), he urged African Americans to refrain from violence but also warned, “White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society.” The “black revolution” was more than a civil rights movement, he insisted. “It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws-racism, poverty, militarism and materialism” (King, “Testament,” 194).