**More in This Series**

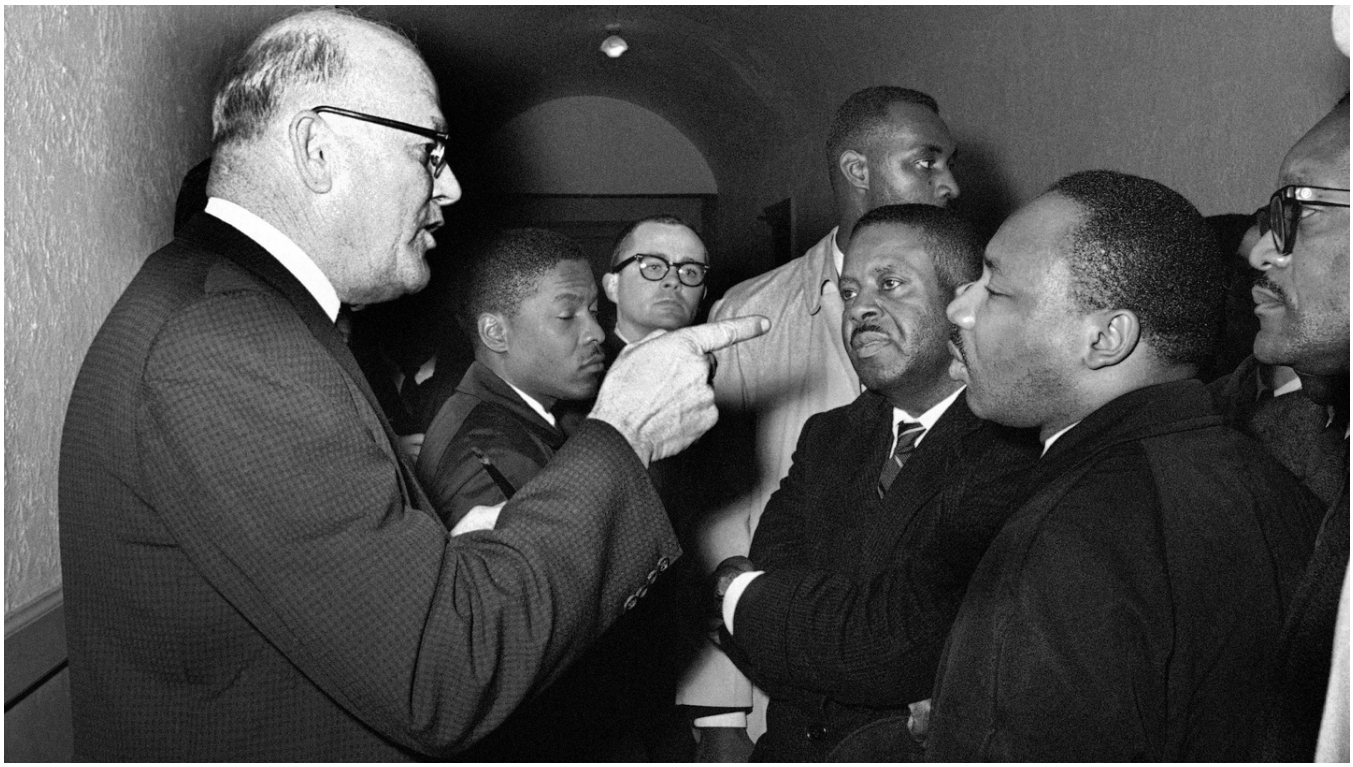
See Project

POLITICS

# King's Message of Nonviolence Has Been Distorted

In order to evaluate what Martin Luther King Jr.'s stance of nonviolence has contributed to our current view of protest, it bears noting that the concept of his nonviolence has been flattened.

DARA T. MATHIS **APRIL 3, 2018**



During a meeting in Hayneyville, Alabama, on March 1, 1965 King inquired about voter registration procedures but Registrar Carl Golson told him "It's none of your business." (HORACE CORT / AP)

***Editor's Note:*** *Read* The Atlantic's *special coverage of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.*

In 1956, after journalist William Worthy nearly sat on a loaded gun in an armchair in Martin Luther King Jr.'s house during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he could hardly know that his report on the incident would become a mere footnote in King's journey to nonviolence. Much like Worthy's discovery of King's weapon, I stumbled onto this anecdote quite by accident. The story provides a lens of nuance and complexity into the life of a man who has transcended into legend. King believed in nonviolence, but he did not start there; his moral suasion helped change the way we perceive nonviolent protest, but he abandoned it in the end.

Perhaps it is the fault of revisionist history that time has seen the removal of teeth from King's philosophy of love and nonviolence. But such a commitment to love must, by necessity, leave one vulnerable—it becomes both strength and weakness. King's use of moral suasion did work for a time on white moderates who pushed through legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but it had a limited shelf life. Although he professed love for both oppressed and oppressor alike, he was still hated by some and eventually martyred.

In order to evaluate what King's stance of nonviolence has contributed to our current view of protest (especially black protest), it bears noting that the concept of his nonviolence has been distorted and flattened. Certainly, King was a minister and an intellectual who believed in nonviolence as a personal philosophy against doing harm to other human beings. He extended this belief to a strategy of nonviolent direct action to effect social change.

King's associates in the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s did not all share the religious and philosophical underpinning of love he used to fuel his personal nonviolence. Many black activists who engaged in the struggle for freedom adopted nonviolent resistance for the sake of political expediency, rather than out of a moral imperative. Fellow organizer Fannie Lou Hamer once said she loved segregationists if only to avoid poisoning her own heart with hatred. But she also warned, "I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won't write his mama again."

King's progression from owning "an arsenal" of guns in defense of himself and his family to advocacy for total nonviolence became overshadowed both by his own nonviolent rhetoric and his opponents' motives. But like many Southern black people, he armed himself before the 1960s against violent attacks by white supremacists. His nonviolent resistance never meant private abandonment of self-defense or even complete conversion to pacifism. And it certainly did not commit future activists to nonviolence or love by association.

Distortion of King's philosophy results in analysis such as the Heritage Foundation's 2006 article, "Martin Luther King's Conservative Legacy," which reduced King's activism to a campaign "not to change laws, but to change people, to make neighbors of enemies and a nation out of divided races. King led with love, not racial hatred." What writer Carolyn Garris and many other conservatives misinterpret in King's emphasis on love is that he believed love would change people and inspire them to dismantle unjust laws and systems of oppression. The conservative belief in racism as an individual sin or moral failing, rather than a system that requires community and governmental reform, makes King's writings on love convenient fodder for warm-and-fuzzy quotes. It no longer performs the work he originally intended—bringing about social justice for morality's sake.

King saw nonviolent direct action as a means of protesters presenting their bodies as an appeal to the conscience of the larger community, in an effort to create a beloved community. Alongside the theater of protest, King's rhetoric performed the role of narration and monologue that heightened the drama between oppressed and oppressor. He was adamant that his nonviolence did not constitute passivity or mollification, but a militant commitment to change.

Modern activists do not need to take this same tactic to effect change.

The legacy of King's militant nonviolence lives on in the pockets of mass protests that emerge across the country following an injustice. Conspicuously absent from the language modern activists use, however, is an appeal to America's innate goodness, a call to fulfill the promise set forth by its Founding Fathers. For most modern-day activists who appear to choose King's "more excellent way" of nonviolence, King's dual emphasis on love is an anachronistic relic. In its place resides principles of nonviolent protest that King is certainly the father of, but not the sole progenitor.

Scholar Gene Sharp's three-volume work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* serves as a basis for pragmatic nonviolent protest for movements like Occupy Wall Street, even though Sharp himself criticized the Occupy movement for having no discernible demands. His 198 methods of protest emphasized civil disobedience as an opportunity for the oppressed to use their power of noncompliance to push for change outside of demonstrations. Sharp admired Martin Luther King Jr., but wrote that "exhortations in favor of love and nonviolence have made little or no contribution to ending war and major political violence."

The most familiar and readily cited example of recent black activism directly in King's tradition is the Black Lives Matter organization, a key part of the black liberation movement, that came into being in 2013 through the work of activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The organization readily acknowledges—even embraces—the similarities between it and the Civil Rights Movement. In 2014, Khan-Cullors and activist Darnell Moore organized the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride to bring over 500 people to protest in Ferguson, Missouri, after police officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown. The event was a clear nod to the Freedom Rides carried out by the Congress of Racial Equality in 1961 to practice civil disobedience on segregated interstate buses and terminals in the south.

Although Black Lives Matter practices nonviolence as a matter of strategy, love for the oppressor does not find its way into their ethos. The network's very name spawned counter-protest rhetoric claiming that Blue Lives Matter or All Lives Matter, or disingenuously accused activists of saying only black lives mattered. Rather, their collective statement of belief asserts that to center black lives, and "to love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a prerequisite for wanting the same for others." The love most commonly spoken of in the Movement for Black Lives is a self-love that compels activism.

Hate does not necessarily reside in the absence of a profession of love for one's enemy. But as King's faith in the humanity of his oppressors could not protect him from their hatred, the truth of Black Lives Matter's mission does not spare them from attack. Black Lives Matter has been mentioned in the same breath as the Ku Klux Klan as a terrorist organization. In 2017, a leaked FBI report counted the organization among a nascent "Black Identity Extremist" movement they considered a "violent threat" against police officers.

Seemingly on the opposite end of the spectrum, the antifa activists behind "punch a Nazi" normally use several tactics of nonviolent direct action, but reserve the right to employ violence toward those who espouse annihilative ideals. The debate on whether (mostly non-lethal) violence toward violent opponents discredits an organization's message requires one side to occupy the high road permanently.

Reverend William J. Barber's "Moral Mondays" movement is an outlier among other modern movements, publicly using his religious beliefs as the motivation to combat poverty, voter disenfranchisement, healthcare inequalities, and other "immoral" legislation in the state of North Carolina. Since its genesis in 2012, Barber's coalition of religious and secular social justice advocates has sought to spread its civil disobedience demonstrations to chapters in other states. With unflinching criticisms based in Judeo-Christian theology, Barber has drawn comparisons to King and sees his activism as an extension of King's unfinished Poor People's Campaign.

Indeed, the effectiveness of King's nonviolence was incomplete in that it could only promote social change in America as long as it persuaded only black people to remain nonviolent toward their white oppressors. Once King began to apply this philosophy to American foreign policy issues such as the Vietnam War, his attempts at moral suasion fell once again on stony hearts. Even before his assassination on April 4, 1968, both white conservatives and moderates used King's nonviolence as a cudgel to curtail the recurring riots that burned America's cities in 1966 and 1967. But King himself looked beyond the rubble of a riot to the root cause: racism.

In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King reserved choice words for the white moderates who took more exception to his methods than to the discrimination he sought to dismantle. "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice;" he wrote, "who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.'"

At times, opposition comes from those who seem to be on the same political side of activists. In 2016, ahead of an Atlanta demonstration protesting the deaths of

unarmed black men, then-Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed said, "Dr. King would never take a freeway." Although historically inaccurate, Reed's position as a liberal Democratic politician is oddly similar to the conservative response to Black Lives Matter protests. Detractors often hold protesters to a misremembered version of King, quoting him on love without doing the work he called for. This is an expected countermeasure. Sharp prescribed nonviolent noncompliance with an oppressor as a way for the oppressed to tap into a power they already possess. But when violent state actors preemptively call for nonviolence to manipulate protesters to comply without addressing their grievance, nonviolence is another way to muzzle the voiceless.

Toward the end of King's 13-year career, his waning popularity coincided with his shift from challenging de jure segregation in the south to challenging de facto segregation in the north. King famously said in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," but his allies in the north would have preferred that his protests remained below the Mason-Dixon line. Summarily abandoned by white moderates who had supported him financially, a mere 22 days before his assassination, he seemed resigned that "It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also." In this excoriating speech, known as "The Other America," he mentions the word love twice and never once refers to his dream.

What ultimately killed the legacy of King's love in nonviolent political protest? I dare say that, even if James Earl Ray had not aimed a shotgun at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, moral suasion still would have died with King. His moral fiber adorned his political strategy, even imbued it with righteousness, but it was not ultimately sustainable even within his lifetime. One-sided love was never enough to change the hearts of those who needed to love him enough to change America.

*We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.*