**EARLY LIFE**

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), American clergyman and Nobel Prize winner, one of the principal leaders of the American civil rights movement and a prominent advocate of nonviolent protest. King’s challenges to segregation and racial discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s helped convince many white Americans to support the cause of civil rights in the United States. After his assassination in 1968, King became a symbol of protest in the struggle for racial justice.

In 1957 King helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization of black churches and ministers that aimed to challenge racial segregation. As SCLC’s president, King became the organization’s dominant personality and its primary intellectual influence. He was responsible for much of the organization’s fund-raising, which he frequently conducted in conjunction with preaching engagements in Northern churches.

SCLC sought to complement the NAACP’s legal efforts to dismantle segregation through the courts, with King and other SCLC leaders encouraging the use of nonviolent direct action to protest discrimination. These activities included marches, demonstrations, and boycotts. The violent responses that direct action provoked from some whites eventually forced the federal government to confront the issues of injustice and racism in the South.

King made strategic alliances with Northern whites that later bolstered his success at influencing public opinion in the United States. Through Bayard Rustin, a black civil rights and peace activist, King forged connections to older radical activists, many of them Jewish, who provided money and advice about strategy. King’s closest adviser at times was Stanley Levison, a Jewish activist and former member of the American Communist Party. King also developed strong ties to leading white Protestant ministers in the North, with whom he shared theological and moral views.

In 1959 King visited India and worked out more clearly his understanding of Gandhi's principle of nonviolent persuasion, called satyagraha, which King had determined to use as his main instrument of social protest. The next year he gave up his pastorate in Montgomery to become co-pastor (with his father) of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

King and other black leaders organized the 1963 March on Washington, a massive protest in Washington, D.C., for jobs and civil rights. On August 28, 1963, King delivered a stirring address to an audience of more than 200,000 civil rights supporters. His “I Have a Dream” speech expressed the hopes of the civil rights movement in oratory as moving as any in American history: “I have a 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.’ … I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.”

The speech and the march built on the Birmingham demonstrations to create the political momentum that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited segregation in public accommodations, as well as discrimination in education and employment. As a result of King’s effectiveness as a leader of the American civil rights movement and his highly visible moral stance he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for peace.

**BLACK POWER**

By the mid-1960s King’s role as the unchallenged leader of the civil rights movement was questioned by many younger blacks. Activists such as Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) argued that King’s nonviolent protest strategies and appeals to moral idealism were useless in the face of sustained violence by whites. Some also rejected the leadership of ministers. In addition, many SNCC organizers resented King, feeling that often they had put in the hard work of planning and organizing protests, only to have the charismatic King arrive later and receive much of the credit. In 1966 the Black Power movement, advocated most forcefully by Carmichael, captured the nation’s attention and suggested that King’s influence among blacks was waning. Black Power advocates looked more to the beliefs of the recently assassinated black Muslim leader, Malcolm X, whose insistence on black self-reliance and the right of blacks to defend themselves against violent attacks had been embraced by many African Americans.

With internal divisions beginning to divide the civil rights movement, King shifted his focus to racial injustice in the North. Realizing that the economic difficulties of blacks in Northern cities had largely been ignored, SCLC broadened its civil rights agenda by focusing on issues related to black poverty. King established a headquarters in a Chicago apartment in 1966, using that as a base to organize protests against housing and employment discrimination in the city. Black Baptist ministers who disagreed with many of SCLC’s tactics, especially the confrontational act of sending black protesters into all-white neighborhoods, publicly opposed King’s efforts. The protests did not lead to significant gains and were often met with violent counterdemonstrations by whites, including neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan, a secret terrorist organization that was opposed to integration.

Throughout 1966 and 1967 King increasingly turned the focus of his civil rights activism throughout the country to economic issues. He began to argue for redistribution of the nation’s economic wealth to overcome entrenched black poverty. In 1967 he began planning a Poor People’s Campaign to pressure national lawmakers to address the issue of economic justice.

**ASSASSINATION**

This emphasis on economic rights took King to Memphis, Tennessee, to support striking black garbage workers in the spring of 1968. He was assassinated in Memphis by a sniper on April 4. News of the assassination resulted in an outpouring of shock and anger throughout the nation and the world, prompting riots in more than 100 United States cities in the days following King’s death. In 1969 James Earl Ray, an escaped white convict, pleaded guilty to the murder of King and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. Ray later recanted his confession. Although over the years many investigators have suspected that Ray did not act alone, no accomplices have ever been identified. In 1999 a jury in a Memphis civil trial brought by King’s family found that a widespread conspiracy not involving Ray led to King’s assassination. However, most investigators continued to believe that Ray was the killer.

After King’s death, historians researching his life and career discovered that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) often tapped King’s phone line and reported on his private life to the president and other government officials. The FBI’s reason for invading his privacy was that King associated with Communists and other “radicals.”

After his death, King came to represent black courage and achievement, high moral leadership, and the ability of Americans to address and overcome racial divisions. Recollections of his criticisms of U.S. foreign policy and poverty faded, and his soaring rhetoric calling for racial justice and an integrated society became almost as familiar to subsequent generations of Americans as the Declaration of Independence.

King’s historical importance was memorialized at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, a research institute in Atlanta where his tomb is located. The King Center is located at the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, which includes King’s birthplace and the Ebenezer Church. Perhaps the most important memorial is the national holiday in King’s honor, designated by the Congress of the United States in 1983 and observed on the third Monday in January, a day that falls on or near King’s birthday of January 15.