

MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF NONVIOLENCE



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Martin Luther King, Jr. addressing the crowd of about 250,000 people at the March on Washington in August 1963.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is remembered for his achievements in civil rights and for the methods he used to get there – namely, nonviolence. More than just a catchphrase, more than just the “absence of violence,” and more than just a tactic, nonviolence was a philosophy that King honed over the course of his adult life. It has had a profound, lasting influence on social justice movements at home and abroad.

In September 1962, King convened a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the main organizational force behind his civil rights activism, in Birmingham, Alabama. King was giving a talk on the need for nonviolent action in the face of violent white racism when a white man jumped on stage and, without a word, punched him in the face repeatedly.

King naturally put up his hands to deflect the blows. But after a few punches, he let his hands fall to his side.

The man, who turned out to be an American Nazi Party member, continued to flail.

The integrated audience at first thought the whole thing was staged, a mock demonstration of King’s non-violent philosophy in action. But as King reeled, and real blood spurted from his face, they began to realize it was no act. Finally, several SCLC members rushed the stage to stop the attack.

But they stopped short when King shouted, “Don’t touch him! Don’t touch him! We have to pray for him.” The SCLC men pulled the Nazi off King, who was beaten so badly he couldn’t continue the speech.

Precisely because the attack wasn’t staged, it left an immense impression on the convention attendees, and anyone else who heard about it in the coming days. King ▶

CHALLENGING IDEAS

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* focuses on ideas that provoke change. The first article traces the development of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolent philosophy in the civil rights movement. The second article reviews political and economic changes in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. The third article analyzes conflicts over free speech on today’s college campuses.

U.S. History: *Martin Luther King and the Philosophy of Nonviolence* by guest writer and *New York Times* deputy op-ed editor Clay Risen

World History: *Vietnam Today* by longtime contributor Carlton Martz

U.S. Government/Current Issues: *Free Speech on Campus: Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces, and Controversial Speech at U.S. Colleges* by guest writer Aimée Koeplin, Ph.D.

hadn't been just preaching nonviolence; confronted, without warning, by racist violence, he lived it, even at great risk to himself.

King did not invent nonviolence as a doctrine for achieving social justice. But he adapted it for an American context, and showed how compelling yet flexible it could be.

Influences on King's Nonviolence

King's earliest exposure to the ideas that would coalesce in his nonviolent philosophy occurred when he was an undergraduate at Morehouse College, in Atlanta. He read Henry David Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience," which outlined the idea of resisting an unjust government through nonviolent resistance, several times. And yet he had a hard time seeing how Thoreau's highly intellectual New England mentality could provide much of a model for the problem of blacks in the American South, where lynching and plain murder were common fates for African Americans who challenged white supremacy.

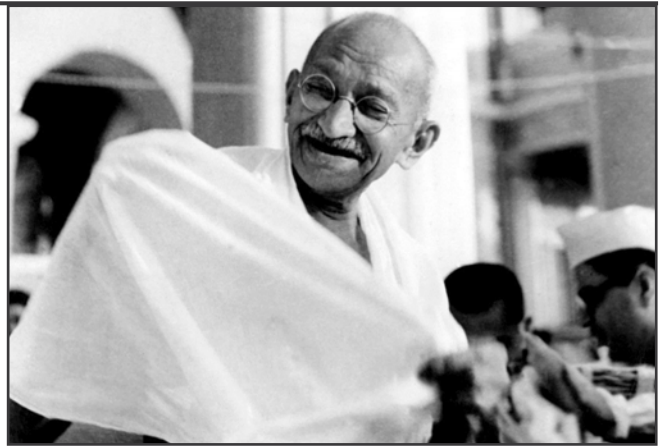
King continued his academic studies, and his personal research into nonviolence, at Pennsylvania's Crozier Theological Seminary, where he began his graduate studies in 1948. There he read deeply the growing literature around Christianity as a social movement, which placed the demands of political and economic justice at the heart of a Christian's religious calling.

But it was not until he began to study the life and works of Mahatma Gandhi that he began to see the possibility of applying nonviolence to the specific problems of African Americans, especially in the South. As he later told it, in Philadelphia he listened to a sermon by the president of Howard University, Mordecai Johnson, who spoke at length about the teachings and actions of Gandhi, and in particular his use of nonviolent mass protest to challenge British control over India. King left the sermon transfixed.

Though Gandhi was Hindu, King saw immediately the similarity with the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the possibility of applying Gandhian nonviolence in an American and Christian context. King had struggled to see how the lessons of the New Testament could be useful in the struggle for racial justice. "Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship," he wrote. "But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was."

Would Nonviolence Work?

For King, the heart of Gandhi's nonviolence was love, in the spiritual, transcendent form of the word. In the face of coercive, racist British rule, Gandhi so loved his oppressors that he refused to take up arms against them. But Gandhi was not without his critics. Some observers said he was lucky that the British were the ones



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Mahatma Gandhi was a major leader of the movement for Indian independence from Great Britain from 1915 until 1947, when Britain granted independence. His nonviolent philosophy was a central influence on Martin Luther King.

doing the oppressing and questioned whether the Nazis – or racist American whites – would have allowed similar flouting of the law, however nonviolent. King was willing to take a chance that, at least in America, the answer was yes.

King also had to deal with another criticism. Some, like the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, said that nonviolence too often became a way of sealing off one's moral superiority, of accepting suffering at the hands of one's oppressors as a form of soul-cleansing, while losing sight of the goal of social justice. "All too many had an unwarranted optimism concerning man and leaned unconsciously toward self-righteousness," King wrote. It was a point he took to heart – and it was one reason, he said, "why I never joined a pacifist organization."

But nonviolence, he argued, was anything but passive. "Nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice," he said. "It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence."

What did King mean by nonviolence? It was not merely the refusal to hit back, an insistence on turning the other cheek. It was, in its own way, aggressive. It meant putting oneself in the face of violence, of actively confronting it and, responding with love to the jabs and punches.

It also meant organizing thousands across the South in specific mass actions that would force face-to-face encounters with white, racist power. Doing so, King taught, would demonstrate both the impotence of white violence and show the country that the black community was not afraid to insist on its rights. For King, responding to violence in kind would show the weakness of the black community, not its strength.

Nonviolence would also strengthen the activist community through shared suffering and struggle.

This experience would expand outward to encompass the black community broadly and, King hoped, all Americans in what he called “the beloved community.”

Of course, King also understood the practical reasons for nonviolence. Given that blacks were a minority, and that Southern whites often had the power of the local and state police behind them, violence was a dead end. Even demonstrating the possibility of a violent response would elicit a massive backlash, potentially destroying the civil rights movement. And it would negate whatever good will the movement was building in the national community, and especially in Washington, where King and other leaders hoped to see federal civil rights legislation.

Testing Nonviolence

King’s first foray into nonviolent protest was with the Montgomery bus boycott, which began in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person while riding home from work. She was arrested, leading to an organized effort by Montgomery blacks to avoid riding the bus system, relying instead on carpools.

The boycott was a classic Gandhian move: a demonstration of economic independence as a way of eliciting concessions from the white establishment.

It was also classic King: intricately organized, well-publicized, and while noble in itself, also leading in a lengthy negotiation with the local white political establishment to desegregate the bus service. And it worked.

It would be several years before King’s next major action, but already others followed his model. The 1961 Freedom Riders, who traveled across the Deep South on desegregated interstate buses, demonstrated King’s highest ideal when they reached Montgomery, Alabama, where a mob of angry whites attacked and beat them savagely. Not a single rider, black or white, hit back.

Meanwhile, King was leading seminars and workshops on nonviolence. While King was trying to build a mass movement, he also was preparing a vanguard of experts in nonviolence who could walk in the front of marches and absorb the brunt of any assault. They also could do their own training in seminars across the South.

Perhaps the most noteworthy trainee to come out of King’s workshops was John Lewis. Lewis was a young seminarian who became a leading activist in Nashville, participated in the Freedom Rides, spoke at the 1963 March on Washington and, most famously, was beaten severely in the so-called Bloody Sunday incident in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.

From Birmingham to D.C.

As the ranks of the Southern civil rights movement grew, King began to set his sights higher. Nonviolent protest

on a large enough scale would overwhelm any possible response. Police could arrest several dozen marchers, but not several thousand. In late spring 1963, King decided to focus on organizing a boycott by black shoppers of the downtown retailers in Birmingham, Alabama, calling for integration of the city’s shops and restaurants.

When talks between King’s SCLC, the city government, and local business leaders faltered, King organized hundreds of school children to march through downtown Birmingham, despite not having a permit. The city police and fire departments, under the command of Theophilus “Bull” Connor, met them with dogs and fire hoses. The water pressure was so high it stripped the clothes off the children’s backs. Those who didn’t turn around were arrested.

King and his associates had trained the students in nonviolence, however, and not a single one struck out. Images from Birmingham appeared in newspapers and on evening news programs around the world. Not only did the protests force the city’s leaders to reach a compromise with King and the SCLC, but the fear of more incidents such as the one in Birmingham spurred President Kennedy (and later President Lyndon Johnson) to push for the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, ending segregation across the South.

King followed up on his success in Birmingham with the August 1963 March on Washington. Despite widespread fears of violence, the march of a quarter of a million people who came to the city to hear King, Lewis, and other civil rights leaders speak was entirely peaceful, a demonstration that Birmingham was no fluke and that nonviolence could indeed become a mass movement.

From Selma to Chicago

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the civil rights movement came a little over a year later, in early 1965, when King and Lewis joined local leaders James Bevel and Amelia Boynton in organizing a march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery. The march would protest the lack of voting rights protections in the South.

King was unable to join the protesters when they first set off on Sunday, March 7, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, headed east out of town. As they reached the far side, they were met by dozens of state troopers. They pressed on and the officers set on them, raining down billy clubs and boot kicks. Lewis had his head split open. Eventually the marchers fled back over the bridge. This incident became known as “Bloody Sunday.”

King arrived to lead a second march three days later but turned back at the last minute, fearing a trap. Finally, with federal protection, the peaceful march set off on March 21 and reached Montgomery three days later. That

Nonviolence, King argued, was anything but passive.

summer, with images of Bloody Sunday still fresh in the nation's mind, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

As a philosophy, nonviolence was unassailable. As a tactic, it worked well in the context of an embattled South, where national attention focused on the shrinking hard core of white racists who refused to give ground to the civil rights movement.

But nonviolence proved less effective as King tried to take his movement national. In 1966, he launched the Chicago campaign, a combination of marches and education intended to highlight the entrenched, but complex, racial disparities in the Windy City. The marchers again encountered white racists who shouted epithets at them, but many Northern whites saw racial disparities as merely the unfortunate outcome of economic disparities. Markets, not men, were to blame, and they refused to see the moral appeal behind King's nonviolent activism.

At the same time, while King dominated the civil rights story in the media during the late 1950s and early 1960s, other leaders and other factions of the movement were often just as active in demanding change but significantly less committed to nonviolence. As the 1960s progressed, these groups, especially the next generation emerging from college, began to gain prominence by taking a more aggressive, even violent stance, embracing armed self-defense complete with automatic weapons.

King disparaged these activists, like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, as immature and unsophisticated. But he could see as well as anyone the diminishing appeal of nonviolence in a country where violence was spreading both at home and in the Vietnam War. Indeed, Brown memorably argued that "violence is necessary. It's as American as cherry pie."

From Memphis to Today

King's last attempt at a nonviolent movement came in Memphis in 1968, where a garbage workers' strike was dragging on. In late March, King arrived in the city to lead a protest march, but he couldn't control it. Hoodlums on the edges of the march began shattering windows, and the police moved in. Dozens were injured, and one boy was killed.

King returned to the city a few days later to try again, hoping that success in Memphis could illustrate the continued power of nonviolence. Instead, on the early evening of April 4, 1968, he was shot and killed by James Earl Ray, a white drifter, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

In the days that followed, riots broke out in more than 100 cities across America; scores were killed and thousands injured; and active-duty military forces occupied Washington, Baltimore, and Chicago. As skeptics noted, it was a very violent end to the life of a proponent of nonviolence.

Despite his violent end, nonviolent protest did not die with King. In fact, protest movements have adopted it time and again in America and around the world – the gay rights movement, the Solidarity trade union in Poland, the Green Revolution in Iran, and recent demonstrations throughout the U.S. (such as Occupy Wall Street and the Women's March on Washington). Not all of them have referenced King specifically. But that's all the more to his credit: Their reliance on the philosophy of nonviolence as the cornerstone of protest politics is the greatest tribute that the world could give to Martin Luther King, Jr.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. What did the violent incident with the American Nazi in 1962 reveal about Martin Luther King's philosophy? What did it reveal about his character?
2. Describe the influences on Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolence. How did he interpret those influences in an American context?
3. How was King's philosophy of nonviolence more than just an "absence of violence"? Use examples from the article.
4. What do you think was the greatest success of the civil rights movement described in the article. How did King's philosophy of nonviolence play a part in its success?

ACTIVITY: Applying Nonviolence

The class is a group of civil rights protesters planning an action in a Southern town in 1962 calling for desegregation of a local lunch counter. Divide students into groups of four. Each group will discuss and then answer the following questions:

- A. What is the best method to protest? (Choices include: sitting at the lunch counter without moving (a sit-in), marching down the center of the town, boycotting the lunch counter, starting a petition to deliver to the owner of the lunch counter, etc.)
- B. What sort of response do they expect from the owners and authorities?
- C. Who are some local allies they can engage with?
- D. What is the best way to publicize the action?
- E. What sort of training is necessary?

After answering the questions, each group's spokesperson will share:

- The method of protest his or her group chose, and
- Reasons for the choice (incorporating answers to the questions as part of the rationale).

Standards Addressed

National United States History Standard 29. Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties. Middle School: (1) Understands individual and institutional influences on the civil rights movement (e.g., the origins of the postwar civil rights movement; the effects of the constitutional steps taken in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government; important milestones in the civil rights movement between 1954 and 1965. **High School:** (1) Understands how diverse groups united during the civil rights movement (e.g., the escalation from civil disobedience to more radical protest).

California History-Social Science Standard 11.10. Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights. (4) Examine the roles of civil rights advocates (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.) . . . (5) Discuss the diffusion of the civil rights movement of African Americans from the churches of the rural South and the urban North, including the resistance to racial desegregation in Little Rock and Birmingham, and how the advances influenced the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of the quests of American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans for civil rights and equal opportunities. (6) Analyze the passage and effects of civil rights and voting rights legislation (e.g., 1964 Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act of 1965) and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, with an emphasis on equality of access to education and to the political process.

Common Core State Standards: SL.1, SL.3, RH.1, RH.2, RH.3, RH.4, RH.10, WHST.1, WHST.2, WHST.9, WHST.10.

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Sources

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