



Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement

Martin Luther King's name is commemorated in thousands of street names and public buildings across the USA. His birthday is a national holiday. His "I have a dream" speech is familiar to millions. He is known around the world as one of the most significant leaders of the civil rights movement.

In the 1950s and 1960s King and many others fought to end racial segregation (separate public facilities for blacks and whites) in the southern United States and discrimination against African Americans. With King's leadership, the civil rights movement gained many victories - publicity for their activities, increased public sympathy for their goals, and changes to the law. Following Mahatma Gandhi's ideals, King organised non-violent protests. He maintained that black people should confront any violence used against them with passive resistance (not more violence). He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.



King faced opposition. Many Americans were against giving more rights and opportunities to black people. Some were prepared to fight for those beliefs and even to kill civil rights activists. On the other side, some civil rights activists thought King did not go far enough and doubted if a non-violent campaign would work. Government authorities objected to King's 'direct action'. In the South, civil rights protests resulted in the arrest of many protesters, including King. From 1965 King turned his attention to the underlying causes of poverty, unemployment and lack of education that stopped black people from sharing true equality with white Americans. He also spoke out against US involvement in the Vietnam War. He was criticised by the government for doing so.

Dr King was assassinated on 4 April 1968 and the world mourned for him. Why was this man the target of so much hostility and also so much admiration? What was the role of Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement? This gallery begins with desegregation at Little Rock Central High School, an illustration of the issues civil rights campaigners faced in the 1950s. We then examine two key events in the struggle for civil rights, and conclude with King's untimely death.

Find out more from the original sources in these case studies:



What happened at Little Rock Central High School?



What did the civil rights campaign in Birmingham achieve?



What was the March on Washington?



How did people view Martin Luther King after his death?