

# 1955–68: Martin Luther King and peaceful protest

## Martin Luther King's background and ideology

Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, and enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing. He graduated from Morehouse College with a degree in sociology in 1948, and then attended Crozier Theological Seminary, and finally the University of Boston, where in 1955 he received his PhD in theology. Prior to his involvement in the civil rights movement, he was, like his father, a Baptist minister.

King's education and religious beliefs informed his approach to the civil rights struggle and his aspirations for his fellow black citizens. Christianity inspired King's aims and his methods. He believed that the campaign for civil rights was God's will, as God had created all humanity in his own image. Moreover, Jesus's message of compassion and non-retaliation characterised King's non-violent approach to protest and his political opponents. Additionally, King believed that civil rights could, and should, be realised by working within the constitution. Indeed, his goal was to ensure that the rhetoric of the **Bill of Rights** and the Declaration of Independence applied equally to all citizens. Consequently, King was willing to work closely with the federal government as well as Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

King's vision was a society in which black citizens were able to take a full part in and enjoy all the benefits of US culture. In this sense King wanted to integrate black people fully into US society. King's dream stands in stark contrast to Malcolm X's agenda, which claimed that US society was so corrupt that integration would be harmful to African Americans.

## Peaceful protest

Martin Luther King adopted the method of peaceful protest for three main reasons. First, he believed peaceful protest was a fundamentally Christian approach to political activity. Secondly, he hoped that by organising events such as boycotts and sit-ins, he would attract media attention, and thereby expose racist policies and laws to the public. Finally, he hoped that his peaceful campaigns would gain public sympathy, because the dignity of the protesters would stand in stark contrast to the racism of those who opposed them.

Additionally, peaceful protest was adopted to enforce the rulings on desegregation that had come about as a result of the work of the NAACP. In this way, the NAACP's

achievement from 1945 to 1960 is paradoxical. The main thrust of its campaign was to legally overturn the Jim Crow laws. While it succeeded in doing this, this achievement on its own did not end *de facto* segregation in America's south. Rather, the NAACP was more successful in inspiring young activists who chose quite a different strategy, allying themselves with the non-violent, civil disobedience campaigns of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

## The focus of the campaigns

### Transport

Jim Crow laws segregated public transport in the southern states. In 1955–56 there were two parallel attempts to desegregate public transport. First, there was a public campaign of peaceful protest, which began when Rosa Parks (a long-standing member of the NAACP) was legally obliged to move when a white passenger wanted a seat on a bus. Her refusal to move led to her arrest and prosecution, and sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. The boycott was an attempt by black Americans to force the desegregation of public transport, and lasted for over a year. Secondly, the NAACP mounted a legal challenge (*Browder v Gayle*) to the Montgomery and Alabama transport segregation laws.

The boycott was significant for a number of reasons. First, it provided a platform for the emerging leader of the US civil rights movement, Dr Martin Luther King. Secondly, it led to the creation of another important civil rights organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in 1957. Thirdly, the scale of the protest was effective in gaining widespread media attention. Nonetheless, it was the legal challenge, and not the boycott, that ended segregation on the buses in 1956.

The NAACP also sought the nationwide desegregation of buses and bus terminals. The Supreme Court case *Morgan v Virginia* (1946) had ruled that segregation on interstate travel was unconstitutional. A second case, *Boynton v Virginia* (1960), established that segregation in public transport terminal facilities was also illegal.

CORE and the newly formed Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee put this ruling to the test almost immediately, organising the Freedom Rides of 1961. CORE's mixed-race team attempted to travel from Washington DC to New Orleans on interstate buses. In both Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, the SNCC team were victims of racist attacks. Notably, the local police were indifferent to these assaults. The Freedom Rides were significant as they provided a context for cooperation between the chief civil rights organisations, CORE, the SNCC and the SCLC. Additionally, they focused media attention on the continuing activity of racist groups such as the KKK.

Finally, President Kennedy (1961–63) was forced to address the issues. Federal injunctions were brought out against the KKK, and Attorney-General Robert Kennedy ordered the desegregation of all inter-state travel. On the other hand, federal government's sympathy for the civil rights movement was qualified. Indeed, federal

government continued to support the imprisonment of civil rights protesters as long as white attackers were dealt with in the same way.

### **Education**

In 1957, nine African-American students set out to test the legal ruling on educational integration that had been brought about by the Brown case. In order to do this, they enrolled at Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas. A crisis erupted when Governor Orville Faubus ordered the **National Guard** to surround the school and keep the 'Little Rock Nine' out. President Eisenhower (1953–61) responded by sending in federal troops to enforce desegregation. Nonetheless, Governor Faubus was not prepared to admit defeat, and consequently closed the school rather than accept integration.

Challenges to segregation in education were extended to universities in the early 1960s. In 1961, violent protests greeted James Meredith's attempts to enrol at the University of Mississippi. Robert Kennedy, US Attorney-General, supported Meredith's enrolment. At the same time, the state governor, Ross Barnett, publicly protested against the move. Following Meredith's admission to the university, the campus was desegregated. However, in spite of the legal ruling of Brown and the peaceful protests at Little Rock and the University of Mississippi, by 1968 only 42% of US black students were attending desegregated schools.

### **Social and economic change**

Segregation was a fact of life that extended beyond education and transport. In the south, restaurants, libraries, parks and other local amenities were routinely segregated. By 1960 this segregation was no longer lawful, but it continued due to the obstinacy of southern whites. Moreover, discrimination was widely practised in employment. The early 1960s saw a series of peaceful campaigns aimed largely at challenging this social and economic segregation.

In 1960, the SNCC organised sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, to protest against the unlawful segregation of a local Woolworth's canteen. Protesters were refused service but no attempt was made to evict them. This sit-in sparked a series of similar sit-ins, swim-ins, read-ins and economic boycotts which in 2 months spread to 54 cities in nine states, with 50,000 people actively involved. By the end of 1961, over 800 towns and cities had desegregated public areas.

A further step was taken in 1961 when President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925. This established the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and legally ended discrimination in all appointments by the federal government and its contractors and subcontractors. The order also gave the government the power to prosecute offenders and issue a 'certificate of merit' to any organisation that was shown to be an equal opportunities employer.

Following Greensboro, non-violent methods were applied to Albany, Georgia (1961–62), and Birmingham, Alabama (1963), in an attempt to overturn racial discrimination. In both cases, non-violent protests were designed to provoke racist violence, and thereby focus media attention on the ongoing struggle for equality.

In Birmingham, this strategy proved highly successful. Local police chief Eugene 'Bull' Connor used water cannon, dogs and heavy-handed policing against unarmed protesters. To avoid the economic disruption of more boycotts, Birmingham stores began to desegregate and businesses pledged to end discriminatory employment practices. In addition, media portrayal of the protests and Connor's response attracted increased support from those outside the south.

By contrast, the Albany campaign, a year earlier, had not been a success. Police chief Laurie Pritchett ensured that the police treated the protesters with respect. He also agreed to discussions about the end of segregation in the city. This effectively defused the situation without leading to any concrete gains for Albany's black citizens.

The March on Washington in August 1963 was staged to draw attention to issues of segregation and black economic conditions. A quarter of a million protesters descended on Washington DC to hear Martin Luther King's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. The march was significant as it marked a moment of unity between the different strands of the civil rights movement and the Kennedy administration. Moreover, the March on Washington was one of the factors that led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–69). Essentially, the Act banned segregation and gave the government powers to enforce this ban. In addition, it created a Fair Employment Practices Commission to address discrimination in the workplace. Economic discrimination was also explicitly outlawed in any projects supported by the federal government.

The Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) did not mark the end of King's vision, but they did lead to a change in direction for the movement. As the 1965 government-commissioned Moynihan Report revealed, black Americans throughout the USA still faced considerable social and economic hardships. For this reason, King turned his attention to issues of poverty, and moved his focus to the northern states where problems of **ghettoisation** were especially severe. In addition, King and the SCLC hoped to encourage the use of peaceful protest outside the southern states.

Poor housing conditions, increased racial disturbances and a lack of racial integration led King to choose the northern city of Chicago, Illinois, as the focus for his 1966 campaign. King's strategy for dealing with ghettoisation in the north was essentially the same as his strategy for dealing with formal segregation in the south. However, as in Albany, Mayor Richard Daley refused to play into his hands, instead making ambiguous promises about improving housing conditions, and implicitly rejecting King's involvement. Additionally, King was unfamiliar with northern conditions and did not enjoy the same respect from, and rapport with, northern African Americans.

In spite of the setback in Chicago, King's final campaign was more ambitious still. The Poor People's Campaign was intended, in King's words, to unite poor people of all races in an attempt to 'confront the power structure'. King believed that a broader coalition was necessary to confront poverty because economic advancement for black

Americans could take place only at the expense of the rich, and therefore the most powerful, people in the USA. In this sense, the battle against poverty would be much more difficult than the battle against segregation, and therefore needed a greater degree of popular support.

### **Political rights**

The year 1965 saw King and the SCLC challenge the political exclusion of black Americans in Selma, Alabama, where only 335 of over 15,000 African Americans were registered to vote. This was an important test of the influence of the Civil Rights Act in the south. The Selma authorities, headed by Sheriff Jim Clark, obstructed the registration of black voters with a series of qualifying questions such as 'How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?' Additionally, the Selma police used electric cattle prods to try and disperse black citizens who were queuing to vote. This ill treatment, coupled with a series of marches from Selma to Montgomery, drew media attention to the continuing disenfranchisement of southern African Americans. President Johnson responded with the Voting Rights Act (1965).

### **Evaluating the success of peaceful protest**

Direct action helped to change the law and was used to test the implementation of these laws. During the Montgomery bus boycott (1956), the Greensboro sit-ins (1960) and the Birmingham campaign (1963), direct action proved particularly successful at winning public support for racial integration. Peaceful protest gave activists the moral high ground. This was especially evident in Birmingham, where media coverage contrasted the brutality of the white police with the dignity of the black protesters. The change in public opinion helped convince law-makers, locally and federally, that reform was necessary. Peaceful protest, then, achieved the destruction of Jim Crow laws in a number of major cities in the south.

Aside from changing the law, peaceful protest sought to test it. During the Freedom Rides (1961), for example, non-violent direct action sought to realise the legal gains of the NAACP campaigns, thus seeking to bring *de facto* change out of *de jure* victory. Similarly, Little Rock (1957) tested the Brown ruling of 2 years before. In this way, direct action was used to accelerate the disintegration of segregation by forcibly bringing practice into line with Supreme Court rulings.

The cumulative effect of peaceful protest in the early 1960s helped to create the public support and political will to enact the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). These Acts had national significance and underlined the effectiveness of non-violent campaigning.

On the other hand, peaceful protest was not always successful. It increasingly came to rely on provoking a violent response from over-zealous white authorities. In cases where the local authorities were shrewd and refused to be provoked, little change was evident. Albany (1961–62), for example, failed to effect any meaningful change for precisely this reason.

Secondly, non-violent direct action essentially failed to bring about social and economic change. King's Chicago campaign (1966) achieved nothing more than vague promises from Chicago's mayor, Richard Daley. King acknowledged that effecting social and economic change was necessarily harder than challenging segregation, as the former was both costly and not simply a matter of changing the law.

Finally, it is also notable that even after the Selma campaign and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the proportion of black citizens registered to vote never equalled the proportion of registered white voters. By the end of 1966, four out of the 13 southern states still had fewer than 50% of African Americans registered to vote.

## Opposition to equal rights

Opposition to the civil rights movement came from a variety of powerful sources, such as US presidents, Congress, local state authorities, and the police and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Additionally, white citizens, taking their lead from these authorities, tried to obstruct the progress of racial integration.

### Presidential opposition

Neither of the US presidents in the period 1955–63 gave civil rights their full support. Eisenhower, for example, was particularly reluctant to support the campaign for racial equality. He was unwilling to show clear leadership on issues relating to civil rights, as he was aware that it could lose him the support of white voters. Moreover, he was born and raised in the segregated south and shared the assumptions of many of the white racists. He regarded the activities of groups such as the SCLC as unduly aggressive and therefore sympathised with white southerners who felt threatened by civil rights campaigns.

Eisenhower's presidency spanned a number of major events in the civil rights campaign, such as the Brown case, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Little Rock campaign, the Greensboro sit-ins and the Freedom Rides. However, he had little sympathy with these campaigns and only met with King and other black leaders once. He refused to give federal support to the Montgomery bus boycott and, until the events of Little Rock, declined to use federal power to enforce the Brown decision.

Moreover, Eisenhower and Kennedy were both dependent on the support of southern senators who opposed desegregation. In order to appease these senators, both presidents were cautious, although Kennedy was prepared to make radical moves when he felt he had sufficient public support.

### Opposition in Congress

Congressional opposition to civil rights measures began in earnest in 1956, when 101 southern congressmen signed the 'Southern Manifesto'. The manifesto strongly

criticised the Supreme Court's decisions in the Brown case, arguing that they represented a 'clear abuse of judicial power'.

Eisenhower's attempt to pass a Civil Rights Act in 1960 was also severely hampered by congressmen from both parties. Southern senators opposed the bill as it would lead to major changes in their segregated constituencies. One congressional strategy to defeat the bill was to table a series of amendments that would weaken it. Even the weakened Act was more than some southern senators were prepared to endorse. As a result, South Carolina's Senator J. Strom Thurmond spoke for 24 hours and 18 minutes against the bill. This technique of talking until the bill runs out of congressional time, known as a filibuster, failed. Nonetheless, the bill had been so weakened that it achieved little for African Americans.

Kennedy and Johnson had more support from Congress for their civil rights initiatives. In spite of this, however, they faced strong opposition from southern senators. For example, all 10 southern Republican members of the House of Representatives and 87 of 94 southern Democrat members voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

## **Opposition from state authorities and the local police**

The US constitution distinguishes between 'state' and 'federal' government. Federal government, headed by the president and based in Washington DC, is responsible for matters that affect the whole of the USA. However, state governments have considerable independence concerning local laws. Indeed, it was the independence of local governments in the southern states that allowed Jim Crow laws to emerge in the nineteenth century.

Civil rights campaigners met opposition from state governors and local authorities in southern and northern states. This opposition took one of two forms. First, in campaigns such as Little Rock and Birmingham, state governors and other local officials used their power to block desegregation in a highly public and confrontational manner. In Birmingham, for example, police chief 'Bull' Connor used water cannon, plastic bullets and other forms of violent physical intimidation in an attempt to break up peaceful protest. However, these tactics were counterproductive, as they guaranteed media interest and, in so doing, won public sympathy for the protesters.

A second strategy, which was more effective at countering the protests, was adopted in Albany and Chicago. In these cases, state governors and local authorities treated protesters with apparent respect, and diffused difficult situations by making vague promises of change. This strategy gave the media less of an incentive to cover the protests and did not provoke public interest.

## **Opposition from the Federal Bureau of Investigation**

The federal police, or FBI, were also opponents of the civil rights movement. The FBI was concerned about the activities of Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell, who worked closely with Martin Luther King and the SCLC. Levison and O'Dell had both been

members of the Communist Party and J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, believed that the SCLC was a front for Communist Party activity. In the climate of the Cold War, Hoover believed that US communists, working with the Soviet government, were planning a communist takeover of the US government.

Robert Kennedy, the attorney-general from 1960 to 1963, gave the FBI the authority to investigate the SCLC. Consequently, the FBI bugged telephone calls and burgled the offices of lawyers who worked for Levison and O'Dell. Through these activities, the FBI was able to establish that O'Dell had been a communist, and caused King and the SCLC significant damage by leaking this information to the *New York Times*.

### White opposition


The civil rights campaigners faced racism from white Americans throughout their campaigns. An example of this is the White Citizens' Councils formed in the deep south in response to the Brown case. Further evidence of racism can be found in the Little Rock incident, where violent confrontations between hysterical white mobs and black students had to be controlled by the National Guard. Worse still was the treatment of NAACP official Medgar Evers, who was assassinated by a white extremist at his home in Mississippi during the Birmingham campaign.

Violent white racism was not limited to the southern states. King's Chicago campaign also met white resistance, with protesters being attacked with broken bottles and bricks. Indeed, King observed that the bitterness of white reaction in Chicago was even more extreme than it had been in the south.

## Martin Luther King: saint or sinner?

King was and is a controversial figure. Questions about his effectiveness as a leader, his relationship with the white authorities, his ability to understand the difficulties faced by working-class African Americans and his moral character dog his legacy.

King rose to national prominence during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56. However, the bus boycott was initiated by local NAACP activists. Some in the NAACP claimed that King effectively hijacked the campaign to further his own reputation. King faced similar criticisms from the leaders of the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960. In addition, King's poor organisational skills jeopardised the effectiveness of the SCLC's campaigns. It has been argued that while King was highly effective at grabbing headlines and acting as a figurehead for the movement, he was poorly equipped to coordinate sustained local campaigns. King's inspirational idealism was not allied with practical administrative skills. For example, the 1957 Crusade for Citizenship (an attempt to persuade federal government to guarantee voting rights for African Americans) suffered as it was not supported by a sufficient number of salaried staff. In addition, the Chicago campaign was accused of having no clear objectives and raising expectations that could not be met.



King was not universally respected by African-American leaders. His refusal to sanction violent methods, the fact that he advocated 'turning the other cheek' and his sometimes close relationship with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson led some African Americans to liken King to the fictional character **Uncle Tom**. By this they meant that King adopted a slavish attitude to the white authorities, and that this was detrimental to the struggle of black Americans.

The accusation that King was an 'Uncle Tom' was heightened by his perceived failure to understand the difficulties faced by working-class African Americans. King's own background was relatively privileged. He had never experienced many of the social and economic difficulties against which he campaigned. This was particularly pronounced during his northern campaigns. Furthermore, King's Christian philosophy was not shared by the majority of African Americans in the north. This further underlined the differences between King and the people he sought to represent.

Finally, King was criticised for failing to live up to his Christian standards in his personal life. King had a series of affairs which were seen by some as undermining his moral position.

However, while it is clear that King was not perfect, he was undoubtedly an extraordinary individual. King possessed an ability to inspire black and white audiences through stirring oratory. He may not have personally experienced some of the oppression he fought, but he had the ability to articulate the feelings of many African Americans. King's famous 'I have a dream' speech (1963) is a clear example of King's outstanding ability as a speaker.

King's ability to inspire went beyond his powerful speeches. King's courage in the face of police brutality, racist violence and jail encouraged many activists to continue fighting. For example, King stood firm when confronted by 30–40 threatening letters a day and the fire-bombing of his own home during the Montgomery bus boycott.

King's ability to manipulate the media was perhaps his greatest strength. King did not invent peaceful protest, but he did realise that it was significantly more powerful in the age of mass media. The images of peaceful resistance to racist violence shocked the USA and swung public opinion behind King's campaigns. This technique was employed to great effect in Birmingham in 1963. King's achievement was recognised in 1964 when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

King's leadership was not without its critics. Nevertheless, King's oratory, courage and ability to inspire made him the ideal figurehead for the civil rights movement.