

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

PROFILES IN **POWER**

ROUTLEDGE



John A. Kirk

Martin Luther King Jr



PROFILES IN POWER

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John A. Kirk

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Abbreviations



ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ACHR	Alabama Council on Human Relations
ACMHR	Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
AFSCME	American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
BSCP	Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CCCCO	Coordinating Council of Community Organizations
CFM	Chicago Freedom Movement
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
COME	Community on the Move for Equality
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CREB	Chicago Real Estate Board
CRS	Community Relations Service
CUCRL	Council for United Civil Rights Leadership
DCPA	Danville Christian Progressive Association
EOA	Economic Opportunity Act
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEPC	Fair Employment Practices Committee
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
FRCC	Freedom Rides Coordinating Committee
ICC	Interstate Commerce Commission
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
LDF	NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
MCL	Montgomery City Lines
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCLC	Nashville Christian Leadership Council
NOI	Nation of Islam
NUL	National Urban League
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
PPC	Poor People's Campaign

ABBREVIATIONS

SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SCOPE	Summer Community Organization and Political Education
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SRC	Southern Regional Council
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
VEP	Voter Education Project
WPC	Women's Political Council

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Introduction: King in Context



Early histories of the civil rights movement that appeared prior to the 1980s were purely biographies of Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Collectively, these works helped to create the familiar 'Montgomery to Memphis' narrative framework for understanding the history of the civil rights movement in the United States. This narrative begins with King's rise to leadership during the 1955–6 Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama, and ends with his 1968 assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. Since the 1980s, a number of studies examining the civil rights movement at local and state levels have questioned the usefulness and accuracy of the King-centric Montgomery to Memphis narrative as the sole way of understanding the movement. These studies have made it clear that civil rights struggles already existed in many of the communities where King and the organization of which he was president, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), ran civil rights campaigns in the 1960s. Moreover, those struggles continued long after King and the SCLC had left those communities. Civil rights activism also thrived in many places that King and the SCLC never even visited.

The historiography of Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement, as that term itself implies, has consequently developed in two distinct strands. On the one hand, the literature comprises biographies of King in the 'Montgomery to Memphis' mould, while on the other hand it also comprises histories of the civil rights movement that have increasingly tended to frame that movement within the context of a much larger, ongoing struggle for black freedom and equality unfolding in the twentieth century at local, state, national, and even international levels. Partisan movement activists have played their own role in reinforcing the idea that there is a division between the 'man and the movement'. Notably, there is the overused quote from Ella Baker (a former SCLC staff member who, disillusioned with the organisation and King, went on to become instrumental in the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)) that 'The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement.'¹ Contrast this with the claim by the Revd C.T. Vivian (a stalwart SCLC staff member, and like King a black Baptist minister) that 'Man, Dr King was the movement.'²

My contention in this book is that King did not create or control the civil rights movement and that neither did the civil rights movement create or control him. Rather, I maintain that movement leaders and the movements that they lead continually shape each other, and it is precisely that dialectical process that needs to be explored further. King is best understood as an integral and organic part of the civil rights movement and not, as has too often been the case, above or apart from it. The *Profiles in Power* series, which does not aim to produce biographies, but instead locates individual historical agents within the broader context of their times, provides the perfect vehicle for doing this.

As the title of the series suggests, the central focus is on the theme of power. The various competing theories on and debates about power could fill this book and several others besides. Acknowledging from the outset that there are a number of different approaches that I could take, I prefer here to keep things relatively straightforward and to use King's own definition of power as 'the ability to achieve purpose . . . the strength required to bring about social, political and economic changes' as my benchmark.³ King's definition of power informs the central questions that this book addresses: To what extent was King able to 'bring about social, political and economic changes'? How and why did King seek to bring about those changes? What strengths and abilities did King in particular contribute in the context of the wider civil rights movement?

In utilising the 'Montgomery to Memphis' narrative I do not seek to simply repeat earlier versions of it, but to rethink and to recast it within the light of recent scholarship. The first way in which this study differs from other, particularly shorter, studies of King is that, unconstrained by the demands of a biography, it seeks to locate King firmly within the context of other leaders and organisations, voices and opinions, and tactics and ideologies, that made up the movement as a whole. Reassessing the conventions of the Montgomery to Memphis narrative also means moving beyond the laudatory and even reverential tone that popular histories of the movement take. Instead, I seek to point out not only what specific contributions King made to the civil rights movement, but equally what he failed to do. Likewise, I seek to highlight King's weaknesses as well as his strengths, his defeats as well as his victories, and the roles played by others in making King's reputation, as well as the role played by King himself. This approach arises from the conviction that King is far too important a historical figure to be drawn over-simplistically as a mythic heroic, even saintly figure, as has too often been the case. King's life and public leadership demand careful and critical analysis and there is much to be learned (and unlearned) in that process. As historian Charles

Payne has noted of certain populist elements of the Montgomery to Memphis narrative, they make 'a good story but useless history'.⁴

The second way in which this study is different from previous studies of King is in its more conceptual approach to the development of his leadership. The typical approach to King has been a methodical chapter-by-chapter account of his life and career that steadfastly runs campaign by campaign, year by year, and even sometimes, seemingly, day by day. This tendency is driven by the fact that King's career unfolded in a relatively short space of time – just over twelve years elapsed between Montgomery and Memphis – but that it was packed with incident. Even the Montgomery to Memphis time frame is deceptive. Most of the achievements and victories identified with King came within the space of just two years between 1963 and 1965: the Birmingham campaign in which Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor used police dogs and water from fire hoses to break up demonstrations; the March on Washington and the 'I Have a Dream' speech; the 1964 Civil Rights Act and King's 1964 Nobel Peace Prize; and the Selma campaign that led to the introduction of a voting rights bill to Congress, which eventually became the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In this book, I seek to identify what I see as the different phases and major periods of development within King's career as a civil rights leader by using a different sort of structure that places individual events and episodes within a much broader conceptual framework.

There were, I argue, four distinct stages to King's development as a civil rights leader. The first stage (covered in Chapter 1) was King's rise to leadership during the 1955–6 Montgomery bus boycott. During the bus boycott, King used his status as a black southern Baptist minister to help mobilise the black community, and he harnessed the black church both as a spiritual base for legitimising and shaping the nature of the protest movement and as a physical base for mass meetings and information dissemination. King would later claim that 'Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method' for the bus boycott.⁵ But it was not until a couple of months into the bus boycott that King began seriously to consider, prompted by representatives from northern-based pacifist groups, how the Christian spirit in which the boycott began might be more formally channelled through nonviolent, direct-action techniques.

The second stage of King's career, stretching from the 1955–6 Montgomery bus boycott to the 1963 Birmingham campaign (covered in Chapters 2 and 3) saw King struggling to translate the mass black community activism of the Montgomery bus boycott, and the idea of

nonviolence, into a coherent strategy for social and political change. To that end, King, along with other movement activists, helped to found the SCLC. However, early efforts to expand mass black activism through bus boycotts and through voter registration campaigns met with little success. Events elsewhere, unfolding largely independently of King and the SCLC, fared much better. The 1960 student sit-in movement led to the formation of a new student-oriented organisation, SNCC, and forced concessions for the desegregation of public and private facilities in a number of communities. The 1961 Freedom Rides were instigated by the Chicago-based civil rights organisation the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and forced federal intervention to uphold civil rights in interstate transportation facilities. The sit-ins and the Freedom Rides led the way in demonstrating how nonviolent direct action might effectively be applied to bring about social change.

King tried to capitalise on these developments in 1961–3 in two community-based campaigns in Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama. Although King and the SCLC's campaign in Albany at the end of 1961 and the beginning of 1962 encountered a number of difficulties, it proved a vital learning experience in running a far more successful campaign in Birmingham in 1963. In Birmingham, King and the SCLC developed a strategy of short-term black community mobilisation in nonviolent, direct-action demonstrations that successfully forced concessions from whites for civil rights at a local level, and engaged support and action from federal government for civil rights at a national level. Historian David J. Garrow notes that the Birmingham strategy marked a significant break from King's earlier attempts to use 'nonviolent persuasion', relying on the moral aspects of nonviolence to persuade whites to instigate racial change, to a use of 'nonviolent coercion' to force change through nonviolent, direct-action demonstrations.⁶

The third stage of King's career, and his most successful, unfolded between the 1963 Birmingham campaign and the 1965–6 Chicago, Illinois, campaign (covered in Chapters 4, 5 and 6). During this time, King and the SCLC attempted to repeat the strategy of the 1963 Birmingham campaign in other communities. The main campaigns in the Birmingham mould were held in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964, in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, and in Chicago, Illinois, in 1966. Of these, King and the SCLC's Selma campaign was by far the most successful, engaging the highest level of public attention, of northern white support, and of federal intervention and action. Following on from the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which had legislated an end to segregation in public facilities and accommodations, President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced and oversaw the passage

of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which removed obstacles to black voting rights and provided active federal assistance to black voters. The campaigns in St. Augustine and Chicago produced far more ambiguous results for a variety of reasons, indicating that the Birmingham strategy did not guarantee successful outcomes in all places, on all issues, and at all times.

The fourth stage of King's career is the most complex and the least familiar. It began with the 1965–6 Chicago campaign and ended with King's assassination in Memphis in 1968 (covered in Chapters 5 and 6). During this period, King was forced to re-evaluate the Birmingham strategy in the face of a rapidly changing struggle for black freedom and equality. With the goal of legislation to compel desegregation and to enforce the black franchise achieved, King and the civil rights movement looked to consolidate these victories while expanding their remit to other areas. A number of urban riots in black ghettos of the west and north of the United States between 1965 and 1968 highlighted the problems faced by blacks outside the South, where King and the civil rights movement had been predominantly based. The popularisation of the 'Black Power' slogan emerged from the experiences of SNCC workers in the rural counties of Alabama and Mississippi, areas where King and the SCLC's influence was also slight, since the Birmingham strategy was focused more on towns and cities.

Amid these changes, the Vietnam War increasingly overtook civil rights as the most important domestic issue in the United States, and the anti-war movement began to sap civil rights movement activists and volunteers. The urban riots, the rise of black power, and the anti-war demonstrations all played their part in prompting a white conservative political backlash to the perceived excesses of liberalism, which conservatives believed was the cause of these developments. King, the SCLC, and the civil rights movement as a whole, were challenged to move beyond their initial goals of desegregation and black enfranchisement, to tackle the fundamental economic problems that underpinned black powerlessness and to engage with unfolding larger social and political developments.

King responded in a number of ways. He tried to tackle the problems faced by urban blacks in Chicago by implementing the Birmingham strategy of nonviolent, direct-action demonstrations there. He sought to temper black power's anti-white rhetoric and advocacy of black nationalism, black separatism and black armed self-defence, by insisting that integration and nonviolence were still relevant and important to the struggle for civil rights. He joined the anti-war movement to oppose the actions of the United States in Vietnam and attempted to fuse the energies

of the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement in a coalition against incipient white political conservatism. King further looked to broaden the base of the civil rights movement by forming a coalition of blacks, ethnic minority groups, and poor whites, in a Poor People's Campaign (PPC) to take the Birmingham strategy to a new level of mass civil disobedience by staging demonstrations for economic justice in Washington, DC. Before he could lead the PPC, however, King was assassinated while supporting a strike by sanitation workers in Memphis in April 1968.

Thus, at the time of his death, King was beginning the next stage of his career, moving from a regional civil rights base to a vision of national, and indeed even international, human rights. He was also engaged in developing a fundamentally new strategy of nonviolence and civil disobedience in the pursuit of social, political and economic power – an agenda cut tragically short by his assassination and one that he would never get the chance to implement.



Becoming a Leader, 1929–56

The Montgomery bus boycott thrust King into a leadership position that he did not expect and for which he was largely unprepared. His early life was dedicated to study in pursuit of a career as a Baptist church minister. Growing up in a family with a ministerial tradition, King attended a northern, predominantly white theological seminary for his divinity degree, before gaining a PhD in theology at the also predominantly white Boston University. He had been in his first job at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, for only fifteen months before the bus boycott began. As the protest developed, King found himself called upon by others rather than volunteering himself to perform a leadership role. Once King had agreed to assume that responsibility, however, it changed the entire trajectory of his life. As the bus boycott grew beyond its initially projected, short-term life, King was drawn into an ever more demanding position of responsibility. By the end of the bus boycott, at the age of 27, King would be one of the most well-known black leaders in the United States and a national symbol of an emergent civil rights movement.

Civil Rights in the Mid 1950s

King's civil rights leadership emerged at a critical point in the continuing struggle for black freedom and equality. The onset of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union after the Second World War had a profound and often contradictory impact on civil rights activism. On the one hand, the Cold War led to a more politically conservative and socially repressive climate in the United States, which found its apotheosis in the anti-communist witch-hunts of Republican senator Joseph T. McCarthy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Any perceived left-of-centre cause risked the accusation of harbouring communist sympathies, and opponents of civil rights used McCarthyite sentiments

and anti-communist rhetoric to curtail the activities of many existing civil rights leaders and organisations. On the other hand, the Cold War made the United States acutely aware of the contradiction between existing racial discrimination and claims to represent global democracy for all. The Soviet Union responded to criticism about its denial of human rights in Eastern Europe by pointing to the United States's own track record in race relations. Anti-colonial struggles by non-whites in Africa, Asia and the Far East created newly emerging nations where the stance of the two superpowers on the question of race would be influential in winning support.

One of the civil rights organisations that did continue to flourish in Cold War America, largely because of its staunch anti-communist stance, was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the oldest civil rights organisation in the United States. Founded by black activists and northern white liberals in 1909, with its headquarters in New York, the NAACP's early campaigns centred on lobbying Congress to pass anti-lynching legislation and defending black civil rights in the courts. It was not until the 1940s, however, that the NAACP became a truly effective and potent force as a mass-membership organisation. As blacks strived during the Second World War to win their share of wartime prosperity in the rapidly expanding economy, and fought in segregated US armed services for what the black press termed the 'Double V' – victory against a racist foe abroad as well as racism at home – NAACP membership swelled tenfold from 50,000 in 1940 to 500,000 in 1946. The bulk of new members flocked to southern local NAACP branches, which they used as a base to pursue better employment opportunities, voter registration campaigns and fairer treatment from whites.

While the NAACP's mass southern membership base grew, the national organisation underwent significant changes. Under pressure from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which denied the NAACP tax-exempt status because of its lobbying activities, in 1939 the NAACP created the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., known later as the LDF or 'Inc. Fund'. The LDF dealt with legal and educational matters only, thus ensuring its tax-exempt status. The LDF provided black attorney Thurgood Marshall, who became director-counsel of the LDF and special counsel to the NAACP, with a platform to pursue civil rights in the courts. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Marshall won a number of favourable rulings to equalise the salaries of black and white teachers. Throughout the late 1930s, and the 1940s and 1950s, Marshall successfully argued a number of landmark cases before the US Supreme Court. *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) outlawed the use of all-white Democratic Party

primaries that blocked black access to politics in a number of southern states. *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) made segregated seating on interstate bus routes illegal. In a series of court cases in higher education, *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Sipuel v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1948), *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950), and *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), Marshall successively rolled back the parameters of segregation in higher education.

The critical legal breakthrough came with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), when the US Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional. Marshall introduced evidence from black psychiatrist Kenneth B. Clark, based on his experiments in southern schools, that convinced the Court that segregation ‘generates a feeling of inferiority as to [black children’s] status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone’. The Court concluded that ‘in the field of public education the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place’. In attacking the legal doctrine of ‘separate but equal’, the Court reversed its earlier ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), when it had declared that the southern states’ practice of segregation did not contravene the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which guaranteed ‘equal protection of the law’. The Court then ruled that ‘separate’ facilities for the races were constitutional so long as they were of an ‘equal’ standard. In reality, few of the facilities that the southern states provided for blacks were equal to those provided for whites, if indeed they were provided at all. By reversing the legal doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ in school education, the Court challenged the legal underpinnings of segregation as a whole, and paved the way for yet more challenges to segregation in other areas of southern life.

After handing down the *Brown* decision the Court delayed its implementation for a year to take advice on how next to proceed. Many white southerners opposed *Brown*. Some vowed a campaign of ‘massive resistance’ and Mississippi led the way in the formation of the first White Citizens’ Council dedicated to preventing school desegregation. Mississippi senator James O. Eastland denounced *Brown* and advised his constituents that they were ‘not required to obey any court which passes such a ruling’.¹ Not all whites took this hard line. Alabama governor James ‘Big Jim’ Folsom declared that ‘when the Supreme Court speaks, that’s the law’, and even Mississippi governor James P. Coleman appealed for ‘cool thinking’ on the matter.² Many white southern newspaper editors echoed these sentiments. Yet as massive resistance grew such voices of reason were increasingly drowned out. Declaring total opposition to any change in the segregated order fast became an electoral necessity for southern

politicians wishing to successfully stay in or to stand for public office. The NAACP bore the brunt of the white southern backlash to *Brown*. Many of its southern members were persecuted for their activities and local branch membership figures began to dwindle, leading to the collapse of a number of local branches altogether. In 1956, Alabama effectively barred the NAACP from operating in the state.

The reaction to *Brown* at a national level was not encouraging either. President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to back the *Brown* decision strongly in public. In private he confided that his recent appointment of Earl Warren as US Supreme Court chief justice was the 'biggest damn fool mistake' he had ever made.³ A US Congress containing many powerful southern politicians also refused to back the Court's decision. In March 1956, 101 southern congressmen signed the 'Southern Manifesto' in outright opposition to *Brown*. There were even rumours of dissent within the Supreme Court. Some justices who had been persuaded to sign up to a unanimous decision in *Brown* now argued for a lenient implementation order to appease opponents. Consequently, when the Court issued its implementation order in May 1955, it appeared to backtrack. The Court set no definite guidelines for when school desegregation should begin, nor did it indicate how it should be carried out. It devolved these responsibilities to local school boards and to local and state judges. Many of these were white southerners opposed to desegregation. School desegregation, the Court informed them, should proceed 'with all deliberate speed'. Many interpreted this as a mandate for indefinite delay.

By the mid 1950s, the legal struggle for black freedom and equality appeared to have stalled. The leading civil rights organisation, the NAACP, had won its greatest victory in the courts after decades of litigation. Yet having won the legal argument against segregation in schools through the courts, white southerners now insisted that they would even go so far as to oppose the law of the land if it meant having to grant black equality. It was at this delicately poised impasse in race relations that the Montgomery bus boycott began in December 1955.

The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

On the late afternoon of 1 December 1955, 42-year-old Rosa L. Parks, a seamstress in a downtown Montgomery, Alabama, department store boarded her bus home from work. As the bus moved along its route it began to fill with people. White bus driver J. Fred Blake told Parks and other black passengers sitting next to and across the row from her to 'let