

THEN

Martin Luther King Jr. (center) leads the March on Washington in 1963.

50 YEARS AFTER MLK

The 1968 assassination of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. stunned the nation, but his work continues to inspire the pursuit of racial equality in America

BY BROOKE ROSS

ON AUGUST 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to hear what is now considered one of the most powerful speeches in history. A young Baptist minister named

Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the crowd, assembled that day for the March on Washington, a protest rally he helped organize.

"I have a dream," King said, "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."

His words were an impassioned call for racial equality for African-Americans. At the time, in parts of the country—especially in the

South—bl certain res attend seg the practic years earli at a rate ne

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PHOTO: ROBERT W. KELLEY/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES; FRIEDMAN; MARCUS CONSTANTINO/REUTERS (NOW); BITTMANN/GETTY IMAGES (MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.)



South—blacks couldn't eat at certain restaurants, continued to attend segregated schools (though the practice had been outlawed years earlier), and were unemployed at a rate nearly twice that of whites.

The march—a prime example of the nonviolent protest King advocated—helped secure passage of the **Civil Rights Act** of 1964. That landmark legislation outlawed racial segregation in schools, the workplace, and at public facilities. The act was one of many civil rights milestones in which King played a key role (*see timeline, pp. 20-21*).

But just a few years later, as King was shifting his attention toward poverty issues and housing rights for African-Americans, his life was tragically cut short. On April 4, 1968, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, at the age of 39.

Millions around the nation mourned King. "The heart of

America grieves today," said President Lyndon B. Johnson. "A leader of his people—a teacher of all people—has fallen."

Today, as the United States marks the 50th anniversary of King's death, important strides have been made toward achieving civil rights for all Americans. But many people believe the nation continues to struggle with racial discrimination. Even as



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. PAVED THE WAY FOR MANY AFRICAN-AMERICAN FIRSTS.

King's legacy has influenced a new generation of activists, his long-ago dream of equality has yet to be fully realized, says Hasan Jeffries, a professor of African-American history at Ohio State University.

"The very same issues that people are wrestling with now—police violence and unarmed African-Americans being killed, people taking to the streets for affordable housing—are the same issues King was wrestling with then."

Before the Dream

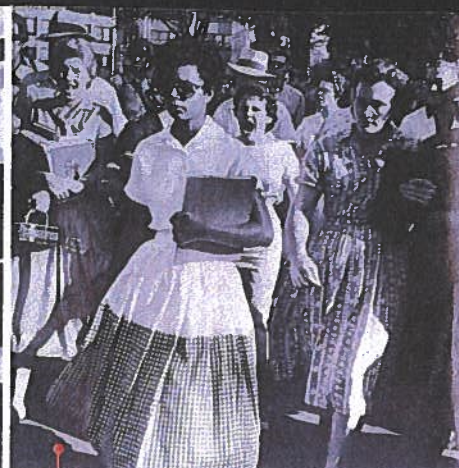
A native of Atlanta, Georgia, King never intended to be the face of the civil rights movement. He started out as a minister in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954. At the time, the Civil War—which resulted in the end of slavery—had been over for nearly a century. Yet throughout the South, where **Jim Crow** laws and racist customs prevailed, →

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TIMELINE: The Civil Rights Movement



1954

BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

The U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregated public schools are unconstitutional.

1955

BUS BOYCOTT

Rosa Parks is arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, sparking a boycott of city buses.

1957

LITTLE ROCK NINE

Nine black students are blocked from entering all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Eventually, federal troops escort the students inside.

1960

WOOLWORTH'S SIT-IN

Four black college students stage a sit-in at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Six months later, the store agrees to serve blacks.

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segregation was a way of life.

Though he had little experience in activism, King—who had a doctorate in **theology** from Boston University—was known as a brilliant public speaker. In 1955, community leaders recruited him to be the spokesperson for the Montgomery bus boycott, one of the first major protests of the civil rights era. The boycott lasted for more than a year and resulted in the U.S. Supreme Court declaring

racial segregation on public buses unconstitutional.

King's role in that boycott transformed him into a national figure. In 1957, he co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to help encourage other communities to take up the crusade for civil rights.

In addition to helping achieve passage of the Civil Rights Act, King played a pivotal role in securing voting rights for African-Americans.

In 1965, he helped organize a high-profile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery. This protest and others led to President Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That law made literacy tests and other obstacles to black voter registration illegal.

As one of the most recognizable faces of the civil rights era, King was a target of those who opposed the movement. He was beaten and jailed, and his home was bombed. He received frequent death threats. Yet even in the face of such violence, King remained peaceful, says biographer David Garrow.

"King was first and foremost a preacher," Garrow says. "He would always insist upon distinguishing between the evil deed and the evil doer. He was incapable of hating."

Struggles and Setbacks

Though many people revere King today, that wasn't always the case when he was alive. Many young people thought his methods were too passive and pushed for a more aggressive approach. Many older people, on the other hand, believed

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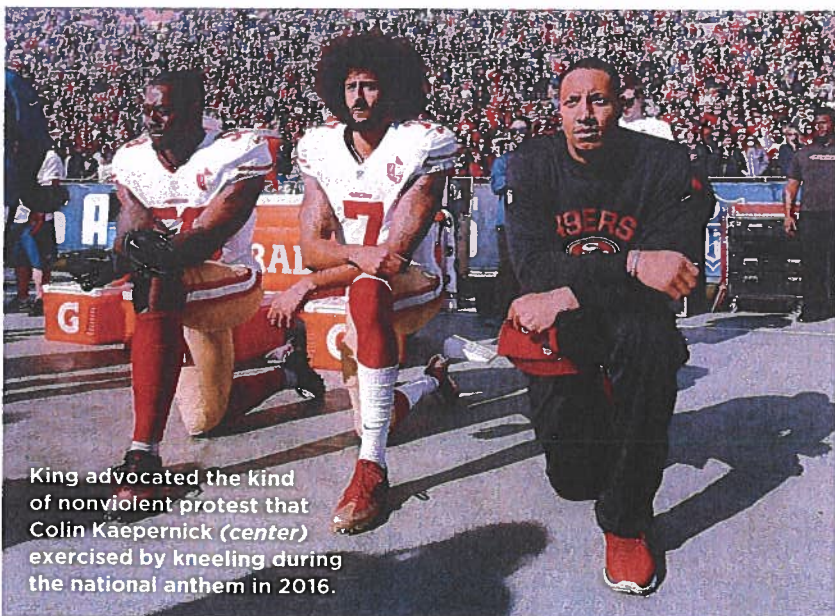
Still, King
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King advocated the kind of nonviolent protest that Colin Kaepernick (center) exercised by kneeling during the national anthem in 2016.

PAGE 20: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES (1955, 1957); MICHAEL T. ADAMS/SAN FRANCISCO 48REX/GETTY IMAGES (COLIN KAEPERNICK); PAGE 21: CAP/GETTY IMAGES (1960); UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/UGC VIA GETTY IMAGES (1964)



MAY 2-10, 1963

CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

Thousands of kids and teens march in Birmingham, Alabama, to protest segregation.

AUGUST 28, 1963

"I HAVE A DREAM"

More than 250,000 people participate in the March on Washington. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

1964

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

President Lyndon B. Johnson (*seated*) signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws segregation in education, employment, and public facilities.

1965

VOTING RIGHTS ACT

President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which makes literacy tests and other obstacles to black voter registration illegal.

King was too radical. In 1967, one poll showed that only 32 percent of respondents approved of him.

Still, King continued to speak out, even taking a stand in 1967 against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (1964-1973). His position drew widespread condemnation.

"King was willing to say things that he knew . . . would make him less popular," Garrow says.

By the spring of 1968, King had begun campaigning for housing rights for people of color. He was also preparing to stage a massive rally in Washington to raise awareness about poverty.

"What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter," he asked, "if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"

However, King didn't get far with these endeavors. On April 4, while in Memphis, Tennessee, he was shot dead on the balcony of his motel. A small-time criminal named James Earl Ray confessed to the killing, though his motives were never clear. (Ray died in prison in 1998.)

Within days of King's death,

Congress passed the Fair Housing Act. The new law—which banned discrimination in housing—was seen as a tribute to King's efforts in his final years.

More Work to Do

King's work helped pave the way for many important African-American firsts, including the election of the first black U.S. president, Barack Obama, in 2008.

THE ISSUES AMERICA WRESTLES WITH NOW ARE THE SAME ISSUES KING WRESTLED WITH.

Still, America continues to struggle with some of the same problems that King faced. Statistics show, for example, that many blacks lack the same economic or educational opportunities as whites and live in less-prosperous neighborhoods.

Also in recent years, police killings of unarmed African-Americans have made headlines and ignited massive

protests. According to one study, blacks are 2.5 times as likely as whites to be shot and killed by law enforcement officers.

Many people believe that if King were alive today, he would support the groups protesting for change in 2018, including NFL players who kneel during the national anthem to draw attention to police brutality; fast-food workers demanding a wage increase; and the Black Lives Matter movement, which seeks to end discrimination in the criminal justice system.

Also, experts say, King would be reminding us that all the positive changes that have happened in this country are due to people's willingness to fight for them.

"You don't need a lot of people to make an impact," Jeffries says. "[When] a small fraction of people organize and come together and speak with one voice, they can make a big difference." ♦

CORE QUESTION Which of King's accomplishments do you think made the biggest impact? Cite text evidence.

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