

Martin Luther King Jr. Changed a Nation in Only 13 Years

Martin Luther King Jr. was just 26 when he came to prominence, by leading a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. He was only 39 when he was killed.

January 15, 1929:

Michael King Jr. is born in Atlanta to Michael King Sr., a prominent local preacher and civil-rights leader, and Alberta King, a former schoolteacher. In 1934, his father changes both of their first names to Martin—by [various accounts](#), to correct a birth-certificate mistake or to honor the theologian Martin Luther. His childhood is comfortable; he excels in school, skipping the ninth and 12th grades. He first becomes conscious of racism at age 6, when a white friend's father prohibits his son from playing with Martin.



Courtesy of Morehouse College

June 8, 1948:

King graduates from Morehouse College, in Atlanta, with a bachelor's degree in sociology. Later, he earns a bachelor-of-divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary, in Chester, Pennsylvania, and a doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University. (In 1991, a BU committee would determine that King had [plagiarized passages](#) of his dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking

of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," from other scholars' work.)

June 18, 1953:

King marries Coretta Scott, an activist and aspiring singer from Alabama studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. After his death, she would advance her husband's legacy by founding the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

Charles Moore

1955–56:

Activists organize a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks, a black woman, is arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. A former head of the state's NAACP calls on King, now the 26-year-old pastor of a local black church, to lead the boycott—because he's "young and intelligent with leadership ability" and has a "wonderful speaking voice." The protest lasts 381 days, ending in victory after the U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional.

Don Cravens / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty

January 10–11, 1957:

Notables in the civil-rights movement form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to coordinate nonviolent protest actions in the South. They soon elect King as the organization's president.

February 1959:

At the invitation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, King [visits India](#) for a month, meeting with social reformers, government officials, and associates of the late Mahatma Gandhi, whose acts of civil disobedience to free the country from British rule inspired King's own approach to bringing about change. "I left India more convinced than ever before," King writes at the time, "that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."

R. Satakopan

August 28, 1963:

At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, then the largest protest in U.S. history, King addresses an estimated 250,000 people on the National Mall. His soaring call for racial justice comes to be known as the “I Have a Dream” speech, after his ad-libbed ending. Today, the speech is seen as both a rhetorical masterpiece and [a defining moment](#) of the civil-rights movement.

Francis Miller / The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty

Paramonov Alexander

December 10, 1964:

King receives the Nobel Peace Prize. At age 35, he is its youngest recipient so far. He promises to donate the prize’s \$54,123 award to the civil-rights movement.

March 1965:

In response to the continued disenfranchisement of millions of black people across the South, the SCLC and other civil-rights groups demand voting rights in a 54-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery. Local police and white mobs react brutally to the nonviolent protest, beating many participants; two white demonstrators are murdered. The march hastens passage of the federal Voting Rights Act later in the year.

April 4, 1967:

In a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam,” delivered at Riverside Church in Manhattan, King declares his opposition to the Vietnam War. He publicly criticized the war two months earlier, in a speech to the Nation Institute. But the widely publicized Riverside Church speech upsets many of King’s usual allies, who accuse him of hurting the cause of civil rights by alienating the American government and public. With this stand, King expands his calls for social justice at home into [a broader, pacifist message](#).

“I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’”

— From his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon, delivered on April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee

Charles Kelly / AP

April 4, 1968:

While in Memphis to protest black sanitation workers' poor treatment by the city, King is shot as he stands on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel. He is declared dead about an hour later. The murderer, James Earl Ray, flees the country and is arrested two months later at Heathrow Airport, in London; he is known to be a racist, but his exact motive is never made clear. (Sentenced to 99 years in prison, he dies of natural causes in 1998.) The assassination sparks riots in more than 100 U.S. cities. President Lyndon B. Johnson declares a national day of mourning.

November 2, 1983:

After years of advocacy from labor unions and civil-rights groups, President Ronald Reagan signs legislation to commemorate the slain leader's birthday with a federal holiday on the third Monday in January. Martin Luther King Jr. Day is celebrated nationwide for the first time in 1986.

This article appears in the special MLK issue print edition with the headline "The Arc of a Life."