

leading the revolution

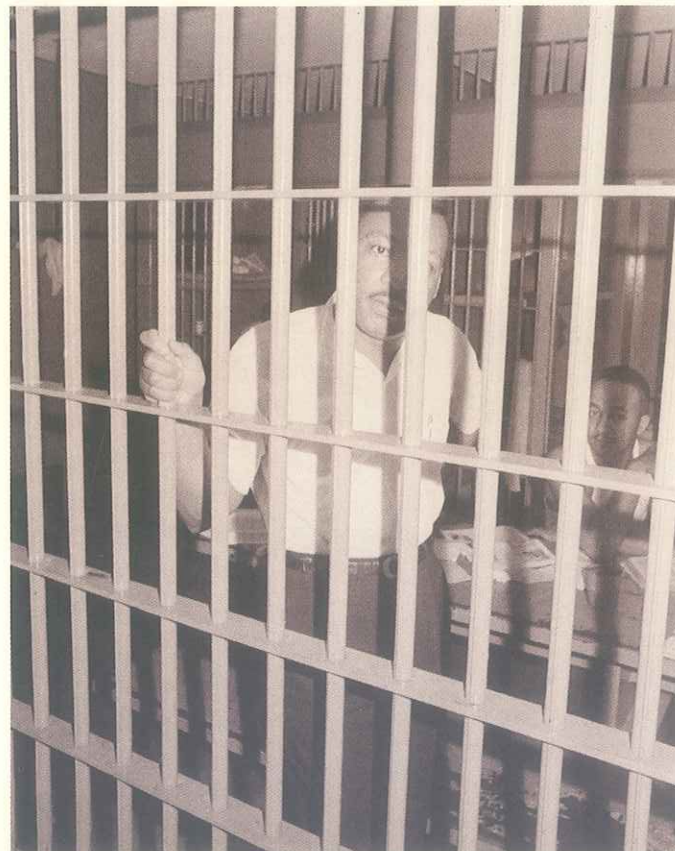


MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.
1929-1968
Assassinated,
Memphis, Tenn.

When black leaders in Montgomery launched a boycott of city buses in December 1955, they picked an articulate young newcomer as their spokesman. Martin Luther King Jr. was the minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the son of a prominent Atlanta preacher, and a biblical scholar who received his doctorate at age 26 from Boston University School of Theology.

King possessed coolness about him when he discussed ideas and strategy, but his preaching could set a congregation on fire. The first night of the boycott, King spoke to a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery. He told the boycotters they had truth on their side and made them believe they could win the battle for equality. "One of the great glories of democracy is the right to protest for right," he said.

After his arrest for attempting to integrate a local restaurant, King stands in a cell in St. Augustine, Fla.



King told them they were right to be tired of discrimination and injustice. "For many years, we have shown amazing patience... But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice." By the time King finished his remarks, the boycotters were jubilant in the face of their challenge.

King's calm under pressure and his transcendent rhetoric sustained the Montgomery bus boycotters through 13 months and made King the most influential figure of the entire civil rights era. Through the next 13 years, he would not only lead a major social revolution but would inspire a transformation of conscience in America.

Martin Luther King's life was in danger from the moment his enemies recognized the power he held. Klansmen bombed

his home in Montgomery. He was attacked by fanatical white supremacists in Selma and stabbed by an angry black woman in New York. He spent many nights alone in jail. He received countless death threats.

In spite of the danger, he continued to lead campaigns for integration — in Albany in 1962, in Birmingham in 1963, in St. Augustine in 1964, and in Selma in 1965. He led with an imagination and strength that surprised his friends as well as his enemies.

In Birmingham, he wrote a letter from his jail cell answering the criticism of moderate clergy who thought he was demanding too much too soon. "For years now I have heard the words 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait!' has almost always meant 'Never!'... We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights... There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over."

In Selma, he issued a nationwide call for clergy to come South for the march to Montgomery. Within two days, hundreds of people poured into Alabama with little more than the clothes on their backs, thrilled just to be marching with Dr. King.

Through him, the doctrine of nonviolence became the movement's unifying philosophy. Over and over, King preached the difficult message of peaceful confrontation. Demand your rights, he urged, but love your enemies.

When the movement suffered setbacks and tragedy, like the Birmingham church bombing and the death of Jimmie



LEFT
Montgomery police take King into custody.



BELOW
King leads off the last leg of the Selma to Montgomery march.





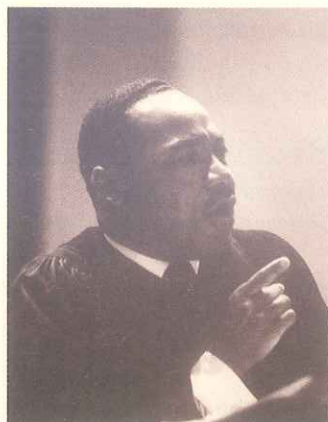
Lee Jackson, King comforted his followers by reminding them “undeserved suffering does not go unredeemed.” Love, he preached, would conquer hatred.

It was King who brought the movement to its highest emotional peak, during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. “I have a dream,” he told the crowd of 250,000 who gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial. “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, 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 gift of rhetoric and his personal strength enabled King to rise above the divisions that plagued civil rights groups in the mid-’60s and to withstand the criticism of political leaders as well as the constant scrutiny of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. His strong spiritual focus led King

to address the issues of world peace and poverty in the years before his death. He spoke out against the Vietnam War and launched anti-poverty campaigns in Chicago and Cleveland. He had gone to Memphis to support a sanitation workers’ strike for fair wages when he was assassinated.

King died a hero to many people of all colors throughout the world. He provided a model for successful social change that today inspires blacks living in South



Africa and people everywhere who are denied their rights.

A Nobel Peace Prize winner, King asked not to be remembered for his awards but for his character. Two months before he was killed, he told a congregation in Atlanta that when he died, he wanted only for “somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others.”

Nine years after his death, Martin Luther King Jr. was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The citation reads, in part:

“Martin Luther King Jr. was the conscience of his generation. A Southerner, a black man, he gazed on the great wall of segregation and saw that the power of love could bring it down... He helped us overcome our ignorance of one another ... He made our nation stronger because he made it better ...

“His life informed us, his dreams sustain us yet.”



OPPOSITE PAGE

King delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington.

ABOVE

Though he was a calm strategist, King became famous for his intense oratory.

LEFT

King with his father (left), wife Coretta and their children.