

Civil Rights famous activists : Martin Luther King Jr vs Malcolm X

Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr.: Early Years and Family

The second child of Martin Luther King Sr, a pastor, and Alberta Williams King, a former schoolteacher, Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15th, 1929.

A gifted student, King attended segregated public schools and at the age of 15 was admitted to Morehouse College, where he studied medicine and law. Although he had not intended to follow his father's footsteps by joining the ministry, he changed his mind under the mentorship of Morehouse's president, Dr. Benjamin Mays, an influential theologian and outspoken advocate for racial equality. After graduating in 1948, King entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree, won a prestigious fellowship and was elected president of his predominantly white senior class.

King then enrolled in a graduate program at Boston University, earning a doctorate in systematic theology in 1955. While in Boston he met Coretta Scott (1927-2006), a young singer from Alabama who was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. The couple wed in 1953 and settled in Montgomery, Alabama, where King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. They had four children.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

The King family had been living in Montgomery for less than a year when the highly segregated city became the epicenter of the burgeoning struggle for civil rights in America, galvanized by the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision of 1954. On December 1st, 1955, Rosa Parks (1913-2005), secretary of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Activists coordinated a bus boycott that would continue for 381 days, placing a severe economic strain on the public transit system and downtown business owners. They chose Martin Luther King Jr. as the protest's leader and official spokesman.

By the time the Supreme Court ruled segregated seating on public buses unconstitutional in November 1956, King, heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and the activist Bayard Rustin (1912–1987), had entered the national spotlight as an inspirational proponent of organized, nonviolent resistance. (He had also become a target for white supremacists, who firebombed his family home that January.) Emboldened by the boycott's success, in 1957 he and other civil rights activists - most of them fellow ministers - founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a group committed to achieving full equality for African Americans through nonviolence. (Its motto was "*Not one hair of one head of one person should be harmed.*") He would remain at the helm of this influential organization until his death.

King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

In his role as SCLC president, Martin Luther King Jr. traveled across the country and around the world, giving lectures on nonviolent protest and civil rights as well as meeting with religious figures, activists and political leaders. (During a month-long trip to India in 1959, he had the opportunity to meet family members and followers of Gandhi, the man he described in his autobiography as "*the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change*").

In 1960 King and his family moved to Atlanta, his native city, where he joined his father as co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. This new position did not stop King and his SCLC colleagues from becoming key players in many of the most significant civil rights battles of the 1960s. Arrested for his involvement on April 12th, 1963 and jailed for about a week, King penned the civil rights manifesto known as the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," an eloquent defense of civil disobedience addressed to a group of white clergymen who had criticized his tactics.

King Marches for Freedom

Later that year, Martin Luther King Jr. worked with a number of civil rights and religious groups to organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a peaceful political rally designed to shed light on the injustices African Americans continued to face across the country. Held on August 28th and attended by some 200,000 to 300,000 participants, the event is widely regarded as a watershed moment in the history of the American civil rights movement and a factor in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The march culminated in King's most famous address, known as the "I Have a Dream" speech, a spirited call for peace and equality that many consider a masterpiece of rhetoric. Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial - a monument to the president who a century earlier had brought down the institution of slavery in the United States — he shared his vision of a future in which *"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.'"* The speech and march cemented King's reputation at home and abroad; later that year he was named Man of the Year by TIME magazine and in 1964 became the youngest person ever awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the spring of 1965, King's elevated profile drew international attention to the violence that erupted between white segregationists and peaceful demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, where the SCLC and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had organized a voter registration campaign. Captured on television, the brutal scene outraged many Americans and inspired supporters from across the country to gather in Selma and take part in a march to Montgomery led by King and supported by President Lyndon Johnson (1908-1973), who sent in federal troops to keep the peace. That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed the right to vote—first awarded by the 15th Amendment - to all African Americans.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Years and Assassination

The events in Selma deepened a growing rift between Martin Luther King Jr. and young radicals who repudiated his nonviolent methods and commitment to working within the established political framework. King broadened the scope of his activism to address issues such as the Vietnam War and poverty among Americans of all races. In 1967, King and the SCLC embarked on an ambitious program known as the Poor People's Campaign, which was to include a massive march on the capital.

On the evening of April 4th, 1968, King was fatally shot while standing on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, where he had traveled to Support a sanitation workers' strike. In the wake of his death, a wave of riots swept major cities across the country, while President Johnson declared a national day of mourning. James Earl Ray (1928—1998), an escaped convict and known racist, pleaded guilty to the murder and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. (He later recanted his confession and gained some unlikely advocates, including members of the King family, before his death in 1998.)

After years of campaigning by activists, members of Congress and Coretta Scott King, among others, in 1983 President Ronald Reagan (1911—2004) signed a bill creating a U.S. federal holiday in honor of King. Observed on the third Monday of January, it was first celebrated in 1986.

<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/martin-luther-king-jr>

Born Malcolm Little in 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm was The son of a Baptist preacher. After The Ku Klux Klan made threats against his father, the family moved to Lansing, Michigan. There, in the face of similar threats, he continued to urge blacks to take control of their lives.

Did You Know?

In 1964, Malcolm X made a pilgrimage To Mecca (Islamic city in Saudi Arabia) and changed his name to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.

Malcolm's father was slain by the Klan-like Black Legionaries. Although he was found with his head crushed on one side, it was claimed he had committed suicide, and the family was denied his death benefit. Its disintegration quickly followed: welfare caseworkers sought to turn the children against each other and against their mother, from whom Malcolm, then six, was taken and placed in a foster home. Mrs. Little underwent a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered.

After the eighth grade, Malcolm dropped out of School, headed for a life of crime. When twenty-one, he was sentenced to prison for burglary and there encountered the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, leader of The Lost-Found nation of Islam, popularly known as The Black Muslims. Muhammad's thesis that the white man is the devil with whom blacks cannot live had a strong impact on Malcolm. Turning to an ascetic way of life and reading widely, he began to overcome the degradation he had known. The argument that only blacks can cure the ills that afflict them confirmed for Malcolm the power of Muhammad's faith. He became a loyal disciple and adopted X-symbolic of a stolen identity - as his last name.

After six years Malcolm was released from prison. Later, he became the minister of Temple No. 7 in Harlem, his indictments of racism and his advocacy of self-defense eliciting admiration, as well as fear, far beyond The New York black community. Whites were especially fearful, recoiling from his Sustained pronouncements of crimes against his people. While most contrasted him with Martin Luther King, Jr., with whose philosophy they were much more at ease, white college students found ugly truths in his searing rhetoric of condemnation. Malcolm, became convinced that Elijah Muhammad was lacking in sincerity, a view painfully validated by corruption at the highest level of the organization. For his part, Muhammad seemed threatened by the popularity of Malcolm, whose influence reached even into the respected student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In 1964, he left The Black Muslims organization, traveled to Mecca, and discovered that orthodox Muslims preach equality of the races, which led him to abandon the argument that whites are devils. Having returned to America as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, he remained convinced that racism had corroded the spirit of America and that only blacks could free themselves. In June 1964, he founded the Organization of Afro-American unity and moved increasingly in the direction of socialism. More Sophisticated than in his Black Muslim days and of growing moral stature, he was assassinated by a Black Muslim at a rally of his organization in New York on February 21st, 1965. Malcolm X had predicted that, though he had but little time to live, he would be more important in death than in life. Foreshadowings of his martyrdom are found in the Autobiography of Malcolm X. The almost painful honesty that enabled him to find his way from degradation to devotion to his people, the modest lifestyle that kept him on the edge of poverty, and the distance he somehow managed to put between himself and racial hatred serve, in that volume, as poignant reminders of human possibility and achievement.

Influenced largely by Malcolm, in the summer of 1966 members of SNCC called for black power for black people. Their lack of power was the foundation of Malcolm's charge that they were denied human rights in America. his clarity on this matter, as America continues its retreat from its commitment to full freedom for his people, has guaranteed for him pride of place among black leaders.

*** Read these 2 biographies and compare these 2 activists' lives and ideas.**

In what areas did Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X's ideas converge?

	MLK	Malcolm X
Childhood		
Education		
Early adulthood		
Influences & ideologies		
Actions		
Final years & assassination		

*** Writing task :** *You're a young black in the 1960's. You want to join the Black Muslims but your parents disapprove. They are in favour of Martin Luther King's ideas. Write a dialogue.*

OR

*** Oral task :** *If you had been an African American at the time, would you have been a disciple of MLK or of the Black Muslims ? Why ? In other words, if you had had to fight for a cause, would you have chosen a non-violent way to do it or a more radical/extreme way to do it ? Why ?*

HELP BOX :

Nouns : militancy - activist - activism- movement - demonstration - march - boycott

Adjectives : inspiring - inspirational - heroic - dedicated - downtrodden (= opprimé, piétiné)

Verbs : demonstrate - protest (against) - inspire - criticise - overcome (= vaincre); civil disobedience

Expressions: fight for one's rights - stand up for