

## **Addendum C: Historical Context for King's Thoughts and Actions**

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a man of impressive moral presence who devoted his life to the fight for full citizenship rights of the poor, disadvantaged, and racially oppressed in the United States. He received a bachelor's degree in sociology (1948) from Morehouse College, a B.D. (1951) from Crozer Theological Seminary, and a doctorate in philosophy (1955) from Boston University.

In 1954, King accepted his first pastorate — the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. He and his wife, Coretta Scott King, whom he had met and married (June 1953) while at Boston University, had been resident in Montgomery less than a year when Mrs. Rosa Parks defied the ordinance concerning segregated seating on city buses (Dec. 1, 1955). King's successful organization of the year-long Montgomery bus boycott, with the assistance of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Edward Nixon, catapulted him into national prominence as a leader of the civil rights movement.

King studied the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and further developed the Indian leader's doctrine of *satyagraha* ("holding to the truth"), or nonviolent civil disobedience. In the aftermath of Montgomery he traveled, delivered speeches, and wrote his first book, *Stride toward Freedom* (1958). In 1960 he accepted co-pastorship with his father of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and became president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Although he continued to travel and speak widely and firmly committed the SCLC to voter-registration campaigns throughout the South, King's major campaigns were those in Albany, Ga. (December 1961-August 1962), Birmingham, Ala. (April-May 1963), and Danville, Va. (July 1963). He organized the massive March on Washington (Aug. 28, 1963) where, in his brilliant 'I Have a Dream' speech, he 'subpoenaed the conscience of the nation before the judgment seat of morality.' In January 1964, *Time* magazine chose King Man of the Year, the first black American so honored. Later that year he became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

After supporting desegregation efforts in Saint Augustine, Fla., in 1964, King concentrated his efforts on the voter-registration drive in Selma, Ala., leading a harrowing march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. Soon after, a tour of the northern cities led him to assail the conditions of economic as well as social discrimination. This marked a shift in SCLC strategy, one intended to 'bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible.' Having begun to recognize the deeper relationships of economics and poverty to racism, King now called for a 'reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.' Along with demands for stronger civil and voting rights legislation and for a meaningful poverty budget, he spoke out against the Vietnam War, which took funds from antipoverty programs.

Early in 1968, King began to plan a multiracial poor people's march on Washington to demand an end to all forms of discrimination and the funding of a \$12-billion 'Economic Bill of Rights.' In the midst of organizing this campaign, he flew to Memphis, Tenn., to assist striking sanitation workers. There, on Apr. 4, 1968, King was felled by an assassin's bullet. The violent death of this man of peace brought an immediate reaction of

rioting in black ghettos around the country. Although one man, James Earl Ray, was convicted of King's murder, the question of whether he was the paid agent of conspirators has not been conclusively resolved. It is clear only that the United States was deprived of a towering symbol of moral and social progress. In 1983, King's birthday was designated a national holiday.

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