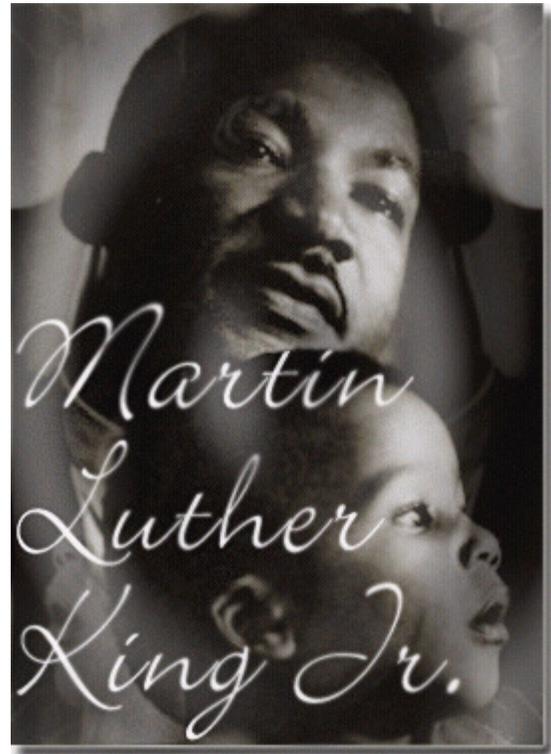


## “Eyes on the Prize” The Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

*God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men, and brown men, and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race.*

- From *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), by Martin Luther King Jr.

**Leadership Tenets**. Not all are called to be leaders. I do not pretend to know whether leaders are born. What I might believe does not matter. In all likelihood, leaders *are* born but, as Peter Drucker so eloquently puts it, “there surely are far too few to depend on them” (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996, p.xi). Put another way, “when leadership is viewed as a nonlearnable set of character traits or as an equivalent to an exalted position, a self-fulfilling prophecy is



created that dooms societies to having only a few good leaders” (Kouzes and Posner, 1996, p. 109). Warren Bennis, in his book, *Leaders*, puts it this way, “nurture is far more important than nature in determining who becomes a successful leader” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p. 223). Another view asserts, “leaders grow; they are not made” (Handy, 1996, p.5). One thing is absolute: leaders are special. Truly great leaders

tend to exhibit certain personal traits that are more a part of their character, more innate. They include high ethical standards in which a person consistently attempts to ‘do the right thing;’ an unusually strong bias for action fueled by a high rate of personal energy and an almost uncontrollable desire to achieve; a propensity for lifelong learning, curiosity, and continual improvement. Many

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<sup>1</sup> Image sourced from LIFE Classic Images; available online at <http://pathfinder.com/Life/mlk/mlkpics.html>

leaders also possess an unwavering self-confidence that frequently translates into courage in the face of adversity, the willingness to take risks, and a sense of destiny—a personal belief that they are meant for something special, perhaps even greatness” (Phillips, 1999, pp.24-25).

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was such a leader. While still a youngster, he told his mom, “Mother, there is no such thing as one people being better than another. The Lord made all of us equal, and I’m gonna see to that” (Phillips, 1999, p.29). As an adult, Dr. King asked Americans to realize,

there comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired—tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. We have no alternative but to protest. If we protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people ... who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization’ (Phillips, 1999, p.39).

The famous biographer and historian, Douglas Southall Freeman, spent virtually his entire life studying the essence of great leaders. He was driven by a perplexing question, “What sets great leaders apart?” Freeman concluded that the power of their leadership came from their common adherence to three basic tenets: professional competence (i.e., know your stuff), service before self (i.e., take care—and lead—your people), and superior character. The greatest of these is character; it is the foundation of humanity. If leaders cannot be trusted by the people they represent, their credibility will be lost and no one will then follow. Many people have a basic understanding of leadership—they know it when they see it—but just what, exactly, is great leadership?

In his landmark book entitled, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns came closest to a pure definition of leadership when he wrote (Burns, 1978, p.19),

Leadership is leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—*the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations*—of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers’ values and motivations.

Leadership, after all, is not a destination; it is a journey. Leaders “listen to others with genuine empathy; they seek first to understand, then to be understood” (Covey, 1990, p.123). How else can they understand and act for the *wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations* of the people they represent? Burns identifies two modes of leadership—transactional and transformational leadership. The relations of most leaders and followers are transactional—a first-order social exchange that is manifest in relatively incremental improvements to productivity and performance. This narrow reactionary focus, in transactional leadership terms, is akin to “a thermometer, reflecting the environment” (Nice, 1997). There is a better alternative.

Poplin (1992) calls on bosses “to be the servants of collective vision” as well as “editors, cheerleaders, problem solvers, and resource finders.” Such are the transformational leaders. It takes little effort to recognize the transformational leaders of history. Mohandas K. Gandhi, for example, had the ability to translate an idea into reality and sustain it. His goal was “not to defeat the British in India, but to redeem them through love, so as to avoid a legacy of bitterness” (Phillips, 1999, p.57). Throughout his campaigns of nonviolent resistance, he created a new method of dealing with oppression that he termed “*Satyagraha*.” *Satya* means truth which equals love and *graha* is force. *Satyagraha* thus means “truth-force” or “love-force;” it is also translated to mean “holding onto truth” (Garrow, 1986, p. 43; King, 1963, p.150; Phillips, 1999, p.57). As a result, his followers considered the importance of absolute values, the need to reconcile power with service, and the necessity to make decisions and take actions that are bounded by moral principles. Jesus is another example. Evidence from the Bible suggests that Jesus, perhaps more than any other individual, has shaped the discussion of the virtues which a leader ought to possess and the

techniques which leaders ought to use to motivate those whom they lead. In fact, Jesus' views of divinely inspired leadership are articulated in his teachings and exemplified in his actions—He practices the very leadership He preaches. And there's no doubting Mother Teresa was a transformational leader. Though she rarely spoke in public and never built a huge corporation, she became a symbol of selflessness while inspiring millions to serve the poor. A less prominent fictional example of a transformational leader is evident in the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, where a newly appointed teacher inspires a love of poetry and intellectual freedom among his young students at a strict New England prep school. In the process, he encounters the profound resistance of his teaching colleagues and administrators. His students are given the opportunity to grasp how difficult it is to bring about change in entrenched cultures and, additionally, are encouraged to focus on alternative ways in which that change might be implemented. In essence, change is what leadership is all about.

**Leadership Environment.** Meriam-Webster defines *change* as “to alter or make different, to become different, or to undergo transformation” (1998). It is a breaking from the past (Covey, 1992, pps.67-78). Gandhi put it this way, "You must *be* the change you wish to see in the world." Leaders are change-makers; transformational leaders are masters of change. They operate in the realm of second-order change that impact the followers' values, beliefs, needs, and goals at a personal level. Transformational leadership, in terms of our thermometer analogy, is more like “a thermostat that changes the environment” (Nice, 1997). The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p.21) found such leaders used vision to animate, inspire, and transform purpose into action.

“The essential thing is action. Action has three stages: the decision born of thought, the order or preparation for execution, and the execution itself. All three stages are governed by the will. The will is rooted in character, and for the man of action character is of more critical importance than intellect. Intellect without will is worthless, will without intellect is dangerous.”

Leaders must “articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unsaid; then they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention.

By so doing, they consolidate or challenge prevailing wisdom” (Bennis and Nanus,

1985, p.39). The leader’s “fundamental act is to induce people

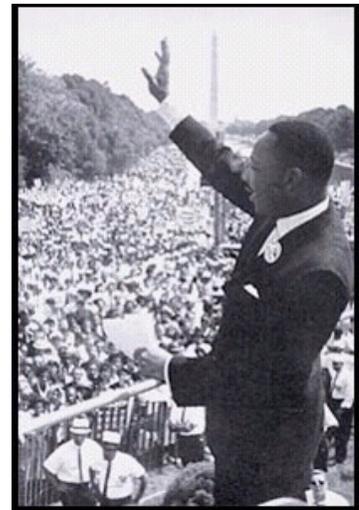
to be aware or conscious of what they feel—to feel their true needs so strongly, to define their values so meaningfully, that

they can be moved to purposeful action” (Burns, 1978). In

contemporary societies, there is no better example<sup>2</sup> than Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., the subject of much study and, of

course, the centerpiece of this manuscript.



Dr. King always spoke about the hopes and aspirations

of his followers. One such occasion was in Montgomery (Phillips, 1999, p. 96):

We are here because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth ... If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.

Dr. King advocated action by appealing to people’s highest standards of ethics and morality. “We must do it because it is right to do it” (Phillips, 1999, p.113). His

decisions were founded on moral and ethical principles we can applaud. He valued

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<sup>2</sup> Image available online at <http://www.archives.state.al.us/timeline/timefr.html>

that which was best for his people as a whole. "There comes a time when one must take the position that it is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must do it because his conscious tells him it is right" (Phillips, 1999, p.187). After all, law and ethics are not the same. Yet the concept of civil disobedience carries with it a further stipulation: that "those who for moral reasons disobey the law must do so consciously and with full willingness to suffer whatever penalties their disobedience brings<sup>3</sup>" (Kidder, 1995, p.73).



#### Transformational leaders

have a bias for action and a sense of urgency that are centered around shared goals; they act with respect for the values of the people they represent; they are visionary and decisive; they have an intuitive understanding of human nature that combines with the ability to care, establish trust, and build alliances; and they have the know-how to successfully create and manage change (Phillips, 1999, pp.23-24).

Put another way, transformational leaders "move people from selfish concerns to serving the common good" (Pinchot, 1996, p.26). Dr. King captured the essence of transformational leadership this way, "Let us rise up . . . with a greater readiness, let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days of challenge to make America what it ought to be." His emphasis on *us* and the common good was best expressed in the sixth century B.C. by the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching (Heider, 1988, p.33):

*A leader is best  
When people barely know that he exists,  
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,  
Worst when they despise him.  
"Fail to honor people,  
They fail to honor you;"*

<sup>3</sup> Alabama, 1958. Image available online at <http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/moore/riotsFrame.shtml>

*But of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will all say, "We did this ourselves."*

**Visionary Leadership.** One of the most crucial and, in some ways, most intimidating issues confronting today's leader is the application of leadership. Leadership, especially in democratic organizations and nations, is not about tactics, micromanagement, and fine detail. It is about "articulating shared values and developing a vision for the future—since that, after all, is how consensus is built and gridlock broken" (Kidder, 1995, p.101)<sup>4</sup>. The problem is that we have tended to think of



leadership as the capacity to take charge and get things done (Mitchell & Tucker, 1992). This view keeps us from focusing on the importance of teamwork in the comprehensive tug-of-war that rages on the balance beam of the mission-people

continuum. Burns' (1978) definition of leadership, as an act that induces "followers to act for certain goals that represent the *values* ... of both leaders and followers" (p. 19), undergirds our understanding of the transformational leader. Successful leadership "depends on grounding one's personal values in context and expressing them in practice" (Johnson, 1996, p.63). Stephen Covey, in *Principle-centered Leadership*, reminds us that we "can never build a life greater than its most noble purpose" (1990, p.294). But, as we have learned from Hemingway (1940), "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Thus, it is essential

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<sup>4</sup> *Alabama, 1965.* Freedom march; image available online at <http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/moore/riotsFrame.shtml>

that leaders develop a core set of values shared by their followers (Deal, 1985). There is no better example than Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Not unlike other great leaders, Dr. King had the ability to create, embody, and communicate his vision. Moreover, he understood the need and possessed the skill to create a common, effective, and widely shared vision—the bridge connecting long-term strategy to people’s innate passion for short-term rewards. Dr. King “had a dream.” Speaking to the African-American community just hours after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court decision that declared Alabama’s laws on bus segregation unconstitutional, Dr. King proclaimed, “With this dedication we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice” (King, 1967; C. King, 1993, p.62; Phillips, 1999, p.47). Decades later, Dr. King’s words still resonate as the world sits precariously on the cusp of a new century.

Dr. King understood leadership and he instinctively knew that an effective leader must “develop and live an enabling and empowering vision” (Peters, 1987, p.283). Bennis and Nanus (1985), who characterize vision as “a target that beckons,” point out that “with a vision, the leader provides the all-important bridge from the present to the future” (p.90). The leader’s role can be summed up nicely from the words of Theodore Roosevelt’s “In the Arena,”

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumphs of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat” (Hart & Ferleger, 1989, p.2).

Dr. King found himself “in the arena” everyday. Such inspired and informed leadership is critical. Today’s leaders routinely confront situations characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity. Senge (1990, p.3) postulates those who ignore such complexities set themselves up for failure:

From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole. When we then try to “see the big picture,” we try to reassemble the fragments in our minds, to list and organize all the pieces. But, as physicist David Bohm says, the task is futile—similar to trying to reassemble the fragments of a broken mirror to see a true reflection. Thus, after a while we give up trying to see the whole together.

But there remains hope.

**Eyes on the Prize.** Great leaders possess high ethical standards; they assume responsibility and set the example for followers who do the *right* things (Hesselbein, et al, 1996, p.xii; Phillips, 1999, p.24). There is “nothing to be afraid of if you believe and know that the cause for which you stand is right” (Phillips, 1999, p.300). In general, leaders must understand human nature if they are to better understand themselves. And, as agents of change, leaders must understand human nature if they are to move the multitudes down the straight and narrow path—a path toward a new destination. In brief, “we are coming to believe that leaders are those people who “walk ahead,” people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and in their organizations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities, and understandings” (Senge, 1996, p.45). Such leaders are those individuals who inspire confidence, undermine hopelessness, confront fear, cease the day, promote positive and productive actions, light the candles, establish goals, and paint brighter tomorrows. They “have a dream.” A contemporary advertisement for such a “dreamer” might read:

*Wanted: Corporate executive to lead Fortune 500 company into the twenty-first century. Must be visionary, authentic, courageous, and a global citizen. Workaholics need not apply* (Bolt, 1996, p.161).

Although twenty-first century leaders are expected to be visionary, they must also be courageous. People expect their leaders to stand for something and to have the courage of their convictions. Dr. King exuded moral fortitude; he was a leader who marched, both literally and figuratively, headlong into history as the man who led “America’s third revolution” (Phillips, 1999, p.23). Addressing an audience in April 1959, Dr. King’s leadership is evident: “As I stand here and look out upon the thousands of Negro faces, and the thousands of white faces, intermingled like the waters of a river, I see only one face—the face of the future” (Phillips, 1999, p.275). A major part of Dr. King’s leadership style was to keep hope alive among the masses. “We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope” (Phillips, 1999, p.278). “The American people are infected with racism—that is the peril. They are also infected with democratic ideals—that is the hope” (Phillips, 1999, p.281). “All the darkness in the world cannot obscure the light of a single candle” (Phillips, 1999, p.280). Such are the words of a transformational leader.

In the final analysis, the courage to lead means standing up for what you believe in, acting when you know you’re going to be attacked for doing so, and continually trying to do the right thing. “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us” (Oliver Wendell Holmes). “Character,” Helen Keller once wrote, “cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved” (Phillips, 1999, p.306). Bolman and Deal (1995) suggest that “the signs point toward spirit and soul as the essence of leadership” (p.39). “Leaders with soul bring spirit to organizations ... Leaders of spirit find their soul’s treasure store and

offer its gifts to others” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p.10). The essence of leadership is “offering oneself and one’s spirit. ... Gifts [that affirm the fundamental moral precepts of compassion and judgment such as] authorship, love and caring, power, and significance only work when they are freely given and freely received ... transforming a place of work to a way of life” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p.102). Dr. King led with soul and he practiced what he preached. Dr. King was always about the business of his people. “I question and soul-search constantly into myself to be as certain as I can that I am fulfilling the true meaning of my work, that I am maintaining my sense of purpose, that I am holding fast to my ideals, and that I am guiding my people in the right direction” (Phillips, 1999, p.77). His principles of leadership are appropriate for all times, for all leaders in any situation with any organization. “Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity,” Dr. King asked, “or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds?”

The choice is ours. Lao Tzu reminds us that “the leader teaches by example” (Heider, 1988, p.3). Our example is vividly illustrated in the life and times of one of the world’s greatest transformational leaders, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His example is expressed in the principles he embodied. Principles are “deep, fundamental truths, classic truths, generic common denominators. They are tightly interwoven threads running with exactness, consistency, beauty, and strength through the fabric of life” (Covey, 1989, p.122). Dr. King also taught us the significance of a vision if we are to lead effectively. Good leaders will have their own dream. Great leaders will share Dr. King’s dream—a dream deeply rooted in the American dream ... a 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.”

The United States, after all, was founded on self-evident truths. Almost all of our greatest achievements have resulted from battles waged and won over moral issues and involving our understanding of right and wrong. Moral courage is a hallmark of great leaders. Abraham Lincoln was unwilling to accept “a house divided against itself,” a nation half-slave and half-free. Lincoln dreamt of “a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last, best hope of earth.” As President, during a civil war that wrenched the soul of the country, Lincoln's commitment to preserve the Union ensured the continuation of the uniquely American ideal of a truly "United States." Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. led America's revolution of the twentieth century on a campaign for justice, the redemption of a “promissory note” signed by the architects of our Republic who promised that all would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If there is but one piece of advice he might give today, Dr. King would tell us the great leader constantly keeps his “*eyes on the prize*.”



LIFE Classic Images; available online at <http://pathfinder.com/Life/mlk/mlkpics.html>

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## Chronology of Events in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Life<sup>5</sup>

**Born:** January 15, 1929 at 501 Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia as Michael King (later known as Martin Luther King, Jr.).

**Marriage:** June 18, 1953 to Coretta Scott

### Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955-56

December 1955 - The Montgomery Bus Boycott begins  
King is elected president of Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) five days after Rosa Parks' arrest for refusing to obey the city's policy mandating segregation on buses.

26 January 1956 - King is arrested for speeding and is jailed for the first time in Montgomery.

30 January 1956 - The King's home is bombed.

21 February 1956 - An all-white grand jury indicts King and 88 black leaders of the MIA for violating a state anti-labor law prohibiting boycotts.

20 December 1956 - Montgomery buses are integrated after the U.S. Supreme Court declares Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional and King is among the first people to ride an integrated Montgomery bus.

23 June 1958 - King meets with President Eisenhower.

17 September 1958 - King publishes his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*

20 September 1958 - King is stabbed in Harlem.

3 February 1959 - King departs for India as guest of Prime Minister Nehru.

22 June 1960 - King meets privately with presidential candidate John F. Kennedy.

19 October 1960 - King is arrested for sitting-in at Rich's Department store in Atlanta, refuses to post bail, and goes to jail with student protestors.

21 May 1961 - King addresses Freedom Riders and black residents at First Baptist Church in Montgomery.

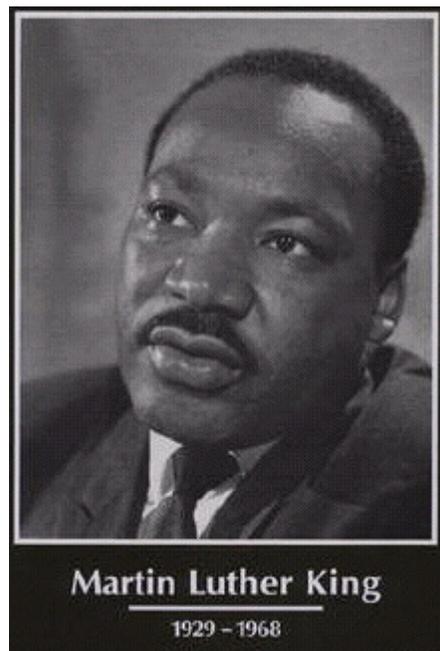
11-14 December 1961 - King responds to an appeal from William B. Anderson, president of the Albany Movement, to join the protests in Albany, Georgia.

16 December 1961 - King is arrested for parading without a permit and is released on bond.

### Albany Movement: 1962

16 October 1962 - King meets with President Kennedy and urges him to issue a second Emancipation Proclamation to end racial segregation.

### Birmingham: Protests and the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail April 16, 1963



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<sup>5</sup> LIFE MLK Cover, April 12, 1968; image available online at <http://pathfinder.com/Life/mlk/cv041268.html>

**Washington:** "I Have a Dream" Speech and the March on Washington August 28, 1963

September 1963 - Strength to Love is published.

10 October 1963 - Robert Kennedy authorizes the FBI to wiretap King's telephone in Atlanta, and subsequently approves taps on SCLC's phones.

March 1964 - King meets Malcolm X in the Capitol building.

**Nobel Prize:** December 1964

**Selma Campaign:** 1965

2 January 1965 - King announces start of Project Alabama, a campaign of mass marches centered in Selma, to arouse the federal government to protect black voting rights through federal legislation.

21-25 March 1965 - King leads Selma to Montgomery March.

26 July 1965 - King's People to People tour of northern cities culminates in a mass march of 30,000 people at Chicago city hall.

6 August 1965 - King is present when President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act.

August 1965 - King publicly opposes the Vietnam War, urging negotiation and a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam.

5 August 1965 - King is stoned as he leads march through Chicago's southwest side. 1966 - Move to the North 1967 - Vietnam and Poverty Campaigns

4 April 1967 - King delivers anti-war speech at the Riverside Church in New York City.

Fall 1967 - King publicly reveals his plans to organize a mass civil disobedience campaign in Washington, D.C. to force the government to end poverty.

1967 - Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? and The Trumpet of Conscience are published.

**Memphis:** 1968

28 March 1968 - King leads a march of approximately 6,000 protestors in support of striking Memphis sanitation workers.

3 April 1968 - King delivers his last speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," at the Mason Temple in Memphis.

**4 April 1968 - King is assassinated in Memphis.**

**9 April 1968 - King is buried in Atlanta.**