

Dr. King & His Evolving Human Rights Agenda

Dr. Martin Luther King (1929-1968) became a prominent *human rights* leader who no longer focused on civil rights after 1965. In 1966, he began a second phase of activism and turned his focus to the much higher goal of **human rights**, which every human being has



when they are born, such as the right to life, freedom, food and water, safety and security, and the right to be recognized as a human being anywhere in the world. Whereas, *civil rights* are given to citizens only within a particular country, such as the right to vote or hold office. Civil rights are granted by governments. *Human rights* instantly exist at birth and are not granted by anyone, but people and governments do attempt to

take away these human rights. King explained that civil rights were important, but are merely rights that Black needed to attain along the road while striving for *human rights*. He developed into a human rights activist in January 1966, but this work is largely ignored by most writers and the American public.

According to King, there were two phases in the Black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s in America. In dozens of essays, interviews, speeches, sermons, and books King explained the two eras or phases of the freedom movement, and where he and other activists were at within these two phases, as they pressed on in the struggle for racial justice. In a January 1965 *Playboy* interview, King revealed that he worked 20 hours a day, traveled a staggering 325,000 miles to help local campaigns and made 450 speeches a year throughout the U.S. on behalf of Black people, and yet his message and direct-action program have been reduced to simply an abstract *dream*. There are thousands of Dr. King records available, where he chronicles the freedom movement that he was centered within, and constantly adjusted strategies as needed. He was a profound, but young, political activist in his 20s and 30s, and never made it to see the age of 40. This fact makes it easy to overlook that despite his wisdom, King was a young man who was still evolving with his increasing political maturity and growing insight.

The misunderstanding of King’s work is common because the vast majority of Americans have not read any of his five books, are not familiar with the organizations that he led, have not heard his numerous speeches, or seen the *full transcript* of his famous “I Have A Dream” speech given on August 28, 1963, when he condemned “the unspeakable horrors of police brutality” *twice* in this address. His evolving political work and ideology *after* the Civil Right Bill and Voting Rights Act were passed in 1964 and 1965 respectively is rarely

discussed, and thus most are unfamiliar with the second phase – the human rights era - in the Black freedom movement that King frequently discussed.

King often stated to his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) colleagues that with the passage of the Voting Rights Bill "**Congress, in a sense, signed the Civil Rights Movement out of existence.**" He meant now that the important civil rights legislation was on the books and Black people finally had the laws on their side, this first phase - civil rights era - of laying the crucial groundwork for real equality was completed. He explained that the second phase had begun, and that white Americans would not see progress and equality at the same "bargain rates" of the first period, when they did not have to give up anything in their personal life. He wrote in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967), that with the passing of the voting bill

"one phase of development in the civil rights revolution came to an end. A new phase opened, but few observers realized it or were prepared for its implications. For the vast majority of white Americans, the past decade – the first phase – had been a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not equality. White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation or all forms of discrimination. ...When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared." King further explained, "The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities with whites. ...The real cost lies ahead. The stiffening of white resistance is a recognition of that fact."

In his November 14, 1966 presentation at a SCLC retreat in Frogmore, South Carolina, King explained why there was an urgent need to transition away from the first phase to the next phase, and outlined three points.

He said, *"First, eventhough we gained legislative and judicial victories during this period...These victories did very little to improve the lot of millions of Negroes in the teeming ghettos of the North." He pointed out that, "Second, however difficult it is for us to admit this,...the changes that came about...were at best surface changes; they were not really substantive changes." His final point was a reminder on the depth of the problem, "A third thing that is necessary to see here is that while this period represented a frontal attack on the doctrine and practice of white supremacy, it did not defeat the monster of racism. ...And we must never forget that the roots of racism are very deep in America."*

King frequently explained that the "civil rights phase" of the black struggle for freedom was **from 1954 to 1965**. The starting point was the 1954 Brown v Board of Education ruling of the Supreme Court, which he called the "legal turning point" in the movement, but he cautioned that "laws declare rights but they don't deliver them," so the people themselves

have to act and make the law a reality in the nation. He also identified 1955 and the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as “the psychological turning point” because Black people stood up for dignity and respect. He explained that “nobody can ride your back unless it’s bent.” According to King, the 1965 ending point of this first period culminated with the Voting Rights Bill, signed into law on August 6, 1965.

For King, the *second phase* or *human rights era* of the movement began in **January 1966**, when SCLC shifted its campaign to Chicago, in the north. Until this time, his entire civil rights work had been concentrated in the southern states, such as Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. He warned that in the second phase white people will have “to make extensive adjustments,” and that “either the Negro will be granted freedom in this country, or he’ll have to be exterminated. That’s the choice.” This phase of King’s work is often overlooked, despite his abundance of speeches, writing, and activism around these points, because it is a later phase in his political work that is uncomfortable and difficult to acknowledge. Unfortunately, King’s last two books and most of his greatest speeches, articles, sermons, and interviews are conveniently ignored, which is the reason he is still mis-characterized as a “civil rights leader,” without any reference to his advocacy of *human rights* for Black people.

According to King, there were two periods in the Black freedom struggle in America. In various speeches and writings, he outlined these time periods and their main aspects, and explained the need to move to the second phase of the struggle:

<u>First Period (1954-1965)</u>	<u>Second Period (1966-1968)</u>
CIVIL RIGHTS	HUMAN RIGHTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moral Issues• Integration• Protest• Reform• Dream• Local Concerns• Nonviolence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Structural problem• “Black Power”• Acquisition of power• Revolution• Nightmare• National and international concerns• Support of armed struggles abroad

Dr. King’s shift from *civil rights* to *human rights and black power* began in late 1965. These are some sources and quotes of King on the second phase (human rights era) of the Black struggle for racial justice.

These are a few speeches where he emphasizes this shift:

Excerpt From: MANU AMPIM, “Dr. Martin King: The Evolution of a Revolutionary” (forthcoming)

- “The Next Stop: The North” (11/13/65)
- “SCLC Address” at Frogmore, SC (11/14/66)
- “The Crisis in Civil Rights” (7/11/67)

The SCLC Annual Convention themes in 1965 and 1966 clearly demonstrate the shift to *human rights*:

- 1965: “Human Rights –Basic Issues – The Grand Alliance”
- 1966: “Human Rights - The Continuing Struggle”

In his Human Rights Day Speech on December 10, 1965 in New York City, King stated:

- “We live an era in which the issue of **human rights** is the central question confronting all nations.” [emphasis added].

At his January 7, 1966 press conference in Chicago King stated:

“We are raising the question of **human rights**” for those “who have been denied these rights by the structures of our society.” He stated a few weeks earlier that the world lived in an era in which “the issue of **human rights** is the central question confronting all nations.” [emphasis added].

In one of his last speeches, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” (3/31/68), King emphasized the nature of the revolutionary times that they were living in, as he explained what he described as the “triple revolution”:

- “Technological revolution”
- “Revolution in weaponry”
- “**Human Rights revolution**”

Below are some bullet points which help identify the reasons for Dr. King’s shift to human rights. There must be a careful examination of Dr. King’s shift from civil rights to **human rights** and **acquiring power** for Black people and the poor, and here is a framework to do so:

- The general public has been given a completely distorted view of Dr. King’s life and political legacy as a *revolutionary activist*.
- There are numerous *primary sources* which indicate that after 1965 Martin King developed as a revolutionary activist, and this led directly to his assassination when he was only 39 years old.
- Dr. King’s revolutionary development grew out of a complex of various factors. They include:
 - The *liberation movements* in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which all drew support from King.

- King's work in *Chicago in 1966*, which marked the beginning of the 2nd and revolutionary period of his development. His focus was now on human rights, and no longer civil rights.
- The issue of self-defense and the rise of the *Black Power Movement* in June 1966, which King supported and defended.
- The *anti-Vietnam War campaign*, which intensified in 1967 and linked King to the radical left.

King was one of the most important **human rights** leaders in the 20th century, yet most are only aware of his civil rights work in the first phase of his 12 ½ years of political work.

Finally, in his book *Strength to Love* (1963), King challenged his readers to be open minded and be willing to accept new ideas. He wrote, "*Few people have the toughness of mind to judge critically and to discern the truth from the false, the fact from fiction. Our minds are constantly being invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and false facts. One of the great needs of mankind is to be lifted above the morass of false propaganda. ...The softminded man always fears change. He feels security in the status quo, and he has an almost morbid fear of the new. For him, the greatest pain is the pain of a new idea. The toughminded person always examines the facts before he reaches conclusions; in short he postjudges.*"