

Martin Luther King's Legacy of Utmost Relevance Today

Lessons from the last six decades provide insights into the current situation in the United States and the world

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*January 15, 2025 represents the 96th birthday of **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, the Civil Rights and Antiwar leader who was martyred in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.*

Dr. King was killed by a white racist sniper deployed by elements within the United States government's intelligence apparatus while lending the support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to a protracted sanitation workers strike where 1300 African American men were seeking recognition as a bargaining unit under the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). (See [this](#))

The assassination of this important figure within the broader human rights movement signaled a turning point in U.S. and world history. African Americans had fought for over three centuries against enslavement, legalized segregation, state repression and economic exploitation.

After the conclusion of World War II, a new sense of militancy erupted among people of African descent and other colonized nations around the globe. In the U.S., efforts within the legal system to end Jim Crow in the South and other regions of the country, had reached an important plateau with the historic *Brown v. Topeka* Supreme Court ruling in May 1954 which declared that "separate but equal" educational facilities were inherently unconstitutional.

In the following year of 1955, a series of extrajudicial murders of African Americans created the atmosphere for the eruption of a mass Civil Rights Movement with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and subsequent actions. In Mississippi, two leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), **Rev. George Lee** of Belzoni and **Lamar Smith** of Brookhaven, were killed for their involvement in voting registration activities in May and August respectively. (See [this](#))



MLK and others in Montgomery

During late August the 14-year-old **Emmett Till** from Chicago was visiting relatives in Tallahatchie County when he was kidnapped and brutally lynched by two white merchant-landowners after he was accused of interacting inappropriately towards a white woman. His mother, **Mamie Till-Mobley**, led a campaign to expose the lynching to people in the U.S. and the world.

Advances and Setbacks: 1963-1965

A somewhat distorted popular view of the 1950s and 1960s as it relates to the struggles of oppressed peoples is that this period was characterized by a series of victories against racism, colonialism and class exploitation. Although significant advances were made during this era, there were many atrocities committed by the racist and capitalist ruling class aimed at ensuring the maintenance of the status-quo.

In the U.S. during 1963, mass struggles were sparked in Birmingham, Alabama; Cambridge, Maryland; Danville, Virginia; Somerville, Tennessee; among many other cities. The assassination of NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers prompted outrage and greater participation in the movement. Prior to the martyrdom of Evers in June 1963, the African American youth in Birmingham had filled the jails demanding an end to legalized segregation and police violence.

Of course, the Detroit Walk to Freedom on June 23, 1963 and the later March on Washington on August 28 gained mass support due to the campaigns in various southern cities. Even though the White House under **President John F. Kennedy** welcomed the leadership of the March on Washington in the aftermath of its success, no concrete measures were

enacted by the federal government.

In less than three weeks after the March on Washington, six African American children were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan and their sympathizers in Birmingham on September 15. Four African American girls: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carol Robertson and Denise McNair died from the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church while two boys: Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware, died at other locations in the city due to violence by the police and a racist mob.

It would be decades later before anyone would be held criminally responsible for the church bombing and the assassination of Medgar Evers. In the summer of 1964, three Civil Rights workers were kidnapped and lynched by the police and the Klan in Neshoba County, Mississippi.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by the U.S. Congress later that same summer and signed into law by then President Lyndon Johnson. As in the cases of the Birmingham killings, it would take several trials over a period of years to win convictions and prison terms against the perpetrators of the killings of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner in Neshoba County.

Selma 1965: The Culmination of the Struggle

Many accounts of the events of January-March 1965 in Selma, Alabama often neglect the previous work done for years by local activists. Also, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had deployed organizers into Selma as early as 1962-63. (See [this](#))



Selma youth movement

In a matter of two months, January-March 1965, three people were murdered while carrying out civil rights work by either the police or vigilantes. Jimmie Lee Jackson was beaten and shot by Alabama State Troopers on February 18 in Marion. Jackson died eight days later in the hospital. The murder of Jackson prompted the plans for the first attempted Selma-Montgomery March. On March 7, hundreds of African Americans were beaten and gassed at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge right outside of Selma.

During the second attempt to demonstrate on March 9, the State troopers and Dallas County mounted police halted the marchers once again. Although the SCLC directed the people to turn around and go back to Brown Chapel AME Church where the movement was centered, later that day Rev. James Reeb, a Universalist Unitarian Minister from Boston, was severely beaten by several white racists outside a restaurant in Selma. Reeb died two days later, and no one was ever held accountable for his murder although the assailants had been identified.

Later after the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery manifestation on March 25, a Detroit activist, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, was shot to death by members of the Klan, one of whom was an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), while driving participates to their homes. Three of the assailants were convicted by a jury in federal court while the FBI informant, Gary Thomas Rowe, served as a witness.

However, after the release of formerly classified FBI documents proving the presence of an informant in the vehicle where the shots were fired, the federal courts refused to grant damages to the Liuzzo family in a 1983 ruling. The FBI in 1965 had launched a smear campaign against Liuzzo in the immediate aftermath of the murder. All of this was done at the aegis of former Director J. Edgar Hoover in an attempt to conceal the role of the FBI in the shooting death of Liuzzo.

Although the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on August 6, the national oppression and institutional racism against African American would continue. Just five days after the Voting Rights Act was signed, the largest African American led rebellion up until that time occurred in Los Angeles setting the stage for several hundred similar actions of civil unrest in numerous cities across the U.S. over the next five years.

Anti-Imperialism and the King Legacy

During the same month of the culmination of the Selma voting rights campaign, the Johnson administration escalated the U.S. deployment of troops into South Vietnam. SCLC at the time did not come out solidly against the imperialist war in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the Student for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the SNCC coalesced in their mobilization of the-then largest to date demonstration against U.S. intervention in Vietnam on April 17, 1965 in Washington, D.C. Approximately 25,000 people gathered for the rally and march which featured Bob Moses of SNCC as one of the main speakers. (See [this](#))



Bob Moses of SNCC during August 1965 antiwar march

During the summer of 1965, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) criticized the war in Vietnam in a newsletter. Later in January 1966, SNCC issued a comprehensive statement opposing U.S. intervention and the entire selective service system which disproportionately drafted African Americans into military service. (See [this](#))

Finally, in early 1967, Dr. King and SCLC came out forcefully against the Vietnam War. In a series of articles and addresses, Dr. King denounced the U.S. role in Southeast Asia saying it was part of a much deeper malady of militarism which hampered the efforts of the administration to purportedly end poverty among millions inside the country. (See [this](#))

It would be King's opposition to the Vietnam War, militarism as a whole, institutional racism and mass poverty which made the Civil Rights and peace advocate a target of the federal government for liquidation. His assassination on April 4, 1968 represented the determination of the ruling class and the capitalist state to end the mass struggles which characterized the period after 1955.

Today, during the middle of the third decade of the 21st century, it may appear to many people in the U.S. that the social situation is bleak with the second ascendancy of President Donald Trump and the control by the extreme right-wing of all three branches of the U.S. government. Yet, as in 1955 and 1965, the masses can rise up and create the conditions for

a much-needed resurgence in the struggles to end racism, economic exploitation and imperialist militarism.

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