Martin Luther King, Jr.

***1929—1968, American clergyman and civil rights leader***

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., graduated from Morehouse College (B.A., 1948), Crozer Theological Seminary (B.D., 1951), and [Boston University](http://www.infoplease.com/edu/colleges/5410/)(Ph.D., 1955). The son of the pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, King was ordained in 1947 and became (1954) minister of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Ala. He led the black boycott (1955-56) of segregated city bus lines and in 1956 gained a major victory and prestige as a civil-rights leader when Montgomery buses began to operate on a desegregated basis.

King organized the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/society/A0930631.html), which gave him a base to pursue further civil-rights activities, first in the South and later nationwide. His [philosophy of nonviolent resistance](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/society/A0909663.html) led to his arrest on numerous occasions in the 1950s and 60s. His campaigns had mixed success, but the protest he led in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963 brought him worldwide attention. He spearheaded the Aug., 1963, [March on Washington](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/marchonwashington.html), which brought together more than 200,000 people. In 1964 he was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0105783.html).

King's leadership in the [civil-rights movement](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html) was challenged in the mid-1960s as others grew more militant. His interests, however, widened from civil rights to include criticism of the [Vietnam War](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0850869.html) and a deeper concern over poverty. His plans for a Poor People's March to Washington were interrupted (1968) for a trip to Memphis, Tenn., in support of striking sanitation workers. On Apr. 4, 1968, he was shot and killed as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel (since 1991 a civil-rights museum).

[James Earl Ray](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0758564.html), a career criminal, pleaded guilty to the murder and was convicted, but he soon recanted, claiming he was duped into his plea. Ray's conviction was subsequently upheld, but he eventually received support from members of King's family, who believed King to have been the victim of a conspiracy. Ray died in prison in 1998. In a jury trial in Memphis in 1999 the King family won a wrongful-death judgment against Loyd Jowers, who claimed (1993) that he had arranged the killing for a Mafia figure. Many experts, however, were unconvinced by the verdict, and in 2000, after an 18-month investigation, the Justice Dept. discredited Jowers and concluded that there was no evidence of an assassination plot.

King wrote *Stride toward Freedom* (1958), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*? (1967). His birthday is a national holiday, celebrated on the third Monday in January. King's wife, [Coretta Scott King](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0827676.html), has carried on various aspects of his work. She also wrote *My Life with Martin Luther King* (1989).