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TO THE PROMISED LAND: THE CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS

In the fall of 1954, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., moved to Montgomery, Alabama, to lead a small Baptist church. The Supreme Court ruling against segregation in public schools earlier that year had changed nothing in Montgomery. Law and custom left blacks separate, unequal, and divided in their attempts to fight discrimination. When Dexter Avenue Baptist Church welcomed King, no one expected that this twenty-five-year-old minister would trumpet the call for unity and equality.

On December 1, 1955, police arrested Rosa Parks when she refused to give her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus. The black Women's Political Council suggested a bus boycott. King agreed to invite other black ministers to Dexter Avenue for a meeting. From their pulpits on Sunday morning, the ministers urged parishioners to walk or carpool to work.

On Monday, buses traveled empty. Black leaders formed a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), and elected King president. That night, King addressed a footsore crowd of thousands who gathered for a mass meeting. "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression," King preached. His speech electrified the crowd. The civil rights movement had found a spokesman.

The Montgomery bus boycott lasted 381 days. In January 1956, a bomb exploded at King's house but fortunately did not injure his wife and daughter inside. In February, the MIA filed a lawsuit to end segregation on buses. Almost immediately, the city charged King and 123 others with illegal boycotting. In March, a judge found King guilty and sentenced him to more than a year in prison or a \$500 fine. While lawyers filed appeals, King encouraged blacks in Montgomery to keep walking. Finally, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the MIA. The boycott, the bomb, the trial, and the victory all put King in the national spotlight.

In 1957, King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy gathered more than sixty black ministers from all over the South to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) handled legal maneuvers in the fight for civil rights. The SCLC took charge of the "spiritual strategy" for protests.

King traveled to Washington as part of a prayer pilgrimage. He also discussed voting rights with Vice President Richard Nixon the first of many meetings with top politicians. In the late summer of 1958, a mentally ill black woman named Izola Curry stabbed King in the chest at a bookstore where he was signing copies of his book *Stride Toward Freedom*. During his recovery from that almost fatal wound, King made a visit to India that strengthened his commitment to nonviolent action. He called for a "broad, bold advance of the southern campaign for equality." Students in Greensboro, North Carolina, responded with a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter. Others followed. In 1960, King moved to Atlanta to co-pastor Ebenezer Baptist Church with his father, and that October police arrested King during a sit-in at a department store. Presidential candidate Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts used his influence to get King freed from jail.

As president of the SCLC, King lent his support and visibility to many civil rights actions, including the Freedom Rides NOTE 1 of 1961. A year later, King met with now President Kennedy at the White House. After an unsuccessful protest in Albany, Georgia, King moved on to an antisegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Arrested and jailed, he wrote his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" to answer critics and explain why people had "a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Meanwhile, the Birmingham campaign continued. The images of white authorities turning water cannon and police dogs on children protesting peacefully shocked many Americans.

King helped plan the March on Washington in August. During the march, he touched the nation with his "I Have a Dream" speech. In 1964, Time magazine named King "Man of the Year," and only months later he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

But many people continued to oppose the civil rights movement with bombs, bullets, and billy clubs. Frustrated young blacks were questioning the effectiveness of nonviolence. In the summer of 1964, riots broke out in inner cities. King appealed for calm.

In 1965, the SCLC targeted Selma, Alabama, in a campaign to register more blacks to vote. Jailed and then released, King joined protesters on a tense march from Selma to Montgomery.

In 1966, King moved his family into a Chicago tenement. Now that blacks were on their way to achieving political equality in the South, King pushed for social equality in the North: equal opportunity in housing, employment, and education. Poverty and racism went hand in hand, he believed. While militant leaders demanded "black power now," King announced his Poor People's Campaign in 1967. The goal of this campaign was to secure jobs and freedom for everyone, black and white.

In March 1968, King traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to back a sanitation workers' strike. The violence of some marchers troubled him more than the usual threats on his life. On April 3, he told a congregation that despite death threats, he had faith in the movement: "I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord!" Little did he know of the prophecy his words carried.

NOTE 1 Freedom Rides were attempts to desegregate interstate bus facilities.

PHOTO: On May 14, 1961, a hostile mob attacked and firebombed a bus carrying Freedom Riders near Anniston, Alabama.

PHOTO: Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus in December 1955 sparked a bus boycott that drew Martin Luther King, Jr., into the civil rights movement.

PHOTO: King sits in jail after one of his many arrests for protesting.

PHOTO: Cofounder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), James Farmer and his organization were the first African Americans to implement the nonviolent measures later adopted by Martin Luther King, Jr. Under Farmer's leadership, the Freedom Riders of 1961 brought about the desegregation of southern interstate bus facilities.

PHOTO: Freedom Rider and student James Zwerg of Wisconsin was beaten unconscious when his bus was attacked in Montgomery.

PHOTO: King and other civil rights leaders meet with President John F. Kennedy.

PHOTO: Having worked for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since the 1930s, Roy Wilkins had much experience in the civil rights struggle when he became executive secretary of the NAACP in 1955.

PHOTO: People around the country gathered in Selma to march for voting rights in early 1965.

PHOTOS (2): King answers reporters' questions at a press conference (top) and, with other leaders, marches in Washington in August 1963.

PHOTO: Black Muslim leader Malcom X preached black separatism and urged African Americans to achieve equality "by any means necessary." Often in conflict with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolence creed, Malcolm X eventually moderated his extremist view to include the possibility of the coexistence of blacks and whites. He was assassinated in 1965.

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By Sylvia Whitman

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