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# THE UNFINISHED DREAM

The March on Washington and the Radical  
Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Albert Scharenberg

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Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, August 2013

**Editors:** Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg

**Address:** 275 Madison Avenue, Suite 2114, New York, NY 10016

**Email:** info@rosalux-nyc.org; **Phone:** +1 (917) 409-1040

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# The Unfinished Dream

## The March on Washington and the Radical Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Albert Scharenberg

August 28 will be the anniversary of the famous March on Washington. This event will be the climax of the commemorative marathon accompanying the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1963. It is clear that during this time we will be engulfed by images of Martin Luther King, Jr. and quotations from his “I Have a Dream” speech, as well as so many references to John F. Kennedy that there is not likely to be any space for critical thought.

The problem with this form of remembrance is that it almost completely reduces the political legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and its famous protagonist to the speech that Martin Luther King gave at the rally in Washington. Moreover, it tends to focus on a single aspect of the speech he gave that day: King’s “dream” of a world without racial barriers. This remembrance makes no mention of the fact that King criticized the continuing economic and social inequalities faced by African Americans, or that he lashed out against the government’s inaction on the rampant poverty that existed in the midst of abundance. Similarly, the fact that the march was actually called the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” is rarely mentioned. Consequently, the focus on King’s “dream” turns a radical Black leader into a hippie with just one wish: that we all just get along.

It does not do King justice to characterize him as a leader who was a threat to nobody, who endangered no one’s privileges, and whose

“dream” may even have become reality with the election of the first Black President. It certainly cannot explain why King, and the Civil Rights Movement he led, met with so much resistance and even hate—and not merely from a few backwards-looking people who seem to have believed that time had stood still since the Confederacy.

To the right of the mainstream, Tea Party supporters actually suppress this version of events. During their anti-Obama demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington three years ago—on the anniversary and location of King’s March on Washington—Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and Co. ludicrously claimed to be King’s “true” heirs by turning his message on its head and asserting that today, King would be on their side!

This represents a complete reinterpretation of history: it instrumentalizes King and the Civil Rights Movement to advance an agenda that is diametrically opposed to King’s political legacy. This has only been able to occur because mainstream remembrance of the real historical events and the people who were involved in them has become ever more faded, decontextualized, and de-radicalized. In order to counter this trend, the current view of Martin Luther King needs to be turned upside down, because the struggle for civil rights was far more radical and complicated than we are led to believe.

## King versus Kennedy

First we need to dispel the idea that whites accepted that their actions had been wrong because of appeals to Christian brotherly love by Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, or that this then propelled the Movement from one success to the next. It has been largely forgotten, but in the historically important year of 1963, King stood at a crossroads.

A long time had passed since his first great successes. Between 1955 and 1956, racial segregation on urban buses in Montgomery had been stopped through a boycott that lasted for more than a year. Just days after Rosa Parks' refusal to vacate her seat for a white passenger and her subsequent arrest, thousands of people gathered to hear their newly elected speaker—the charismatic young pastor from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. King called out to them:

*And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [...] And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. 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. [...] And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

The bus boycott in Montgomery saw King rise to international fame. Since then, however, the Civil Rights Movement had been far less successful. This was worsened by the fact that one year before, the campaign against racial segregation in Albany, Georgia, run by King and the umbrella organization that he led—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—had suffered defeat. King in particular had been viewed as a role model by the Civil Rights Movement's younger, more impatient student

activists. Since the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) the students had taken part in civil disobedience, but they now increasingly viewed King as too cautious and entangled in the interests of the Movement's white partner organizations. In short, by the end of the year it was all or nothing for Martin Luther King—the events of 1963 were to decide his fate as leader of the Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement had become stuck because institutionalized policies had repeatedly and successfully been defended against change at all levels. This occurred during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. In the South, white supremacy was still firmly in place; this was judicially sanctioned rule by the white population and legitimized through racism. Yet this was nine years after the historic U.S. Supreme Court judgment that had declared this system to be illegal, six years after the successes in Montgomery, and more than two years since the election of President Kennedy.

Although the media generally imply otherwise, Kennedy did not view King as an ally. In fact, Kennedy did not even invite the leader of the Civil Rights Movement to his inauguration. Worse still, the President was clearly unwilling to take action against racial segregation, and during his time in office he did a lot to win the vote of supporters of segregation. Furthermore, Kennedy reacted to the Civil Rights Movement with delaying tactics and particularly disappointed his African American voters by not implementing a campaign promise to immediately end racial discrimination in federally funded housing construction. Kennedy had repeatedly denied responsibility for the institutional "war" being fought over racial seg-



regation. This is clear from his reaction to the Commission on Civil Rights, which called on the president to block the payment of federal funds to Mississippi until the state followed court rulings protecting Black people from violence and discrimination; President Kennedy simply claimed that this was not within his powers.

On the question of civil rights, SCLC members viewed Kennedy as hardly better than General Eisenhower, Kennedy's Republican predecessor. King and his staff were all too aware of the difficulty of persuading Kennedy to act. It was

clear that for something to change, pressure would have to be built up, and that this would be best achieved by ensuring images of abuse by local government authorities were published in national media. These images would show how immoral and illegitimate the regime of racial segregation actually was. It was therefore clear to the SCLC that they would continue their nonviolent actions and use them to provoke police assaults. Newspaper reports, but above all photographs and television images, would then generate nationwide outrage. The aim of this was to force the reluctant President to intervene.

## **"Project C:" Birmingham—In the Lion's Den**

Towards the end of 1962, King and the Civil Rights Movement decided to enter the lion's den: Birmingham, Alabama. It was not by chance that their campaign was known internally as "Project C"—the "C" stood for confrontation. The aim of the campaign was to use protest marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and other actions to make the local police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor, show his true colors. Connor was notorious for his open collaboration with white terror groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council, and his notoriety had spread far beyond Birmingham's city limits. Only two years before, he had stood by as a racist mob attacked and severely injured the Freedom Riders with baseball bats and iron chains at the local bus station.

The campaign in Birmingham was unsuccessful at first. Although the churches were full whenever King spoke, only a few dozen African Americans were prepared to participate in the actions. The dangers they faced when campaigning for their legitimate rights were just too great.

Martin Luther King was arrested during a protest march a few days into the campaign and sent to Birmingham Jail. This was the thirteenth arrest (of thirty) that he faced for his participation in political campaigns, another fact that is rarely mentioned today. With their leader in jail, the Movement faced collapse and lacked the money to post bail for him or the other detainees.

It was in this situation, four months before the March on Washington, that King wrote his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. In his letter, King clearly explains that the system of racial segregation was not merely based on thoughtlessness, but that it in fact represented "a white power structure." King made it abundantly clear that he was deeply disappointed by the reluctant position of white liberals, who he had always courted as allies:

*First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Cit-*

*izen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom [...]. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.*

King's message is perfectly clear here: when injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty. The passage also shows that even before the March on Washington, King had become deeply disappointed by the white liberals he had trusted as allies; he was certainly not the naive, dreamy hippie that he is perceived to have been by the mainstream. He stated that:

*Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing*

*the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.'*

This section of the letter describes the core of the Civil Rights Movement's political philosophy: the aim was to use extra-congressional action to *force* politicians to act, not only in Birmingham, but also (and especially) in Washington. The passage above also illustrates why Martin Luther King was never liked by those in power—and this despite his unwavering commitment to nonviolence and the love of one's enemies and despite his continued tactical acceptance of the institutional constraints that elected politicians are subject to. Rather, he was regarded as a troublemaker because he organized protests and “tension”—particularly in the South but also in Washington, by Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. Those in government always prefer calm, orderly societies. Rather than facing criticism or pressure, they wish to be applauded and celebrated, and this was something that King was unwilling to accept.

## The Mobilization of Schoolchildren

On April 20, 1963, King and the vice-president of the SCLC, Ralph Abernathy, were finally released on bail from Birmingham Jail. The bail was organized at short notice and posted by his friend, Harry Belafonte, who is still politically active today. Belafonte's personal request to Robert Kennedy to work for King's release, however, was rebuked with sarcasm.

On release, King quickly realized that his worst fears had come true: active support for the Movement had subsided considerably, and often less than ten volunteers at the daily evening meetings expressed willingness to be

arrested during actions. Not even the release of their leader changed this at first. The SCLC leadership soon began to fear that their campaign would end in defeat even before it had really begun.

During an internal meeting, an SCLC member put forward the idea that because the adults did not dare protest publicly out of fear of losing their jobs, the children would have to be mobilized. Initially the entire group—including King—rejected the proposal, but faced with the choice of either retreating from Birmingham or doing something spectacular, King

finally accepted the idea. This decision led to criticism from almost all sides. The Kennedys portrayed King's actions as irresponsible, conservatives accused him of instrumentalizing children, and male radicals such as Malcolm X condemned the mobilization of schoolchildren as "unmanly."

On May 2, hundreds of children and young people gathered at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, the Movement's central meeting point. The police cordoned off the entire area, and whenever a group of young people attempted to leave the church, they were taken into custody using police vehicles that had been waiting for the purpose. A total of 600 children and young people were arrested that day.

On the next day, a similar event occurred. However, because the prisons were already full due to the arrest of so many children on the previous day, the police changed their tactics; they used water cannons. When this did not make the children disperse, Bull Connor sent in his dog handlers.

The sight of barking and snarling German Shepherd dogs terrified the children. Although the children fled, several were still bitten by the dogs, whereas others were injured by the police with batons. The photo of a white police officer wearing sunglasses became a symbol of police brutality. The dog handler was photographed holding onto a Black 15-year-old and

providing just enough line to enable his dog to bite the boy in the stomach.

But even the dog handlers could not disperse the schoolchildren. Finally, at three o'clock in the afternoon the police arrived at the church to negotiate. Although hundreds of people were still ready to get involved, King immediately agreed to a truce; he knew that the day's images would be enough to reach their aims.

Soon afterwards, King faced huge pressure from the government and from President Kennedy to immediately stop the protests; King steadfastly refused. In his eyes, the sudden sympathy expressed for black schoolchildren was nothing but hypocrisy. Why had the politicians shown no sympathy for the fate of the children throughout the previous years? Where had they been during the daily discrimination, oppression, and arbitrary police action and violence? What had these politicians ever done to end this intolerable situation?

That was the point: They had done nothing.

It was exactly this failure on the part of white liberals that King had criticized in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. But the opinion of the children's parents was far more important to King and his colleagues. The Movement was worried about the parents' reaction, as only they could have put an end to the demonstrations, even against King's will.

## **The Triumph of Birmingham as a Symbol of Political Change**

King's fears were quickly dispelled. When he arrived at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church later that evening, the entire community welcomed him with thunderous applause. It was at this point—when the parents trusted him so much

that they were even prepared to let their own children face imprisonment to further the goals of the Movement—that the Civil Rights Movement actually united behind him, not just in Birmingham but throughout the country.

This victory marked a personal turning point for King. On his arrival in the city in early April, many people, from journalists to activists, believed that the highpoint of his influence had long since passed. Now, just six weeks later, he was the Movement's undisputed leader.

The events in Birmingham sent waves across African America. This was the Civil Rights Movement at its strongest. In the coming weeks, local protests were to spread across the South, and then across the entire country. King's supporters went on the offensive, and they took up the nonviolent struggle against racial segregation in hundreds of towns. Everywhere, activists asked themselves: If it could be done in Birmingham, why not here? And if the children are taking the initiative, is it acceptable that we as adults let them stand alone?

## **King's Surveillance by the FBI**

On June 22, after the events in Birmingham and before the March on Washington, King was finally invited to an audience at the White House. But if he had assumed that the President wanted to talk about desegregation and the struggle against discrimination, he would quickly think again. In a bizarre interview round, the Attorney General, his deputy, and finally—during a walk through the famous rose garden—the President himself tried to separate King from two of his associates, who they accused of being communists. Even ten years after McCarthy, an accusation that someone worked with communists was still an effective means of politically discrediting them. When King refused and demanded proof, the FBI produced newspaper articles claiming communists had infiltrated the Civil Rights Movement. The resulting public pressure finally forced King to back down; with a

The triumph of Birmingham was to lead to a new political current: Despite the ongoing racist violence, Bull Connor's defeat set a force in motion that could no longer be stopped. The supporters of racial segregation were now on the defensive, and the Civil Rights Movement was soon to achieve its decisive breakthrough.

After years of stalling, even President Kennedy felt compelled to support the Movement and sided against racial segregation. On June 11 in a televised speech, he stated, "Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfil its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them." A debate soon began in Congress about the Civil Rights Act, which was finally adopted one year later, after Kennedy's assassination.

heavy heart King broke contact with his attorney, Stanley Levinson, and his close associate, Jack O'Dell.

Doing so did not, however, reduce the pressure on King. Just a few months after August 28, 1963, the FBI intensified its surveillance of King; this occurred with the explicit permission of Attorney General Robert Kennedy. From this point on, all of King's telephone conversations were monitored, and rooms in which he stayed were bugged. At the end of the year, the FBI in New York and Atlanta received orders to take action "as is appropriate to neutralize or completely discredit" King. This signalled the start of an incredible smear campaign, during which attempts were made to link King to tax evasion, to cut off the SCLC's sources of funding, to threaten and frighten King's allies, and to influence journalists and members of Congress.



Immediately after he had been awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, the FBI sent King its infamous “suicide package,” which among other things included audio recordings of his sexual affairs, with the aim of persuading King to kill himself. From then on, the FBI also failed to inform him about assassination plots against him and refused to provide him with personal protection.

It was precisely in the year of the March on Washington that King was monitored and deliberately discredited by the FBI on behalf of the government. This was how representatives of state power treated the leader of the Civil Rights Movement while he was still alive. Would they have treated him in the same manner had he merely spoken about a “dream?”

## No to War

King’s opposition to war was used as an opportunity to increase surveillance and attempts to discredit him, something that continues to be the case with anti-war activists in “Obama’s America.”

In early 1965, shortly after he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Martin Luther King began to speak out against the Vietnam War. But the media outcry was so great that for the time being he limited himself to promoting an anti-war perspective among his immediate circle. Early in 1967, King received a copy of the January issue of the magazine *Ramparts*. In an article on “The Children of Vietnam,” he saw photos depicting the ugly reality of war, including a mother holding her baby that had been killed by the U.S. military. This inspired King to use all of his powers to campaign against the war, despite the unpopularity of his position. Today, in the age of embedded journalism and the “War on Terror,” such images are no longer published by the mainstream media.

On April 4, 1967, at a meeting of the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam in New York’s Riverside Church, King set out his opposition to the war in no uncertain terms. He was later to become co-chair of this organization. In his speech, King argued directly against

U.S. military operations and the commander-in-chief, President Johnson. King stated that his conscience provided him with no choice but “to break the betrayal of my own silence.” He argued that as the military was devouring enormous sums of money, “war is the enemy of the poor.” He viewed the devastation of Vietnam by his own government in terms of the unspeakable tradition of “deadly Western arrogance” and American foreign policy in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. For King, this was a form of warfare that had no qualms about civilian casualties. As such, it demonstrated that “we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam.” If the Vietnam War, which had already led to the murder of one million men, women, and children, were not to be stopped by “a radical revolution of values,” the U.S. would soon “approach spiritual death.” In order to prevent this from happening, King argued that justice must be made to prevail, in terms of both the economic exploitation of developing countries and the distribution of wealth in the United States. This could not be achieved through war, he argued, but through the immediate cessation of hostilities and peace negotiations with the Viet Cong; only this could “save the soul of America.” King, the apostle of nonviolence, left no doubt about his moral obligations: “I could never again raise my voice against the violence

of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.”

This speech led the Nobel Peace Prize winner to face a storm of indignation. His remarks were condemned in the strongest terms through-

out the media. President Johnson was furious and referred to King as “that goddamn nigger preacher.” It should not be difficult to imagine what King—who would now be 84 years old if he had not been murdered—would say about Obama’s foreign policy, about the use of drones, targeted killings, and “collateral damage.”

## From “Dream” to “Nightmare”

King even went one step further. In a radio address on Christmas Eve 1967, he complained that the “dream” of the just world he had set out in 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial was “turning into a nightmare.” This led him to call for a “bolder dream, a dream of revolution rather than one of reform.” In an interview, he stated “For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.”

Within just a decade, King’s demands had dramatically changed. In Montgomery, he had called for desegregation in the city’s buses; now he was calling for “a social revolution,” for “basic structural changes in the architecture of American society.”

King, a liberation theologian, even turned against the existing economic order, arguing, “Something is wrong with capitalism.” He viewed the roots of economic injustice as located “in the system rather than in men or faulty operations.” As a solution to these problems, King called for “democratic socialism” in America. However, the Nobel Peace Prize winner only spoke so openly among friends and during internal meetings such as the SCLC

retreats, where he might meet contradictory opinions but did not need to fear the official published line on the Cold War. However, in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, which was published in 1967, he openly called for a “socially conscious democracy” that would abolish “the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”

King’s priorities in the last few years of his life confirm this. As such, it should not be surprising that the campaign in Chicago (where in the north of the country, the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition’s campaign had failed due to informal, covert racism) or King’s last campaign, the Poor People’s Campaign, with which he aimed to mobilize the country’s poor to besiege the capital, are rarely mentioned in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the March on Washington. The same applies to King’s radical opposition to war, his criticism of the white power structures that lay behind the facade of color blindness, and lastly King’s relentless surveillance by the FBI.

Clearly, this is because King’s true message is still politically explosive today. Social inequality is much worse than it was in the 1960s; war has become a permanent condition; and despite the election of the first Black President, racial segregation and the social gap between whites

and blacks remains unbroken. Furthermore, Martin Luther King did not speak out against but rather advocated in favor of a guaranteed income; he did not represent corporate interests, but openly supported trade union struggles. Moreover, King was not proposing an idle night-watchman state that, neglecting its social responsibilities, only benefited the rich, but instead called for massive social welfare programs to fight poverty, including universal health insurance. He was not against a liberation-theology interpretation of Christianity, but rather followed the path of radical liberation theology and gave everything in the struggle against poverty in the here and now. He did not even turn against socialism, but actually called for a democratic socialist society. Finally, King certainly did not support war-based U.S. foreign policy, but instead became a principal opponent of the Vietnam War.

The main lesson of King's activism, however, is that it was not politicians—not the Kennedys, the governors, or the members of Con-

gress—who were responsible for social progress in U.S. society at the time. It was not the understanding of whites in the South or in the White House itself (which, in fact, was built by slaves) that crucially changed the fate of African Americans. Rather, it was the *action* organized by King and the Civil Rights Movement that repeatedly forced political leaders to act, even against their own wishes. It was the Civil Rights Movement's massive, nonviolent, fearless struggle that led the United States to implement its centuries-old promise of formal equality of all its citizens before the law. And it was only through the huge pressure exerted on Congress by King and the Civil Rights Movement that a set of social reforms was finally passed that even decades of neoliberal hegemony have not been able to erode completely. That is what we should be remembering today—and not simply the legend of his "dream."

*All quotes taken from Scharenberg, Albert (2011), Martin Luther King. Ein biografisches Porträt, Freiburg, Germany.*

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