
Martin Luther King: Influence On The Position Of African Americans

Throughout the civil rights movement, many individuals influenced the position of African Americans in a variety of ways. From grassroots activism to national marches, individuals affected the morale, organization, and pride of African Americans, but nobody, however, did this as significantly as Martin Luther King did. The influences upon the impact of individuals altered to a significant manner as time advanced, with the information more regularly available by the time the 1960s arrived, which aided Luther King to convey his message to all areas within American society, contributing towards palpable change within American legislation. His influence on the legislative change is unrivaled by any other individual which is the most significant alteration possible for any African American, which made Historian, Peter Ling, believe that “No one else matched his leadership”, whereas Clayborne Carson professes that “black struggle would have followed a similar course if King had never lived”. Other individuals, such as Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, significantly influenced attitudes within the African American community and helped promote the idea of black pride, however, the effect of this on actual change is debatable. Individuals such as Booker T Washington and W.E.B Du Bois did have influence, but due to their controversial views, in turn with the timeframe which they operated in, did not allow them to have the influence that perhaps they could have had.

King’s influence over advancing the position of African Americans was significantly helped by the adoption of a non-violent ideology towards tackling racial injustices. This approach allowed the civil rights movement to advance in a way not previously witnessed. This was first seen in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. On the first day of the boycott, 15,000 people were present to witness one of his speeches, proving that his methods could inspire many. On the 5th of June 1956, a federal court in Montgomery concluded that ‘the enforced segregation of black and white passengers on motor buses operating in the City of Montgomery violates the Constitution and laws of the United States. Having such influence as to affect law within a country is very significant, advancing the position of African Americans by not only providing more freedoms and rights but also through inspiration, proving that protest can improve their lives. This style of protest, additionally, garnered a significant level of support from white people, who were inspired by the convincing nature of King’s speeches, as shown by the significant level of white support present at the march on Washington in 1963. This exerted increasing pressure on the government to continue to change and remove discriminatory laws as King had “appealed vitally to neutrals in a way that negated more conservative voices.” However, other individuals also adopted a non-violent philosophy in order to improve the position of African Americans, such as Booker T Washington. Washington’s opinion was that white and black people were separate and that the post-reconstruction period for black people should have much of its focus on the development of practical skills and education in industrial fields. Subsequently, he opened the Tuskegee Institute in 1881. This facility had a significant impact on the lives of African Americans, as it enabled many to learn practical skills, allowing them to become more self-reliant and gain employment. However, the impact this could possibly make on the advancement of African Americans as a collective was minimal because only a limited number of African Americans had access to the education Tuskegee provided. Additionally, his overall attitude towards the position of African Americans, even though non-violent in nature, was detrimental due to his acceptance of discrimination from white people, believing that equality

was never achievable, becoming known as “the Great Accommodator”. While advancing education should be applauded, the benefits due to legislative change would have both short- and long-term effects for all African Americans, therefore the King’s approach was deemed more successful.

On September 18th, 1895, Booker T Washington delivered a speech known as the Atlanta compromise speech to a mostly white audience at International Exposition in Atlanta. The speech displays Booker T Washington’s unwillingness to attempt to change attitudes towards African Americans and therefore preventing advancement in this area. He suggested that Black people, after being emancipated and slavery abolished within the 13th amendment in 1865, had been offered “too much too soon”, reinforcing the notion that he believed that progress came in agricultural roles first. The speech is very valuable as it presents the problems that the African American community faced in the late Nineteenth century as Washington’s opinion was one that suited the agenda of the white population. Since a copy of the speech was sent to President Grover Cleveland, it reinforced to the politicians that no changes were needed, creating a false narrative that African Americans could just “gain valuable advantages offered to them by their citizenship”. Portraying this narrative towards leading white figures undermines the validity of any suggestion that Washington was the most influential leader because he gained white support. However, the source does have limits to its value because of the time Washington was operating in. Washington’s possible influence over advancement would be limited due to Jim Crow laws, so it could be suggested that Washington was operating in a manner that would best improve the position of African Americans, through support on “education of head, hand, and heart”. However, overall the speech is very valuable in understanding why Booker T Washington was problematic overall for the advancement of the position of African Americans and why he cannot be valued as having the most impact out of any individual. His apparent endorsement of white supremacy hindered the development of equality, justifying the “separate but equal” precedent set.

Martin Luther King, within his campaign, manipulated the media in such a way to escalate issues to a much higher level than seen before. His skills as an orator, combined with him becoming a recognizable face in the media, formed a view of him as a great leader who could garner support from people who were less concerned about the issues, therefore the pressure on the Governments both local and national extended and demand for change increased. Through “the miracle of television” in the 1950s and 1960s, which allowed information to be distributed nationwide, King had the ability to expand his supporter base and therefore influence. King’s continued presence on the television in the form of speeches and debates was a significant factor in the extensive support seen for the march on Washington in August 1963, in which 250,000 people attended and millions witnessed on the television worldwide. The level of support seen towards King pushed civil rights to the forefront of political discussion, eventuating in the Civil rights Act of 1964, significantly advancing the position of African Americans through the banning of segregation in public places. Additionally, as King adopted a more non-violent philosophy, when aggressive retaliation was seen to these non-violent protests in the media, such as in “the most segregated city in the country,” Birmingham, Alabama in April 1963, this only increased sentiment towards King and his ideology. After King’s arrest and imprisonment, the pressure placed on the Government due to the media backlash was pivotal in President Kennedy’s decision to propose a major civil rights bill, the Civil rights Act of 1964, illustrating how King advanced the position of African Americans through the media. However, it could be suggested that this success had come fortuitously. King operated primarily within the 1950s and 1960s, a time when televisions had become a widespread household item, with 90%

of households owning one by 1962. This allowed the distribution of media stories to become almost instantaneous with moving pictures providing a greater impact on people than type in a newspaper or listening to descriptions on the radio. Other leaders, such as Ida B Wells, did not have the opportunity to gain such widespread media attention due to the time in which they were operating, which could have affected her effectiveness. Wells, whilst promulgating the abhorrent lynching's occurring in the southern states within the "Free Speech and Headlight" newspaper in the 1890s, could not garner the same interest in her pieces as the newspaper's readership was predominantly African Americans in southern states, even though the support for the publication from those readers was significant. However, without the availability of national press, the effects these pieces could have were limited and therefore could not aid the position of African Americans as significantly as King did. In Addition, with the negative effect individuals such as Malcolm X was having on the media at the same time, King's achievements in the media could be said to be even better than first apparent. X was an advocate of equality "by any means necessary" and he encouraged a more violent means as to achieving advancement for African Americans. The constant negative press surrounding these violent protests discouraged white people to support the movement, so King's achievements within a similar timeframe become more substantiated and impressive. The manipulation of the media by Martin Luther King does have significant and strong links to legislative change, especially in terms of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, even though it could be suggested that there was a fortune in terms of the timeframe and the coincidental technological advancements. The use of the media in an effective way was not guaranteed, however, so the success of his campaigns cannot be underestimated, and the position of African Americans was advanced significantly thereafter.

The Selma to Montgomery marches in March 1965 followed a similar pattern to the events in Birmingham, where peaceful protestors were met with retaliation from state troopers. Horrifying images of bloodied protestors were seen nationwide on the television, with the perception of those observing these brutal pictures captured by George B. Leonard in a report for "The Nation" magazine on 8th March 1965, the day after "bloody Sunday". This source has significant value in understanding the influence the media, together with a non-violent protest ideology, could have on influencing legislative change. "There are moments when the senses become suddenly sharper when outrage turns to action" indicates that the national reaction to these abhorrent events forced action to be taken, which is shown by the immediate response by President Johnson announcing the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This reinforces the value of the source as it shows that action was undertaken due to the outrage caused by the influence of the media. Also, as the source was written the day after the event, this adds value as it would accurately portray the opinion of the time, therefore showing the emotional reaction possible from viewing a story in the media, described as "painful", reinforcing the media's importance. However, the source does have limits as, due to its proximity to the event, the national opinion could not have been fully compiled yet, so suggesting that the "entire nation" had become "outraged" could be considered premature, reducing the source's value. However, the source is extremely valuable overall in recognizing the influence the media had over legislative change, reinforcing the notion that King was the most influential figure in advancing the position of African Americans.

Peter Ling, a professor of American studies at the University of Nottingham, has the opinion that, although King's "messiah complex" proved a detriment to his leadership through "neglect of more basic, organizing measures", he was still the most influential figure in terms of political and legislative change, and that "No one else matched his leadership of targeted, orchestrated

campaigns that strengthened national political strategy.” This reinforces the notion that King was the most influential in the most important aspect in terms of progression, the political aspect. To a strong extent, Ling’s viewpoint has value because he is professing American studies at a university, therefore his knowledge of the subject will be thorough and substantiated through considerable research and evaluation. In addition, much of his writings, such as “Martin Luther King’s Style of Leadership”, were written in retrospect, as this was written in 2003. This adds value to the opinion as being uninvolved within the movement allows Ling to properly substantiate his opinion with information and see the true extent as to what the effects of legislation such as the Civil rights act did have. Also, Ling’s opinions can be substantiated with evidence such as legal documentation that would not have been available previously, and that, due to the distance from the event Ling has, the piece can be written more objectively and with greater substance, creating a more validated opinion. Ling references King’s limitations and his lack of influence over “local struggles” and how he “Had never been a master strategist”, however, this shows limits in the value of his opinion as it underestimates his influence in events such as the Birmingham movement, as he was one of the main instigators within the planning of the campaign, with the strategy adopted is the most significant factor in the success of the campaign. Overall, however, Ling’s opinion is very valuable in understanding the impact that Luther King did have on the position of African Americans through his thorough assessment of all of King’s actions and recognizing his limitations whilst still concluding that he was the most significant figure in advancing the position of African Americans through his influence on political strategy in the United States.

However, one historian who questions King and his importance is Clayborne Carson, the current director of the Martin Luther King Education and research institute. His overriding opinion is that, although King was the most prominent individual, he was not the most important, as “black struggle would have followed a similar course if King had never lived.”. There was too great an emphasis on his “charisma” which obscured “other important aspects of the black movement”. This interpretation, however, does have limitations. Firstly, Clayborne Carson was present on the march on Washington in 1963, with his initial opinion being that he “Had a lot of vivid memories, but not of King’s speech”. Carson’s presence at King’s speech, and his conclusion drawn from that, have a significant impact on his view of King and may have clouded his objectivity in his future writings and potentially limits the value of his opinions in terms of King’s Impact. In addition, some of his articles such as “Martin Luther King Jr.: Charismatic leadership in a mass struggle” were written in the 1980s, in this instance 1987. At this time, there was a greater focus in historical writing on grassroots activism, on people “who initiated protests and small towns in the south”, and how influential this was, therefore less credit would have been awarded to King since the focus had shifted away from leaders, more to activists, therefore limiting the value of his opinion on King within this. However, his appointment as director at a King research institute indicates his opinion to be valuable as he was given a significant role in the development and understanding of the Civil rights movement in the future. Furthermore, much of the basis that forms Carson’s opinion on King was that he was not the instigator of the events that “opened up the possibility for King to show qualities for which we remember him”. In the case of the Montgomery bus boycott, Rosa Parks initiated the boycott through her refusal to give up her seat on the bus, therefore there is fair justification to suggest that King was an effective spokesperson but was not the most influential individual, showing value in his judgment. Overall, even though elements of his judgment are valuable and can be justified to a certain extent, there are significant limitations to Carson’s interpretation that do not allow complete objectivity and review of events in complete retrospect, due to his emotional connection with King and the time in which his works were written, therefore his viewpoint

cannot be seen as very valuable in understanding King's influence over the advancement of the position of African Americans.

However, an element to the civil rights movement as to which Luther King was not as successful in comparison to others in advancing the position of African Americans was in terms of instilling a sense of black pride. Marcus Garvey, for example, modeled his whole philosophy in terms of civil rights on advancement for those of African descent and 'Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad, when establishing UNIA in 1914. The concept behind his "Black Star Line" was to establish a black community in a place where they were valued and were perceived to belong. He wanted to advance the position of African Americans by attempting to improve the livelihoods of the African Americans by moving to a place where he believed they would be valued as themselves, with significant success in terms of support, with the UNIA claiming to have 4 million members in 1920. Additionally, Frederick Douglass continued to allow black people to believe that discernible change was a possibility, even whilst operating in challenging times during the reconstruction period. His inspiring speeches, such as the Keynote Speech in 1876, made African Americans believe that there was an opportunity for them, additionally with the 1871 civil rights act, which he helped establish through his support of Ulysses S Grant. His positions in established and high-ranking positions within the US government, such as the deputy ambassador to the Dominican Republic also instigated an improvement in the level of black pride. The achievement of this would inspire many African Americans, to make them believe that advancement was possible, which, in ways, was the opposite to what King attempted in some instances, where there was a strong suggestion from him that progression was unachievable without legislative change. Additionally, the non-violent approach by King would have been seen as uninspiring and "too cautious" to some, especially those born from the ideology of Malcolm X. Violent protests to achieve advancement appealed to younger activists, with many believing that X was the "cutting edge" within the activist world. He reinforced this by suggesting that "If they make the KKK non-violent, I'll be non-violent", which outlines the justification of acting in such a way to get progression. X was at the forefront of the Black Power and Black Panther movements, who mobilized many and created the belief that change was possible. This, therefore, advanced the position of African Americans through inspiration, enabling them to protest with purpose and direction. However, the methodology employed by Malcolm X was not beneficial in the long run due to the reduction in the chance of actual legislative change occurring due to the violent protest.