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Martin Luther King

Martin Luther King was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. He was raised as a Baptist in the segregated South and gained a Doctorate from Boston University in 1955. King dedicated his adult life to issues relating to Civil Rights and equality for Americans, becoming a national figure during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56. King co-ordinated and spearheaded the refusal by many black people to use the public buses until segregation on public transport was overturned – which it eventually was. King subsequently led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from 1957 and became an internationally recognised figure during his ‘I have a Dream’ speech in Washington D.C during 1963. King’s actions are often credited with being a key factor in the passing of the Civil Rights Act 1964 and Voting Rights Act 1965. However, historians debate the ultimate significance of Martin Luther King to the movement.

Patrick’s arguments that King was vital to the Civil Rights Movement	Elliott’s arguments that King’s contributions to the Civil Rights Movement deserve a more critical appraisal
King’s ultimate goal - as espoused in the ‘I have a Dream’ and ‘I’ve been to the Mountaintop’ speeches, was entirely justified and congruent with America’s own stated ideals; that all Americans be treated equally – irrespective of class, creed or colour - in line with the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution.	He can hardly be considered to be pioneer in the area of civil rights, as he simply continued the good work of those who had come before him: W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph and such – people who often get overshadowed by King’s popularity.
King was an unswerving proponent of Non-Violent Direct Action, inspired by Ghandi in India and his Baptist faith. When faced with violent opposition, such as at Birmingham in 1963, he was able to remain peaceful and win international sympathy for the cause and maintain the moral high ground.	Even during, what is considered to be King’s ‘heyday’, there are other individuals and groups worthy of equal or more praise than he – Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP, the SNCC and such. He may have been the ‘face’ of the movement, but he was not the rest of the body.
King was an incessant and relentless organiser – he appreciated the fact that the goal of de facto equality could not be won alone. As well as leading the Montgomery Improvement Association during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from 1957. King wisely wanted blacks to register to vote, so that politicians would be compelled to take issues relating to Civil Rights and equality seriously.	When King turned his attention to the problems of the north, he used the same tactics that had helped turn the tide against segregation and voter restrictions in the south. These tactics failed spectacularly when used to address the socio-economic problems of the urban, industrial north – where he made little to no impact. He then alienated his biggest ally within the federal government (LBJ) when he criticised US involvement in Vietnam in a speech in 1967.
King was inclusive of support from all quarters of society, as long as they remained peaceful. Unlike others such as Malcolm X, King realised that the goal of equality could only be won by building a mass movement, involving people of all colours and faiths.	In no way was he a nationally embraced figure within the black community. Many young black men and women in the urban north, had little in common with this educated, middle class, Baptist who kept telling them to ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘be patient’.

Don’t forget to check out Dr Elliott L. Watson’s free website: www.thecourseworkclub.com and follow him at @thelibrarian6 on Twitter.

Don’t forget to check out Patrick O’Shaughnessy’s free website: www.historychappy.com and follow him at @historychappy on Twitter.