



**STRATEGY
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**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
HIS STRATEGIC VISION, LEADERSHIP, AND
CONFLICT/ALLIANCE WITH THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

His Strategic Vision, Leadership, and Conflict/Alliance with the Kennedy Administration

by

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ABSTRACT

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History has vividly recorded three revolutions in the United States of America. These tumultuous events— The American Revolution (1776-1783), the Civil War (1861-1865), and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968)—occurred approximately one century apart. This paper addresses the Civil Rights Movement, a mostly nonviolent period of transformation centered on issues of racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. More specifically, it focuses on the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., arguably the most influential and effective leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He was a “strategic leader” and personified the essential qualities that define strategic leadership. The purpose of this project is to examine his performance as a historic strategic leader within the context of the strategic leader competencies, and to analyze this leadership in light of his relationship, challenges, and efforts in working with the Kennedy Administration. This examination has relevance to today’s senior leader because the impact of Dr. King’s vision and the Civil Rights agenda of the Kennedy Administration helped shape our current national values and interests. Dr. King, President Kennedy, and Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, were often at odds on how to best end segregation and racial discrimination in America. These conflicts were significant, but through Dr. King’s extraordinary strategic leadership, they were overcome. The alliance between King and the Kennedy Administration ultimately established the framework and impetus that eventually led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the premiere civil rights and human rights legislation of this nation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	III
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.	1
DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGIC LEADER: THE EARLY YEARS	1
DR. KING AND THE STRATEGIC LEADER COMPETENCIES	3
PRESIDENT KENNEDY: FOR OR AGAINST DESEGREGATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS	7
SHAPING THE PRESIDENT'S POLITICAL AGENDA: KING'S VIEW	9
THE FORMING OF ALLIANCES: KINGS AND KENNEDYS	11
CONCLUSION	13
ENDNOTES	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. HIS STRATEGIC VISION, LEADERSHIP, AND CONFLICT/ALLIANCE WITH THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

The United States of America, like many countries, has produced more than its share of great leaders. These leaders hailed from various walks of life, and many of those commonly referred to as strategic leaders came from our military institutions. Most of these American leaders endeavored to make our world a better place, whether leading soldiers in combat, leading the nation in peace, or leading citizens through periods of social change.

"It has been said that there were three revolutions in American history-spaced approximately one century apart: The American Revolution (1776-1783), the Civil War (1861-1865), and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), a mostly nonviolent period of transformation (but no less a revolution) conducted to change human behavior relating to the doctrine of racial prejudice known as separate but equal".¹

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arguably the most influential and effective leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He was a "strategic leader" and personified the essential qualities and competencies that define strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is defined in the Strategic Leadership Primer published by the United States Army War College as follows: *"the process used by a leader to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood vision by influencing the organizational culture, allocating resources, directing through policy and directive, and building consensus within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous global environment which is marked by opportunities and threats."*

The purpose of this project is to examine Dr. King's performance as a historic strategic leader within the context of the strategic leader competencies (conceptual, technical, and interpersonal skills), and to critically examine his relationship with the Kennedy Administration in pursuing his strategic vision. This examination has relevance to today's senior leader because the impact of Dr. King's vision and the Civil Rights agenda that he forged in working with the Kennedy Administration helped shape the current national values and interests of the United States. Today's senior leaders bear a responsibility to understand our history and our country's struggle in pursuing freedom and democracy for "all" people. Equally important, today's leaders, military and civilian, need to thoroughly understand, appreciate, and practice the leadership competencies that made Dr. King one of the world's premiere strategic leaders of all times.

DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGIC LEADER: THE EARLY YEARS

Dr. King's development as a strategic leader began as a child in Atlanta, Georgia. He was the son of three generations of ministers and enjoyed a first-hand view of the challenges and rewards of leading people, particularly through periods of adversity. As a child, he witnessed first-hand the abuses and indignities of racial prejudice, discrimination, and violence directed at minorities.² He enjoyed a positive and firmly religious upbringing in a household where he was taught that segregation and bigotry were wrong.³ His father and maternal grandfather were active fighters in the movement to abolish "Jim Crow

Laws" in the country.⁴ Like most African American children of the south during the years of segregation, Dr. King suffered personal experiences of racial injustice that helped shape his character and leadership abilities.⁵ One of the more memorable events involving segregation that helped shape his views occurred while traveling on a bus with one of his high school teachers from Dublin to Atlanta, Georgia, one evening after winning an oratorical contest. The subject of this contest, ironically enough, was "The Negro and the Constitution".⁶ Here is an excerpt from that boyhood oratorical contest:

"We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance. We cannot have a healthy nation with one-tenth of the people ill-nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognize no color lines-obey no Jim Crow laws. We cannot have a nation orderly and sound with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost forced into unsocial attitudes and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. We cannot come to full prosperity with one great group so ill delayed that it cannot buy goods. So as we gird ourselves to defend democracy from foreign attack, let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free opportunity for all people.

Today thirteen million black sons and daughters of our forefathers continue the fight for the translation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments from writing on the printed page to an actuality. We believe with them that "if freedom is good for any it is good for all," -that we may conquer Southern armies by the sword, but it is another thing to conquer hate, that if the franchise is given to Negroes, they will be vigilant and defend, even with their arms, the ark of federal liberty from treason and destruction by her enemies."⁷

While traveling back home by bus after winning first place in this contest and basking in the aftermath of the victory, he was forced to get out of his seat, surrender it to a white passenger, and stand in the aisle for the ninety-mile trip home.⁸

Although the bus incident was not Dr. King's first exposure to direct prejudice, it was the most humiliating episode he had personally endured to date.⁹ He had witnessed similar events of racial prejudice that were directed towards his parents by police officers and business merchants.¹⁰ "It was from experiences like these that, as a young man, Martin developed a hatred for white people, for the oppressive society he was forced to live in, and for injustice of any kind".¹¹ This hatred caused very confusing emotions for young Martin Luther King because they contradicted all aspects of his Christian teachings and observations of his parental role models.¹²

His parents taught him not to react to this hate with violence or anger, but rather with love, compassion, and defiance where appropriate.¹³ He was fortunate in that he watched his father and mother battle against prejudice without resorting to violence.¹⁴ Their example had a significant impact on the formulation of strategies he would use later in his life. His parents' influence shaped his thirst for knowledge which resulted in his becoming a serious reader and gifted student at a very early age. He was admitted to Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of fifteen.¹⁵ It was during this period of his life

that he began to actually question the moral position of the US Government and the consequences of oppressing a nation's people.¹⁶

While a student at Morehouse, Dr. King began a fundamental transformation that would shape his views on the dismantling of segregation and racial discrimination. First, he became a minister "because he felt an inner urge to serve society and to preach the gospel".¹⁷ Second, he overcame his pure hatred of the "white man". This occurred in part through the eye opening experience of working with young white men and women who were nearly as committed to ending segregation as he was. This revelation, coupled with his religious conviction, helped to make him a more tolerant and cooperative man.¹⁸ Third, and perhaps most interesting in his early development, King read Henry David Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience". It was during this reading of a "courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than to support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, that Dr. King made his first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance."¹⁹

Dr. King graduated from Morehouse College at the age of nineteen.²⁰ His thirst for education was still strong.²¹ He was becoming more enamored with the study of religion and the potential for practicing the ministry.²² These desires, along with his father's encouragement, motivated him to apply for admission to Seminary.²³ "While attending the Crozet Theological Seminary, he began a serious intellectual quest for methods to eliminate social evil."²⁴

DR. KING AND THE STRATEGIC LEADER COMPETENCIES

The major categories of leadership competencies are conceptual, technical, and interpersonal. Strategic conceptual competencies include the thinking skills needed to understand and deal with the complex and ambiguous strategic world. Technical competencies include knowledge of the external political, economic, and cultural systems that impact the organization. Interpersonal competencies include consensus building, both internal and external to the organization, and the capacity to communicate effectively.²⁵

Conceptual competence was one of Dr. King's greatest strengths. First, his frame of reference development was well suited for his leadership role in the Civil Rights movement. He was raised in a very religious home where he was taught that all people were created equal and in the image of God. He benefited from a solid education that included a Doctorate in Systematic Theology from Boston University, and began his professional career as a pastor of a small Southern Baptist church in Alabama.²⁶ Second, his problem management skills were superb. He was forced to consider and manage problems offered by opposing parties in the fight for civil rights. Third, he had a tremendous capacity to envision the future. He instinctively knew what America should look like and how to best create the opportunities to realize that vision. Like many strategic leaders, Dr. King possessed a comprehensive understanding of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the principles of freedom that underpinned the founding of the United States. It was his understanding of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, along

with his core religious beliefs, from which he developed his passion to fight the institutions of bigotry and segregation.

One of Dr. King's first major tasks after assuming the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama was to help organize the boycott of the city bus system. His duties and responsibilities in this community required a great deal of conceptual competence—a thorough knowledge of a complex and ambiguous world. Montgomery, Alabama, was such a place. Like most segregated places in America, African-Americans in that city were relegated to sitting in the back of the public buses. Dr. King quickly learned that people, black and white, had their own set of fears and prejudices. These fears complicated his efforts in trying to organize a peaceful means of getting the city of Montgomery to change the laws for city bus passengers.

There were two local area political action organizations that focused on race relations in Montgomery, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Alabama Council on Human Relations.²⁷ Both cared about treating human beings decently; however, there were some differences in their approaches. The NAACP felt that integration could only come through legislation and court action.²⁸ The Alabama Council on Human Relations was an interracial organization that employed educational methods to achieve its purpose.²⁹ It sought to attain, through research and action, equal opportunity for all the people of Alabama.³⁰

Like most strategic leaders, Dr. King had to employ significant skill in persuading both of these organizations to work together. He believed strongly that both of their approaches were necessary to end segregation.³¹ His time in Crozer Theological Seminary, Boston University, and observing his father, the Rev. M. L. King, Sr., lead church congregations, had prepared him well to handle opposition parties. Dr. King convinced both groups that "through education one sought to change attitudes and internal feelings (prejudice, hate, etc.); through legislation and court orders one sought to regulate behavior. Anyone who starts out with the conviction that the road to justice is only one lane wide will inevitably create a traffic jam and make the journey infinitely longer."³²

Dr. King's efforts at building coalitions between organizations were not limited to the NAACP and the Alabama Council on Human Relations. He was very active in working with and guiding the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). It took Dr. King and the MIA almost two years to force the city of Montgomery to desegregate city busses. The method he used to successfully achieve this end was non-violent protest. After numerous arrests, attempts on his life, and a ruling by the United States Supreme Court, the city was forced to desegregate the buses. One of the most perplexing challenges that Dr. King faced during this period was keeping the black population focused on the "end state" without fearing the loss of jobs or life.³³ His professional training at the seminary and at Boston University, years of inculcating the teachings of religious parents, and an innate understanding of human emotions helped him lead the people of Montgomery, Alabama, through a tumultuous period in our country's history. Dr. King's success in Montgomery, Alabama, offers a clear example of conceptual competence. His success

can be directly attributed to his thinking skills and his ability to deal effectively with a complex and ambiguous environment.

Technical competence was an imperative for Dr. King. As an end state, he wanted to end segregation throughout the United States because it violated all aspects of biblical law, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights.³⁴ In order to achieve that end, he knew that his first task was to call attention to the injustices faced by black Americans in the South.³⁵ He clearly understood the workings of our country's judicial, legislative, and executive bodies of government. His activities in Alabama and his speeches in the United States and abroad afforded him infrequent audiences with various US government officials to include the President (Eisenhower) and the Vice President (Nixon).³⁶ We now can begin to see how Dr. King employed his technical competencies at the national level.

Understanding how politics and public perception factored into executive-office decisions, Dr. King tried to get President Eisenhower to desegregate every facet of American society.³⁷ While he was not successful in doing this, he did elevate the cause of desegregating America to a new level.

Dr. King tainted the Eisenhower administration's chances to positively impact history when he said that "future historians will have to record that when America came to its most progressive moment of creative fulfillment in the area of human relations, it was temporarily held back by a chief executive who refused to make a strong positive statement morally condemning segregation".³⁸ This statement reflects the beginning of Dr. King's involvement in the political process at the national level. His activities were quietly becoming a topic of daily Presidential discussions and issues. Dr. King was fully aware of this and made every effort to capitalize on the opportunities when possible. This understanding of the political and social process in the United States provides more clear evidence of his technical competence. Dr. King understood political relationships within which he tried to work. In doing so, he also displayed interpersonal competency as he attempted to shape the external environment.

Dr. King's interpersonal talents were significant in creating the conditions for the eventual success of desegregation in schools, public housing, and all other public establishments throughout the country. He was both a skilled negotiator and a world-renowned communicator. These interpersonal skills were required to forge cooperation between more than nine different organizations, all dedicated to ending segregation and winning full equality for all Americans. The oldest of these organizations was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). "Sadly, this organization was initially hostile towards Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), of which he was the national leader. Accordingly, Dr. King's emergence as a national leader was met with all the natural human emotions of jealousy, apprehension, and distrust-even in his own home town".³⁹ Dr. King was able to reduce the negative fall-out from these concerns by communicating directly with each organization's leader and seeking his or her advice on various issues.⁴⁰ He was always clear on how the

other organizations' particular goals directly supported the aims of what he was trying to accomplish with the SCLC.⁴¹

Despite the frequent bickering amongst these organizations, Dr. King continued to "advocate the creation of alliances of many kinds-political, social, religious, intellectual, economic, and cultural".⁴² This was a very skillful technique that forced these organizations to work in close concert with each other to achieve a common end. These alliances served to heighten the level of national and international attention focused on the plight of African-Americans. Dr. King's extraordinary skill in persuading these alliances to work together further elevated his stature as a strategic leader.

Dr. King not only exhibited the three competencies of the strategic leader, conceptual, technical, and interpersonal leadership skills, but he was also effective in consistently accomplishing several strategic leadership tasks. These tasks include providing vision, managing national-level relationships, representing the organization, and leading and managing change.

Dr. King's vision was very simple. This vision was for America to end segregation and create an environment where all people were treated equally, regardless of race, creed, color or national origin. He spoke of this vision in speeches, sermons, meetings, and debates with Americans from all walks of life. This vision is perhaps best remembered during the delivery of his "I have a Dream Speech" in Washington, D.C. on 28 August 1963. Why was this vision relevant to the President? Our National Security Interests? To the Nation as a whole? Simply put, as a Nation, we existed while living only a half-truth! How could we espouse freedom and liberty for the remainder of the world if we, the great United States, espoused legal segregation and discrimination within our own borders? This made Dr. King's vision relevant to the President and our National Security Interests. Failure to support Dr. King's vision would eventually erode our credibility on the world stage.

The vehicle to achieve this vision was non-violent protest. Dr. King learned this technique from his readings of the great Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. Dr. King believed that non-violent protest was the only means to successfully end the practice of segregation.

He relied heavily on the many well-known and some little known national alliances to help desegregate America. Dr. King "regularly articulated the following goals to foster teamwork and focused orientation for the various alliances: (1) the banding together of individuals creates energy, enthusiasm, and courage, (2) in contrast to individuals working alone, people gain more power and strength in formal organizations, (3) major social change is best achieved in groups, (4) alliances effectively expand contacts and networks of communication, (5) alliances allow more results to be achieved".⁴³ These goals were the cornerstone of his achievement in managing national-level relationships.

Leaders frequently have to suffer the pains of the masses in order to be respected and followed. Dr. King, like many non-violent protesters, was beaten, jailed, stabbed, and spat upon while practicing non-violent protest. He was extremely effective in representing the "cause" by continually placing himself in the public eye, not to accept personal rewards or selfish gains, but to achieve his vision. His efforts of self-sacrifice were indeed effective.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: FOR OR AGAINST DESEGREGATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Dr. King was fully cognizant of the fact that to ultimately achieve his vision, he would need to continue to gain the attention, trust, and respect of National leaders and garner the support of President Kennedy and his administration. Although recorded history is often in conflict on where President John F. Kennedy actually stood on Civil Rights issues, the passage of time has clearly illustrated that he was in fact sympathetic to the abolishment of Jim Crow laws and the passage of a Civil Rights Bill. Some scholars and civil rights advocates have argued that Kennedy was not genuinely interested in the subject, except for when he could benefit politically.⁴⁴ Other scholars argue that he was the driving force and initiator behind the 1964 Civil Rights bill that eventually passed after the President's assassination in 1963.⁴⁵

Dr. Martin Luther King's early assessment of John Kennedy during the presidential campaign was not favorable. Although Kennedy was a Democrat, and Democrats were considered sympathetic to the Civil Rights effort, King did not feel Kennedy was passionate about quickly ending Jim Crow laws.⁴⁶ Despite these feelings of uncertainty, King was a patient and careful listener to the speeches made by Kennedy; he was equally attentive to Kennedy's writings. In the 1960 Presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy made the following statement which perhaps paints a philosophical picture of how he saw the future for Black Americans:

"The Negro baby, regardless of his talents, statistically has one-half as much chance of finishing high school as the white baby, one-third as much chance of finishing college, one-fourth as much chance of being a professional man or woman, four times as much chance of being a professional man or woman, four times as much chance of being out of work. Only a President willing to use all the resources of his office could provide the leadership, the determination and direction. . .to eliminate racial and religious discrimination from American society."⁴⁷

To the average reader and observer, the aforementioned statement clearly gives the impression that President Kennedy was sympathetic to the issue of Civil Rights for all Americans. His views, although offering the appearance of being sympathetic, were quite pragmatic, and designed to not alienate potential political allies required to win the presidential election or future legislative victories.⁴⁸ This observation in no way suggests that President Kennedy was a supporter of Jim Crow or segregation, but simply suggests that he believed "in time" the race and discrimination problem could be fixed to the satisfaction of all.⁴⁹ Dr. King was not overly convinced during the 1960 Presidential campaign that the future President was passionately committed to the Civil Rights effort.⁵⁰

John F. Kennedy sensed early in his campaign for the Presidency that he did not have the trust and confidence of the Black Americans. Realizing this, he developed a staff organization that began to help him shape his views and deepen his commitment to the effort. Dr. King was instrumental in helping the aspiring young President reach this conclusion. Until Mr. Kennedy re-shaped his campaign focus and began inviting Dr. King to his home and office for consultations, "most civil rights leaders preferred Hubert Humphrey or Adlai Stevenson for the Democratic nomination".⁵¹

Kennedy was a politician who clearly understood the political landscape. He began to understand early on that his desire to win the democratic nomination, and ultimately the Presidency, depended largely on the Black vote. Despite Kennedy's appearance to the average African American of not being overly aggressive in advancing immediate initiatives to rid the country of segregation and discrimination, he was in fact committed to making changes for all oppressed people in the United States. Dr. King stated in an article written in 1964 that *"President Kennedy believed that there could be a world of diversity. He believed that different societies, different political systems, and different races could exist on the same small planet. He believed that different races could live within the same society in harmony. He believed in the conscience of man."*⁵² These are very compelling words from a man who at one point was not confident in Kennedy's commitment to the Civil Rights effort. It is important to note that many of King's views of President Kennedy changed after Kennedy's assassination in 1963. These views did not change because the President was slain, but more because King had witnessed the President's maturation process in office over a short period of time.

The Kennedy Administration's victory in 1960 marked the start of a new area of Civil Rights in the United States. It is not widely known or discussed, but Kennedy won the election without a ringing and overt endorsement from Dr. King.⁵³ Despite Kennedy's consolatory call to Dr. King's wife, Coretta, while King was jailed in Georgia during October 1960, Martin felt it unwise to publicly endorse any candidate.⁵⁴ This did not appear to taint their relationship, but it did put the young Presidential aspirant on notice that his actions in office would have to be overt and significant prior to winning the total confidence of Dr. King and other Civil Rights Leaders.

Just prior to the election in 1960, Dr. King had been jailed for a minor traffic offense and sentenced to six months at hard labor. This sort of judicial injustice was common place in America in 1960, particularly in Southern States. The Black community and certain Civil Rights sympathizers were vocally outraged.⁵⁵ The Press was involved in covering this story and immediately made it a campaign issue between Vice President Nixon and Senator John Kennedy. History has shown that Kennedy's "sympathy call" to Mrs. King in addition to Bobby Kennedy's call to the judge who had issued the order to jail King, made a difference in how Black Americans voted in the 1960 election. A Harris and Gallop poll showed that 68-78% of Black Americans voted for Kennedy.⁵⁶

Upon Dr. King's release from jail, he stated at a press conference that "he was deeply indebted to Senator Kennedy, who served as a great force in making my release possible. For him to be that courageous shows that he is really acting upon principle and not expediency. He added, there are moments when the politically expedient can be morally wise".⁵⁷

SHAPING THE PRESIDENT'S POLITICAL AGENDA: KING'S VIEW

When President Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, Dr. King had a very simple agenda to propose: end segregation and discrimination immediately. King believed the new Administration had an opportunity to make some sweeping changes towards ending our Nation's segregation policies. He and most members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were not interested in surface fixes to age old problems.⁵⁸ Again, this is relevant because the United States was a superpower and the world leader in espousing free and democratic governments. Sadly, America's home front remained conflicted. Without changing the laws that allowed segregation, how could we as a nation demand that other countries snub communism and embrace democracy?

Dr. King challenged the new Administration to make bold and creative changes to existing laws. He did this with a continuing series of articles, sermons, lectures, and visits to the Oval Office. In an article titled "*Equality Now*", published in the *Nation* magazine on 4 February 1961, King said that "*we must decide that in a new era, there must be new thinking. If we fail to make this positive decision, an awakening world will conclude that we have become a fossil nation, morally and politically; and no floods of refrigerators, automobiles or color TV sets will rejuvenate our image. The second element in a new approach is the recognition by the federal government that it has sufficient power at its disposal to guide us through the changes ahead.*"⁵⁹ In the same article, Dr. King lay much of the blame for our country's inability to end segregation at the doorstep of our Federal institutions. He said that "*we must face the tragic fact that **the federal government is the nation's highest investor in segregation.** Therefore, a primary goal of a well-meaning Administration should be a thorough examination of its operations and the development of a rigorous program to wipe out immediately every vestige of federal support and sponsorship of discrimination.*"⁶⁰ Dr. King's solution and offer to the Administration for making these changes were three-fold: first, take the fight to Congress despite obvious and anticipated opposition; second, use the power of moral persuasion; this was clearly the job of "only" the president as the elected leader of our Nation; and third, use the Executive Office to issue "Executive Orders"-despite all anticipated objections. Dr. King's ultimate goal in challenging the Administration and the American people with these proposals was the ultimate introduction of a wide-ranging Civil Rights Bill.⁶¹

The focus of his Legislative effort was to take advantage of the Democratic majority in both houses of Congress and vigorously fight for a "far-reaching legislative program".⁶² King felt and shared with the President, a belief that with resolute leadership, a majority in both houses could be persuaded to pass meaningful laws.⁶³ He, King, said that a determined majority-party leadership possesses the means to carry the reluctant along-and to hasten the end of the political careers, or privileges, of those who prove unyielding.⁶⁴ Dr. King provided many more specific proposals in the Legislative arena, to include changing the laws that supported the "administrative obstacles, legal impediments, and economic reprisals" that impacted voter registration.⁶⁵ Although it was legal for the Black Americans to vote, enforcement of their constitutional rights were stymied by local precincts and racist politicians. This had

to be corrected immediately. These proposals to impact legislation offer another clear example of Dr. King's conceptual and technical strategic leader competencies.

Legislative efforts and victories alone would not solve America's race problems according to Dr. King. He was an ardent believer in the power of moral persuasion. King believed that *"the President was the embodiment of the democratic personality of the nation, both domestically and internationally. The President's own personal conduct influences and educates."*⁶⁶ In discussing this issue, Dr. King put President Kennedy on notice that if he, Kennedy, would make it known that he would not participate in any activities in which segregation existed, he would send a very clear message to the American people.⁶⁷ Another area where King felt the President could help accelerate the end to segregation would be the chairing of conferences of black and white leaders.⁶⁸ The focus of this effort would aid in opening the channels of communications.⁶⁹ King's other reason for introducing this initiative was designed to help the white southerner feel less reluctant to meet with black leaders.⁷⁰ A forum directed and facilitated by the President would be much easier for many whites to accept rather than meeting with blacks in their local communities.

The third area where the new Administration could make in-roads into the abolishment of segregation lay in a seldom-used power known as the "Executive Order". Dr. King very eloquently stated that *"the power inherent in Executive orders has never been exploited; its use in recent years has been microscopic in scope and timid in conception. Historically, the Executive has promulgated orders of extraordinary range and significance. The Emancipation Proclamation was an Executive order. The integration of the Armed Forces grew out of President Truman's Executive Order 8891. Executive orders could require the immediate end to all discrimination in any housing accommodations financed with federal aid."*⁷¹

Although Dr. King made these proposals in a serious and forthright manner, he was not a political novice who felt they would be accepted and made to work outright. He clearly understood the realities of all three branches of government, the Congress, and how the President's agenda contained not only domestic issues, but also international issues. His effort in trying to shape the President's Civil Rights agenda was to capitalize on the mood of the country and the enthusiasm generated by a young administration with new ideas. President Kennedy listened intently to Dr. King's suggestions, but the scope of his responsibilities and political realities prevented him from acting at the pace desired by Dr. King and many African Americans.⁷²

Dr. King's proposals in trying to shape the President's Civil Rights agenda were not embraced with enthusiasm by every department within the federal government, particularly the FBI. The FBI, especially the director during this time period, saw Dr. King as a troublemaker and radical opportunist with little respect for the laws and "customs" of the day. King's closing comments in his article "Equality Now" gave the Kennedy Administration a very directed challenge that would eventually be addressed head-on. He commented that *"history has thrust upon the present Administration an indescribably important destiny-to*

complete a process of democratization which our nation has taken far too long to develop, but which is our most powerful weapon for earning world respect and emulation. How we deal with this crucial problem of racial discrimination will determine our moral health as individuals, our political health as a nation, our prestige as a leader of the free world."⁷³

The Kennedy Administration had many agenda items that at times would appear to be more pressing than Civil Rights. However, for the duration of Kennedy's presidency, Dr. King and other leaders in the Civil Rights movement kept Civil Rights and the destruction of segregation on Kennedy's front burner. The problem would not go away because Dr. King was determined to change political and social landscape of America. His strategic vision, thought, and mastery of the conceptual, technical, and interpersonal competencies was beginning to shape our National Values and Interests.

THE FORMING OF ALLIANCES: KINGS AND KENNEDYS

The unofficial alliance between the Kennedys and the Kings actually started to form in 1960 during the Presidential campaign.⁷⁴ A more formal relationship was developed just prior to the election when John Kennedy made his famous "sympathy call" to King's wife, Coretta, while Dr. King was in jail for a traffic violation. This relationship was aided further when Bobby Kennedy violated established ethical principles and called the judge who had sentenced King to hard labor for the traffic violation. The net result of these actions was that King was released from jail, King's father publicly lent his endorsement to Kennedy, and Kennedy won the election.⁷⁵

While each of these events gave the appearance of a relationship cemented in stone, such was not the case. A mutual respect existed between the Kennedys and Kings because of the moral position the Kennedy brothers took on human and civil rights and their ability to do what was right when faced with tough segregation issues—once pressed. The actual alliance between King and the Kennedy Administration was not firmly bonded until June 1963. The catalyst for cementing the alliance grew out of the American public's outrage at the violent police reaction to the peaceful protest marches conducted in Birmingham, Alabama, in April and May 1963.⁷⁶

Dr. King decided to bring his "direct-action non-violent marches" to the streets of Birmingham in the spring of 1963. He was cautioned against doing this because of the avowed racist behavior of the local sheriff, "Bull Connor." King was advised to wait until Birmingham completed its upcoming local elections that had promised to put more moderate and liberal politicians in office.⁷⁷ Dr. King's response to all of these apparently well meaning and sensible requests was "no". His view, and the view of Black-America, was that the waiting had already been too long.

David Oppenheimer suggests in the University of San Francisco's Law Review that "Birmingham would prove to be a turning point in Dr. King's career." *"When he arrived in Birmingham, his position as a leader was uncertain, as was the direction of the Civil Rights movement. In Birmingham, he faced the choice of obedience to immoral authority, or disobedience and jail; he chose jail."*⁷⁸ It was during this

period that he wrote his now famous "letter from a Birmingham jail" which defended non-violent direct action. This observation perhaps suggests that had King not chosen jail, the ultimate outcome of the Civil Rights struggle may have been different.

Dr. King's courage and moral leadership was tested at every turn during the months of April-June 1963. The Kennedy Administration was urging calm while leaders within the Civil Rights movement were often divided over which course of action to pursue —march or wait. Dr. King and his advisors decided to flood the streets of Birmingham with non-violent marchers daily.⁷⁹ Children were allowed to march in an effort to overcrowd the Birmingham jails. In overcrowding the jails, King and his associates hoped to win some concessions from the local authorities on desegregating the public facilities in the city.⁸⁰ Wofford, Schlesinger, Carson, and many other authors who studied this period wrote how the massive "marches were met with violent reaction from local law enforcement officials." Each of these authors poignantly writes of how the Birmingham police turned high-powered fire hoses onto the marchers, to include the children. In addition to the fire hoses, they described how police dogs were allowed to attack the marchers. Television cameras captured this chaotic event and broadcasted the turmoil across the nation. The American public recoiled at the site of children being sprayed with high-powered water hoses and police dogs attacking passive people who were kneeling in prayer.⁸¹

Prior to the Birmingham marches in April 1963, President Kennedy was opposed to the introduction of a major Civil Rights Bill. His reasons were political; fear of the bill failing in Congress, irreparable damage to other pending legislation, and further isolation of Southern Democrats. Seven weeks later, after the nation witnessed the brutal treatment of American citizens on television, the President announced to his cabinet that he was directing the Justice Department to immediately draft a Civil Rights Bill and have it sent to Congress.⁸² As was the case with most Americans, the Kennedys were appalled at the treatment suffered by the Birmingham marchers.⁸³

In June 1963, the President called a press conference for broadcast over television to the nation regarding "the Civil Rights Issue". At the conference he stated that Civil Rights was a "moral issue- as old as the scriptures and clear as the American Constitution. The time had come for the nation to fulfill its promise. Token talk or moves could not quiet the moral crises; it could not be left to demonstrations in the streets. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Next week, he said, he would ask Congress to make the commitment it has not yet fully made in this century-the commitment to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law."⁸⁴

The Birmingham marches and the President taking the Civil Rights issue to the American people and the Congress in June of 1963 were the watershed events that cemented the alliance between the Kennedys and Dr. King. It became increasingly difficult for Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department to delay immediate response to violence against peaceful demonstrators after the events of Birmingham. The Attorney General, along with the President, gave audiences during the summer period after

Birmingham to Dr. King and other notable leaders in the Civil Rights movement. The communications channels were open throughout the crises. Although Dr. King, President Kennedy, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy disagreed on the timing of the protest marches, they always parted their strategy sessions with a mutual respect for one another. This alliance would later play a central role in winning the President's support for the August 1963 march and rally at the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. King gave his famous "I have a Dream speech".

Dr. King was indeed a strategic leader. His greatness can best be measured from the view that he insisted on challenging our nation to develop and maintain the moral imperative in how all "her people" were treated. This lesson is important for today's strategic leader as well. It is difficult to lead, inspire, and motivate a nation or organization if you are morally corrupt, or practice double standards where many of your "flock" are not afforded the same rights and privileges of others. Dr. King, with the help of President Kennedy and the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, forced America to look at herself and her place on the world stage.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an extraordinary strategic leader who used his vision as a moral compass to change the behavior of the most powerful nation on earth-the United States. His vision, conflict and ultimately his alliance with President Kennedy and his brother, Robert, enabled him to challenge the conscience of America. How could we call ourselves the undisputed leader of the free world when in our own borders a large part of our population was still in bondage? How could we boast that our Constitution was a great living document and testament to freedom when we, as a nation, refused to adhere to her principles? Dr. King continually pressed the Kennedys with questions of this magnitude.

The greatest conflict between these leaders had to do with whether the timing was right. Dr. King was a staunch believer in the adage that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed".⁸⁵ This impatience with those seemingly not in a hurry to end discrimination and segregation often resulted in conflict. Both of the Kennedy brothers (John and Robert) discussed here were believers in human rights and reluctantly worked with Dr. King clearly against the backlash of a conservative and racist faction of non-believers in Civil Rights. Their greatness must be measured by the results - - - they took action, despite the motive - - -genuine or for political purposes. Like Dr. King, the Kennedy brothers had a strategic vision for America's future. Through their actions and support of Dr. King's vision, I can conclude that they envisioned an America where the Constitution and Bill of Rights were meant to protect and provide for all people, in both theory and practice.

What is the significance of this study for today's military officer or government strategist? What does it have to do with developing strategy, waging war, making policy, or leading coalitions? For a nation to be a leader of other nations, it must have a moral imperative. That lesson is critical for today's

leaders. Dr. King forced America to look at herself. He forced our country to face its own double standards. He forced America to reexamine the Constitution as a living document and model instrument of freedom that is the envy of the world. This, in turn, forced upon America a period of national self-review and assessment that has transported the US to its current position as a world leader.

Today's strategic leaders have the potential to provide even greater leadership to this nation if they clearly understand and embrace the idea that our stature in the world today is not simply a product of our being economically powerful, or the victors in several wars. We are the greatest nation on earth, in part, because Dr. King forced the United States to examine her own warts and forced the government to make unpopular changes. The Kennedy Administration was a central component in forcing these needed, but in many circles, unwanted changes. Do today's strategic leaders remember this part of our history? They should and must do so in order to lead effectively in the 21st century.

WORD COUNT = 7055

ENDNOTES

¹ Clayborn Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998), 48.

² Ibid., 9

³ Ibid., 7

⁴ Ibid., 5

⁵ Ibid., 9

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 9-10

⁸ Ibid., 10

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9

¹¹ Donald T. Phillips, Martin Luther King, Jr. On Leadership: Inspiration & Wisdom For Challenging Times. (New York, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1999), 22

¹² Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 7

¹³ Ibid., 7

¹⁴ Ibid., 8

¹⁵ Ibid., 13

¹⁶ Ibid., 14

¹⁷ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 7

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 16

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 17

²⁵ Roderick R. McGee II, Strategic Leadership Primer, Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 37.

²⁶ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 30, 45

²⁷ Ibid., 48

²⁸ Ibid., 48,49

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 49

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 73

³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., Equality Now, The Nation, Vol 192, Feb 4, 1961, New York, NY, 93

³⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., Bold Design For a New South, Mar 30, 1963, New York, NY, 259

³⁶ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 149

³⁷ Ibid., 101

³⁸ David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York, New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1986), 119.

³⁹ Phillips, Martin Luther King, Jr. On Leadership, 138

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 139-140

⁴⁴ Harris Wofford, Of Kennedys & Kings, Making Sense of the Sixties, (New York, NY, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 128,130

⁴⁵ David Benjamin Oppenheimer, Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth and Walker, (San Francisco, CA, University of San Francisco Law Review, Vol 29, 1995), 645

⁴⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin Company & Cambridge, MA, The Riverside Press, 1965),930

⁴⁷ Ibid., 929

⁴⁸ Ibid., 930

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy. Transition, Volume 0, Issue 15 (1964), 27-28 (Duke University Press, 1964), 28

⁵⁰ Schlesinger, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, 928

⁵¹ Ibid., 928

⁵² King, John F. Kennedy, 28

⁵³ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 150

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 147

⁵⁶ Wofford, Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties,24

⁵⁷ Ibid.,22

⁵⁸ King, Equality Now, 92

⁵⁹ Ibid., 91,92

⁶⁰ Ibid.,92

⁶¹ Ibid.,95

⁶² Ibid.,92

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 93

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² Wofford, Of Kennedys and Kings, Making Sense of the Sixties, 128
- ⁷³ King, Equality Now, 95
- ⁷⁴ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 143
- ⁷⁵ Schlesinger: A Thousand Days, John F. Kennedy in the White House, 76
- ⁷⁶ Oppenheimer, Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth, and Walker, 646
- ⁷⁷ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 175
- ⁷⁸ Oppenheimer, Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth and Walker, 626
- ⁷⁹ Carson, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 180
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 213
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 208, 209
- ⁸² Oppenheimer, Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth, and Walker, 645
- ⁸³ Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, John F. Kennedy in the White House, 959
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 965
- ⁸⁵ Phillips, Martin Luther King, Jr., On Leadership, 68

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