

## The Most Influential Person of the 20th Century

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**Course:** ENGL 101

**Instructor:** Jennifer Ortiz

**Essay Type:** Argument

The Civil Rights Movement is one of the most important events in the history of the United States. Although many people contributed to this movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. is widely regarded as the leader of the movement for racial equality. King saw the injustices first hand growing up in the deep south. King's studies of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings influenced his views on effective ways of protesting and achieving equality. "Heroes should be judged on their deeds, and there are those with plenty in common heroically but not much in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or gender" (Bader 396). Martin Luther King's view on nonviolence and equality and his enormous effect on the citizens of America makes him the most influential person of the twentieth century.

King can be considered influential in his preaching of nonviolent protest during the civil rights movement. King quickly realized that there were two alternatives in the struggle against "the forces of injustice," violence or nonviolence (Ansboro, 233). He decided against violence for obvious reasons. During this time in America, the African-American community only represented ten percent of the total population. King felt that this made it impossible for African-Americans who lack access to weapons to successfully wage a violent revolution against the white majority. Any attacks by the civil rights workers on their followers would surely result in counter attacks by the segregationists, resulting in the injury and deaths of many of King's followers. With these points in mind, King came to the conclusion that the best strategy in gaining the rights for African-Americans was the use of nonviolent protest. He believed that

violence only "intensifies evil," instead of promoting love and peace among all races (Ansboro, 231). King's purpose in promoting nonviolent direct action was to create a situation so crisis packed that it would inevitably open the door to negotiations. He felt that practicing nonviolence would portray his followers as moral beings, while making apparent the brutality of the segregationists. King's preaching of nonviolence was monumental in succeeding in demonstrations such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the desegregation of public schools. On the first of December 1955, a small, neatly dressed black woman in Montgomery left work at quitting time and boarded a bus for the ride home. She took a seat near the rear; in the row just behind the section marked Whites Only. When two white men boarded and paid their fares, the bus driver called over his shoulder for the first row of blacks to move back. After some delay three blacks rose and stood in the aisle. But Mrs. Rosa Parks, feet aching, lap covered with packages, did not budge. The driver shouted, "Look woman, I told you I wanted the seat. Are you going to stand up?" Gently but firmly, Rosa Parks said, "no," and for that she was arrested and thrown in jail. She had defied the law that established not only separate seating for blacks and whites, but required blacks to surrender their places if buses were filled. A few minutes later after the arrest Rev. Ralph Abernathy called E.D. Nixon, a plainspoken Pullman sleeping-car-porter and a leader in the Montgomery NAACP. He thought blacks in the town should display their anger by launching a boycott of the city buses. He knew how deeply Montgomery blacks resented the buses, and how they particularly loathed the business of having to give up their seats, something that was not required in many other southern cities. He knew how bus drivers, all of whom were white, insulted and abused black passengers. But he had no doubts about a boycott. He endorsed the planned boycott and asked for his friend's backing. King agreed. King's

reaching of nonviolent direct action furthers the arguments that King is the most influential person of the twentieth century.

Not only did King feel it was necessary to preach nonviolence in order to achieve equality among all Americans, he also felt it was important for his message to appeal to all people regardless of race. Despite the injustice being inflicted upon them by segregationists, King felt it was important for African-Americans to love and respect people of all races. Realizing that complete and equal separation of the races was virtually impossible, King felt that the most important aspect of the movement was for all people to eventually be able to live together in harmony. King believed that whites and blacks must have a mutual respect for one another or else America would become a nation in constant turmoil. King bestowed his views of love, respect, and equality on his followers, eventually gaining the respect of people of all races and classes.

King's philosophy of nonviolent, direct action, and his strategies for racial equality, affected the conscience of the nation and reordered its priorities. His wisdom, his words, his actions, his commitment, and his dreams for a social change are intertwined with the American experience. Martin Luther King's influence on the history of America is what makes him the most influential person of the twentieth century.

*B.J. Gibson's English instructor was Jennifer Ortiz.*

**Ms. Ortiz's Comments:** *This is a great model for student writing to show how a student can move from a basic developmental stage to a more complex writing style within the course of one semester. He integrated the semiotic theories we discussed in class, outside sources, and his own*

*opinion to produce an essay that was well-thought and well-written, and was also inspirational for the members of his peer editing group.*