

Name:

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US History II

Martin Luther King's Legacy

1968 was, to put it mildly, a difficult year for America. The Tet Offensive, Viet Cong soldiers attacking the US Embassy in Saigon, and Mai Lai massacre turned public opinion against the Vietnam War. Protests continued, and President Johnson, who was convinced he was not the right man to handle the job, announced he would not be seeking re-election.

Then on April 4, 1968, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 39, was shot to death in Memphis, Tennessee by an escaped convict, James Earl Ray.

Dr. King, the acclaimed civil rights leader, arrived in Memphis on April 3 and delivered what would be the final speech of his life, now known as the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" address, in which he spoke of his own mortality. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

The next day, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel reportedly speaking with the civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, who stood below in the parking lot, Dr. King was shot. As *The New York Times* described the scene, "The Rev. Ralph W. Abernathy, perhaps Dr. King's closest friend, was just about to come out of the motel room when the sudden loud noise burst out. Dr. King toppled to the concrete second-floor walkway. Blood gushed from the right jaw and neck area. His necktie had been ripped off by the blast."



Joseph Louw/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Civil rights leader Andrew Young, left, and others on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel point in the direction where gunshots came from after the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. His body lays at their feet.

An emergency surgery failed to save Dr. King's life. He was declared dead about an hour after being shot.

News of Dr. King's death soon spread throughout the nation. At a campaign rally, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a strong supporter of civil rights and a Democrat running for president, commemorated Dr. King in an address. "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black," he said. (Just more than two months later, Mr. Kennedy would also be killed by an assassin's bullet after a campaign appearance in California.)



Riots broke out in many cities after the fatal shooting of Dr. King. The *Times* said that in Memphis, the "tragedy had been followed by incidents that included sporadic shooting, fires, bricks and bottles thrown at policemen, and looting that started in Negro districts and then spread over the city."

In the *Times* obituary published on April 5, 1968, Murray Schumach wrote: "To many million of American Negroes, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the prophet of their crusade for racial equality. He was their voice of anguish, their eloquence in humiliation, their battle cry for human dignity. He forged for them the weapons of nonviolence that withstood and blunted the ferocity of segregation. And to many millions of American whites, he was one of a group of Negroes who preserved the bridge of communication between races."

The eventual convicted assassin, Mr. Ray, was arrested two months later in London's Heathrow Airport. He admitted to killing Dr. King and was given a life sentence. He later recanted and said that he had been set up. Mr. Ray died in prison in 1998.

The King family supported Mr. Ray's claims, believing that Dr. King may have been killed in a conspiracy because of his antipoverty and antiwar campaigns. By 1967, Dr. King had become the country's most prominent opponent of the Vietnam War, and a staunch critic of overall United States foreign policy. In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 — one year to the day before he was killed — Dr. King had called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." In its editorial on the speech, "Dr. King's Error," The *Times* criticized Dr. King for "link[ing] his personal opposition to the war in Vietnam with the cause of Negro equality in the United States."

In 1999, the King family won a civil suit against a Memphis restaurateur who was said to have hired a police officer to kill Dr. King. "The jury's decision," explained The *Times*, "means it did not believe that James Earl Ray ... fired the shot that killed Dr. King."

Activity:

Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence and commitment to economic and social justice remain influential 44 years after his death. In an August 2011 Op-Ed article in the *New York Times*, Prof. Cornel West reflected on Dr. King's legacy. He argued that Dr. King's concern for America's "four catastrophes" "racism, poverty, militarism and materialism," is as valid today as it was in the late 1960s and that the "age of Obama has fallen tragically short of fulfilling King's prophetic legacy."

What are your thoughts on Dr. King's legacy as it applies to the "four catastrophes"? Do you think he would "weep from his grave" as the headline of Dr. West's Op-Ed suggests, or would he have a more optimistic view of the United States in 2016? Why? With your group develop an answer to this question, using specific examples from the news/your knowledge of current events.