April: Assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was undoubtedly the most well known and recognized of the national leaders of the mid twentieth-century freedom movement. He first came to national attention during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1957. As a newcomer to Montgomery—and precisely because he was a newcomer—King was chosen to lead a group of activists, many of whom had already been working for years to get rid of segregated buses in the city. Under his auspices, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed; it later became subsumed into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which King directed. Even though many others in the black community had worked for equality decades before King, his became the face of the movement in America and abroad.

Like many other African Americans who fought for civil rights, King had personal experience with the violence needed to sustain white supremacy. During the bus boycott, his home was bombed; King was not at home at the time, and his wife, baby daughter, and a friend were unharmed. A crowd later gathered outside his home, and many were angry. There were people in the crowd who talked of retaliation. King spoke to the crowd and stressed his commitment to nonviolence. As often as possible, however, he tried to ensure that, especially at night, his wife was not left home alone. It is also said that King kept several guns in his house for protection.

The next year while at a speaking and book signing engagement, a mentally ill woman approached him and stabbed him with a letter opener. (Izola Ware Curry, was deemed incompetent to stand trial, and spent the rest of her life in mental and assisted-care institutions. She died in 2015). It was so perilously close to his heart if he had sneezed, he would have bled
to death. While leading a march in Chicago in August 1965, King was felled by a large rock. And knocked to his knees. People repeatedly called his home and left threatening messages. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) wiretapped his hotel rooms, peppered King with notes suggesting he commit suicide, and sent a cassette tape that purported to be of him having sex with another woman. In March 1968 on his last flight to Memphis, Tennessee to participate in demonstrations in support of striking garbage workers, his plane was delayed because of a bomb threat against him. Yet King never shirked being out in public, nor traveled with bodyguards. He felt that presenting himself to the world was needed to expose the hatred directed at black Americans.

On the night of April 3 he spoke at the Mason Temple, in Memphis, where he gave his last public address. The speech, known as I’ve Been to the Mountaintop, King spoke of how he had looked death in the face and was expecting it. He claimed not to be worried, nor was he paralyzed with fear. Indeed, he and his wife often spoke of his death so that she would be prepared when it happened.

Early in the evening of April 4 King was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel—now the National Civil Rights Museum—bantering with colleagues before a performance. He was hit by a bullet that pierced his cheek, broke his jaw and some vertebrae, and severed major arteries and his jugular vain. King was transported to St. Joseph Hospital where in spite of resuscitation efforts, he died and hour later. He was thirty-nine years old.

It is extremely ironic that the death of the man who was a supreme practitioner of nonviolence was met with more than one hundred urban rebellions across America after he was murdered. The violence in Washington, D.C. was so bad that President Lyndon B. Johnson
called up the military. In all, more than fifteen thousand people were arrested, more than 2,500 injuries were reported, and close to fifty deaths occurred during the civil disturbances.

**Further Reading**

