

Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Life

When: October 15, 22, 29, November 5

Professor: C. Henry

(1 to 3 pm)

New research suggests framing protests as fights for civil rights “backfires.” Researchers found that liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, Black, Latino and White respondents all reacted negatively to civil rights framing. Protesters tend to use the civil rights frame because the Civil Rights Movement was an important and successful movement in American history. However, what is remembered and celebrated is often a highly idealized version of reality. This idealized collective memory undermines current protests because they cannot match the flagrant state sanctioned bigotry of the past, nor do they seem as heroic as past leaders. Central to that idealization is the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr.

As that era’s greatest leader, King’s life helps us both focus history and humanize it. As a profound thinker, as well as an activist, we can examine the process by which individual thought is converted into group action. And by examining the forces that shaped King’s life and his impact on society, we should gain some sense of how history is constructed, remembered, and used today.

Required Reading

Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life* (New York: Picador, 2023)

Gerald Posner, *Killing the Dream* (Chap. 1) (will be posted online)

Michael Nagler, “Fighting Fire with Water” (will be posted online)

Recommended Reading

Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*

David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Clarence B. Jones, *Last of the Lions*

Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Radicalism and Black Religion*

Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*

Course Schedule

Week I The Early Years

- A. Black Christianity v. White Christianity
- B. Family of Preachers
- C. The Scholar Preacher
- D. The Montgomery Story (Video)

Read: Eig, Part I

Week II Building a Movement

- A. Competition between Organizations
- B. Birmingham
- C. March on Washington
- D. Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (Video)
- E. Selma

Read: Eig, Part II

Week III The Northern Campaign and Vietnam

- A. Black Power
- B. Chicago
- C. Vietnam
- D. The Poor People's Campaign
- E. Memphis

Read: Eig, Part III

Week IV: Assassination and Legacy

- A. Conspiracy theories and reaction
- B. Legacy
- C. The Role of Violence in a Violent World (Nagler)

Read: Posner and Nagler