



{ MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MEMORIAL SPECIAL }



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with Walter Fauntroy at a Home Rule Demonstration in 1967. Reprinted with permission of the DC Public Library, Star Collection, © Washington Post

## A KING for Washington and DC

BY DEREK MUSGROVE

**O**n August 28, 2011, the National Park Service will open the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial to the public. The memorial consists of a massive statue of King, arms folded in steely determination, flanked by two huge stones. Standing in a semi-circular plaza that opens onto the Tidal Basin, King gazes toward the Jefferson Memorial, seemingly challenging the man who drafted the Constitution to resolve the racial contradictions at the core of American democracy. Situated amidst the cherry trees that have come to define this section of the Mall, it is a beautiful place to contemplate the man and his ideas.

Though DC residents tend to shrug at the opening of monuments and other national goings-on of official Washington, the unveiling of the King Memorial, I suggest, is a good time for us to head down to the Mall and contemplate the late

reverend's message for this city and the nation. A consistent theme in the city's history is the separation between "Washington" and "DC" -- between the gleaming white marble monumental city, populated by out-of-town lawmakers and tourists, and the neighborhoods; between the disproportionately rich, white, and powerful, and the black, poor, and powerless. King was a regular visitor to both Washington and DC. While most Americans know of the many speeches he delivered to the nation from Washington, few are aware of his efforts to speak to the interests of DC residents and the impact of his assassination on the city.

### A National Stage

Like most great twentieth century U.S. protest leaders, King used Washington as a stage from which to address policymakers and the American people on the great issues of his day. His most famous speeches in this city were milestones in his

life and the civil rights movement. On May 17, 1957, King traveled to the capital for the “Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom” at the Lincoln Memorial. Before a gathering of 20,000, King delivered what many regard as his first national address, “Give Us the Ballot.” The march was designed to stimulate public support for the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and it had its intended effect. Alas, the law was a toothless tiger, gutted of nearly all of its important provisions by southern Senators, among them Lyndon Johnson of Texas.

Six years later, at the height of the civil rights movement, King returned to the Lincoln Memorial for the August 28, 1963, “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” The crowd of 250,000 – one in ten of whom was a DC resident – stood rapt as King delivered what has since become the most recognizable address in modern U.S. oratory. This speech, unlike the last, was followed by meaningful legislative reform, and the following summer, King returned to the city to witness President Lyndon Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On the fortieth anniversary of the march, King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was memorialized with a brief inscription on the steps where he stood. Though celebrated today, the speech alarmed Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover, a lifetime resident of Seward Square, just off of Pennsylvania Ave. SE, who, in the years and months following the march, used his agency to viciously attack King and the movement for which he spoke.

And on March 31, 1968, King returned to the capital city to deliver what turned out to be his last Sunday sermon, titled “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” at the National Cathedral. At the start of his remarks, the overflow crowd of more than 3,000 listened uncomfortably as King made the case for his Poor People’s Campaign, scheduled for later that spring. The prospect of tens of thousands of the nation’s poor dramatizing their destitution by living in a tent city on the National Mall gave even strong supporters of civil rights pause in the era of “long, hot summers.”

### Home Rule / Urban Renewal

Though King used Washington as a stage for his civil rights crusade, he did not ignore its domestic politics.



Located on the Tidal Basin, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial creates a visual line of leadership between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials in Washington, D.C. The Memorial is the first on the National Mall to honor a man of hope, a man of peace, and a man of color. It will be an engaging landscape experience utilizing the natural elements of water, stone, and trees to convey four fundamental and recurring themes throughout Dr. King’s universal message – democracy, justice, hope, and love. A 450-foot inscription wall will feature more than a dozen Dr. King quotes engraved into granite to serve as a lasting testament and reminder of his humanitarian vision. The Memorial will include the “Mountain of Despair” and the “Stone of Hope,” which will feature a 30-foot sculpture of Dr. King. Image courtesy of the Washington, DC Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, Inc. (c) 2010 - 2011. All Rights Reserved.

By the 1950s, the issues of home rule and civil rights had become inextricably entwined, and for good reason. At the height of the civil rights movement, DC was a de-facto segregated majority-black city ruled by southern segregationists in Congress. In August 1965, King lent his voice to the local struggle. Following more than a half dozen meetings with community groups at which he expressed his support for home rule, King sat down with the members of the House and Senate Committees on the District of Columbia, who were then blocking President Johnson’s Home Rule bill, to make local residents’ feelings known. The following day, King led a crowd of 5,000 to Lafayette Park before a banner that read “We’re glad you’re with us Mr. Johnson. We do need home rule now.” Revealing that his closed-door meeting with members of the DC Committees did not go well, King told the crowd that members of Congress had been “derelict in their duties and sacred responsibility to make justice and

freedom a reality for all citizens of the District of Columbia.” If DC was not granted home rule “in the next few weeks,” King vowed, he would return to lead a march of 200,000. Though conservatives in Congress remained defiant, King’s demand for home rule was partially fulfilled by President Johnson’s 1967 “reorganization” of DC government and his subsequent appointment of Walter Washington as “Mayor/Commissioner.”

Home rule was not the only problem facing DC residents in the mid-1960s. Many of the same Congressmen who opposed home rule favored “urban renewal” plans that threatened to bisect dozens of DC neighborhoods with six-lane highways. These plans would relieve the city’s wretched traffic congestion, but at the cost of destroying countless communities and transforming thousands of city residents into refugees. On March 12, 1967, local opposition to the highway plan brought King back to the city for a parade through Shaw with his dynamic

local understudy Walter Fauntroy, Director of the Washington Bureau of the SCLC. Noting that similar projects threatened urban neighborhoods throughout the nation, King told the protesters that “...you on these 675 acres called Shaw can point the way for the nation out of her most serious domestic dilemma – the decay of the city.” Remarkably, the protesters won, saving significant portions of the old city from destruction.

### Assassination

Perhaps the most powerful, long-term impact that King had on the city came with his assassination in 1968. Beginning in the early-1960s, King warned that increasing segregation in America’s cities, deteriorating conditions in the ghettos, unemployment, and police brutality had created a combustible mix that could explode at any time. All that was needed was a spark and the nation’s cities could be engulfed in flame. Though long touted as riot-proof because of its large black



middle class, Washington proved to be little different from other cities across the country. Black unemployment was between two and three times that of whites, the rat infestation in black neighborhoods was so bad that Congress of Racial Equality President Julius Hobson organized a protest around it, and relations between the majority-white Metropolitan Police Department and African Americans, always tense, were deteriorating rapidly. In 1967 alone, MPD officers shot and killed more than a dozen African Americans and, Washington Post reporter Ben Gilbert tells us, "street disorders requiring police action became regular, almost weekly, occurrences."

These conditions help explain what happened on the evening of April 4, 1968, when news broke that King had been shot in Memphis, Tennessee. A hastily arranged and ill conceived effort by former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Chairman Stokely Carmichael to get U St. stores to close in honor of King soon spiraled out of control, and within hours the area was engulfed in rioting. Looting and arson continued for the next four days, destroying the U St., 7th St., 14th St., and H St. corridors, claiming twelve lives, and sending many of the city's small businesses fleeing to the suburbs. Some of these areas did not see substantial new investment until the 1990s. The riots demonstrated the human limits of the love and nonviolence that King had preached.

In late April 1968, King's Poor People's Campaign rolled into town. A motley assortment of the nation's poor, joined by civil rights activists, set up a makeshift "Resurrection City" in West Potomac Park, a stone's throw from the Lincoln Memorial. Arriving so soon after the riot, the protesters set the city on edge. After six rain soaked weeks, relieved only by a "Solidarity Day" rally of 50,000 at the Lincoln Memorial, the protesters' permit expired and they were forced to abandon the site. Many DC residents breathed a sigh of relief as the MPD cleared the area and the National Park Service bulldozed the shacks. The poor, it seemed, were once again out of sight and

out of mind. Residents' relief was momentarily interrupted by reports of scattered rioting along 14th St. in Shaw, but liberal amounts of MPD-launched tear gas dispersed the crowds before the disturbances spread. Three months after King's death, the city began to return to "normal." Just as the riots showed the limits of King's message of non-violence in the midst of escalating racial animosity, the failure of the Poor People's Campaign illustrated the limits of Americans' willingness to embrace his vision of a more egalitarian society.

### Memorial

As the King Memorial opens on the National Mall "Washington" and "DC" residents should remember that the good reverend had a message for this city and its inhabitants, black and white, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. A version of that message, delivered at the National Cathedral just four days before his assassination, was the inspiration for the memorial itself: "I say to you that our goal is freedom, and I believe we are going to get there because however much she strays away from it, the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be as a people, our destiny is tied up in the destiny of America... With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope." This beautiful metaphor, now formed in granite on the banks of the Tidal Basin, should stimulate us anew to join the battle against what King referred to as the "triple evils" of racism, economic exploitation, and war. King's history in this city should also motivate us to join the ongoing battle to end taxation without representation in the nation's capitol.

So head down to the Mall, fellow residents of Washington and DC, and be inspired.

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