# Martin Luther King ’s Impact In The Civil Rights Campaign: Book Review

The idea that Martin Luther King had the greatest impact of any individual in advancing the position of African Americans in the USA is mostly valid as he became a motivational figurehead for the struggle, preaching non-violent progression which set the tone for the rest of the time period and gained support from all areas of society from African Americans to the majority white US government. He was essential to landmark legislative changes for African Americans like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. However, the situational factors that supported King’s changes can’t be ignored as he was able to make as much progression as he did by building on the successes of his predecessors like Booker T. Washington, who was an advisor on racial matters to President Roosevelt, and through the efforts made by grassroots organisations like the Student, Nonviolent Coordinating Committee supported by Ella Baker. These factors were imperative to King’s success as a civil rights leader and, despite the undeniable impact of other civil rights leaders like Washington and Baker, King’s ideas and achievements are still relevant 50 years after his death, evident through the yearly celebration of Martin Luther King Day in the US, thus showing that he had the greatest impact of any one individual in advancing the position of African Americans, making the statement mostly valid.

Dr Kirk’s book ‘Martin Luther King Jr.’ argues that it’s true that King was an important part of the campaign, however he wasn’t ‘above or apart from it’ - this view is fairly valid as it supports the idea that King was supported by grassroots organisations too. Kirk suggests that King struggled in his leadership role and was helped by other leaders; he even suggests that other events, like the 1960 student sit ins, had more success than any of King’s events did - this can be considered valid as following the sit ins, dining facilities in the South began desegregation. As Kirk is a white person writing in 2005, he’s likely to have a more detached view of the civil rights movement - this can be beneficial as it allows him to have a more clear view from an outside perspective without being emotionally invested to one side of the story. However it is limiting as he has less access to primary sources from the time as many are kept in their local communities. Also, Kirk focuses primarily on the civil rights movement from the 1950’s - 1960’s looking at the origins and legacies of the struggles faced in the civil rights movement. This is limiting as during this time period, historians tend to focus only on the leaders of national significance, like King, while ignoring grassroots organisations in favour of ones like the NAACP. This in turn means that he’s likely to ignore the role of female activists as they typically were only involved in grassroots organisations while men took the leadership positions - Ella Baker was a strong activist for students, for example. As Kirk’s book was written in 2005, it gives him a more advantageous viewpoint as he is able to look at the civil rights campaign in its entirety while still able to look at first hand perspectives. This is especially true as, despite being, he now lives in Arkansas. Kirk is a Professor of History and director of Anderson Institute on Race and Ethnicity at the University of Arkansas so is considered a highly reputable source for the civil rights movement. He’s also published eight books, including one award-winning book focusing on black activism in Arkansas from 1940-1970 titled ‘Redefining the Color Line.’ Kirk’s heavy focus on King’s leadership can be beneficial as he clearly has a detailed knowledge of all of King’s successes and failures and has still come to the conclusion that he wasn’t above the movement, however it prevents him from making a comparison to earlier

activists, as he doesn't seem to look at content from before 1940, thus ignoring the hardships these activists faced, especially during the 1800s, like lack of accessible media. Overall, Kirk's view is fairly convincing; this is evident as his level of expertise allows him to reach a substantiated conclusion, although he looks at a fairly narrow period of time, his view is still fairly valid.

Dr Street's review of Kirk's book is fairly not valid with reference to King's impact in the civil rights campaign. He argues that Kirk ignored the massive impact King had in the media, especially through his skill as an orator and that King's speeches - especially 'I Had a Dream' - had a big impact in reducing racial discrimination as he had Americans 'in the palm of his hand.' Kirk also ignores King's use of sermons and Street suggests that more emphasis should be placed on his position as a spiritual leader, not just political leader. Street is a Senior Lecturer in American History at Northumbria University in Britain - this may give him a more limited view as he studies all of American history, rather than just the civil rights campaign. Within his civil rights work, he focuses on the political struggle of the 1960's and 1970's, meaning that he is more likely to focus on the well known leaders, like King and Malcolm X, rather than the work done locally, this is fuelled by Streets position as a person as he is likely to look at events that have a national impact, rather than changes made in each state. Similarly to Kirk, Street doesn't acknowledge the earlier civil rights campaign, instead preferring to favour the 1940's onwards. This gives him a limited view on the campaign as a whole as he doesn't consider the cultural differences of each leader and how that helps or hinders their successes. Street's opinion of King is quite valid as he did lead many successful marches for African American rights, characterised by his powerful speeches he gave, especially at the March on Washington in 1963. It's also clear that King did use references to Christianity in his writings in order to reach a wider audience - evident in his 'Letter From a Birmingham Jail', therefore emphasising his position as a spiritual leader. Street's time of writing being 2005 means that he had no personal involvement in the civil rights activism, therefore making him less emotionally attached to what he's saying and making his view more trustworthy. Overall, Street's view is fairly unconvincing as he only has a small focus on the civil rights campaign while studying American history in general. Although he is a professor focusing on the movement in the 1960's and 1970's, his view is still fairly not valid with reference to the impact King had compared to other civil rights leaders.

Street's view differs from Kirk's evidently, perhaps because Street focuses on the political struggle of the time period, explaining why he looks at King so highly as he was so influential within the government, whereas Kirk seems to pay closer attention to grassroots activism, like the student sit ins. As Street is a professor of American History, he is able to view King's huge impact over time and how it impacted the US afterwards, unlike Kirk who focuses on the narrow time range, therefore making him more likely to see the small impact made by grassroots organisations, despite it not always being able to stand the test of time. Despite this, Kirk's view is more valid as he looks at the wider factors influencing civil rights activism and how this helped and hindered King's success as the individual with the greatest impact. Therefore he's able to look at King from a more objective standpoint compared to similar activists.

King's use of non-violent methods was an integral part of his ideas for the campaign and explains the huge impact he had in advancing the position of African Americans in the US. This is evident from the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 where King used Gandhian methods, like rejecting violence and seeking friendship instead, as his main intent, which later evolved into the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in

January 1957. King was able to influence federal government through his peaceful means which were much more appealing than the violence other civil rights leaders offered - he was able to converse with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson which ultimately led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This level of cooperation would be unlikely achieved had violent methods been employed instead. However, it can be argued that other civil rights leaders did have success when using violence to achieve their means - Malcolm X used media to spread his opinions that violence was needed so that African Americans could defend themselves without waiting for the government to implement change, and he influenced the Black Power movement of the 1960's and 1970's which was essential in mobilising African Americans. Similarly, Garvey was a black nationalist who used radical means to unite all black people through the Universal Negro Improvement Association beginning in 1914 in which 700 branches were established across 38 states, emphasising the high level of support his organisation gained. Despite this, King had a bigger national impact with a legacy lasting over 50 years as his non-violent methods meant he was able to establish a positive relationship with the federal government and was able to emulate this in the media in order to build support, evident in the March in Washington of 1963 which he led and had attracted over 200,000 people. This shows that it's mostly valid that he had a big impact on advancing the position of African Americans by using peaceful methods to appear as the motivational figure he portrayed in the media.

King's non violent methods reflects the wider methods and achievements of the Civil Rights Movement and is evident in his 1963 letter "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", thus making King's great impact in advancing the positions of African Americans mostly valid. He was the high profile leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and was addressing the clergy who had previously published a statement - "A Call for Unity" - in a Birmingham newspaper, criticising King and his methods so he intended to contradict their claims which were detrimental to his ideas and support network.The reason King had to write the letter from a jail was because he had just been arrested for peacefully participating in an anti-segregation march opposing the Jim Crow laws that were prevalent in the South, particularly Birmingham, Alabama. This adds value to the source as Birmingham was victim to a lot of racist violence in early 1963 - some locals referred to it as 'Bombingham.' However the source may be limiting due to the high emotions King must have felt upon being arrested and his repeated use of religious rhetorics, like comparing himself to Apostle Paul who 'carried the gospel of Jesus Christ', could just be used to persuade the clergy to sympathise with the movement. King argued that 'constructive nonviolent tension' is 'necessary for growth' and therefore negotiation and actually criticises the clergy for suggesting that he uses 'extremist' methods. This suggests that King took pride in his non violent methods to open the doors to negotiation. However, as King was operating at the same time as Malcolm X who was infamous for his extremist methods, he may have just emphasised the power of non-violent action because he knew it would make the predominantly white government officials want to work with him, rather than people like Malcolm X. King's tone in the letter emphasises the hopelessness that many African Americans faced and how it would continue unless they took action against the 'morally wrong'. His tone remains calm and respectful throughout, addressing the clergy as 'sirs' in order to show his willingness to work with white people, without resorting to violence. This adds value to the source and shows that King's non violent methods had a huge impact on advancing the position of African Americans.

King's use of media was a main factor in his ability to advance American Americans. His frequent use of biblical language and imagery created a messianic tone, particularly evident in 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' where he compared his help to Paul responding to the 'Macedonian call for aid'. This was particularly appealing to the largely Christian US. He was

an inspiring orator, as suggested by Dr Street, who thought that more emphasis should be placed on King as a spiritual leader, as well as political and that King should be praised, especially for his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, which inspired thousands. He was able to reach a white audience that wouldn’t usually be receptive to change in the African American community through the use of TV which wasn’t available to earlier activists. However, earlier activists still had an irrefutable impact that led the way to King’s campaigns, like Timothy T. Fortune who was considered one of the greatest black newspaper writers in the US and was elected chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Afro-American Press Association in 1890. This committee paved the way for later organisations like the Niagara Movement and the NAACP. However, typically black owned newspapers were only read by African Americans so the earlier activists has less influence in the white community to incite change. Similarly, Ida B. Wells spent time lecturing abroad in 1893 to gain support from reform-minded white people and wrote an in-depth report called ‘A Red Record’ in 1895 which detailed instances of lynchings in America so that people could be more informed of the injustices faced by African Americans. However, this achieved little in the long term as lynching remained prevalent throughout the US - a black teenager named Jesse Washington was famously lynched in Texas in 1916 as a result of racial discrimination. This shows that King did use the similar methods to previous civil rights leaders and used the advancement of media to his advantage and, although he was supported a lot, he did have the biggest individual impact in advancing African Americans, making the idea mostly valid.

Activists like Washington and Roy Wilkins were pivotal in the advancement of African Americans through the implementation of better educational policies, unlike King who tended not to focus on social reforms. Washington founded the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1881 where African Americans could be trained in agricultural pursuits and eventually earn the respect of the white community leading to racial equality - this is now known as the Tuskegee University and remains as a reminder of Washington’s significant impact which is still relevant today. Similarly, Wilkins directly influenced the Brown v. Board of Education US Supreme Court decision in 1954 which reversed the ‘separate but equal’ ideology and ensured that African Americans could receive the same level of education as white people and therefore be better prepared for the future. This acts as a means of advancing their position as African Americans. However, it can be viewed that Washington’s strategy was counter-productive as he thought that they should accept disenfranchisement and segregation in his accommodationist view, therefore suppressing the ability to advance their position. As well as this, King routinely promoted the idea of education - in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1964 he stated that he believed that people should have ‘education and culture for their minds and dignity.’ Despite this, King had very little long-lasting impact in education, especially compared to the monumental impact that Wilkins had to increase racial equality, as he preferred to focus on relations with federal government. This shows that the idea that King had the biggest impact on advancing African Americans is of limited value when considering education.