



## FIRST AMENDMENT IN HISTORY

### FREEDOM OF SPEECH, PRESS, AND ASSEMBLY: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929-1968)

#### RESOURCES

- <http://www.nps.gov/malu/>
- <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/mlking.htm>
- <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>

#### ACTIVITY

Martin Luther King, Jr. exercised his First Amendment rights to free speech, press, and assembly to secure greater political and civil rights for all Americans. King was born in Georgia in 1929. He fought for desegregation and equal rights for African Americans by writing, speaking out and leading marches. He always preached non-violence as the means for change.

King exercised his right to publish his ideas when he wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in April of 1963. King was imprisoned for demonstrating without a permit in Birmingham, Alabama. In an open letter to his critics that was published in newspapers, he wrote, “I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to...deny African Americans the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.” His letter was read all over the country.

The Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum, and in June of 1963, the president proposed civil rights legislation to Congress. The law was soon blocked. Civil rights leaders wanted to raise public awareness and revive the proposed legislation. They planned a peaceful march on Washington, DC. Two months later, King delivered the most famous speech of his career. During the August 1963 March on Washington, a quarter of a million people assembled on the National Mall. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In his speech, King referred to the Declaration of Independence, saying, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

In the years that followed, King led civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama. Television cameras captured police brutality on peaceful marchers. These images, and the determination of the marchers, continued to energize the civil rights movement. King was present when President Johnson signed portions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.

King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. For the next several years, King devoted his time to socioeconomic issues. Throughout his life, King spoke and wrote freely, to crowds who had assembled freely, in order to promote and expand freedom for Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. His funeral was attended by 300,000 people.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What changes in society did Martin Luther King work for, and what did he believe was the best means for achieving that change?
2. Why was King arrested in Birmingham?
3. How did King refer to the Declaration of Independence in his “I Have a Dream” speech? Why do you believe he mentioned it?
4. How did King exercise his First Amendment rights to achieve his goals?
5. What do you believe was King’s most effective use of his First Amendment freedoms? Explain.



## FIRST AMENDMENT IN HISTORY

### FREEDOM OF SPEECH, PRESS, AND ASSEMBLY: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929-1968)

#### ANSWERS

1. King worked for civil rights protections for African Americans and justice for all. He advocated non-violent protest as a means for change.
2. He was arrested for demonstrating without a permit.
3. He referred to the Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal" and shared his hope that the United States would "live out" this promise by protecting the rights of all equally. Students may say that King mentioned the document to remind Americans that the ideas he was advocating were not new, but rather as old as the republic itself.
4. King published a letter in newspapers, exercising his right to freely publish; he spoke out, exercising his right to free speech; he led demonstrations and marches, exercising his right to free assembly.
5. Answers will vary.