



CHAPTER ONE

Our Racist History

The name “Martin Luther King Jr.” and the term “civil rights movement” have often been used interchangeably, as if to imply that King was “the movement,” or that he was its sole leader. Although neither of these was true, he was indeed a major symbol and leader of the movement. Still, almost from its inception there were a host of women and men who provided leadership in various areas of the movement. It is important to keep this in mind, although our focus here is on King.

Most twenty-first-century students from high school to

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graduate school know little about Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil and human rights movements. Throughout their formal education they receive little exposure to race relations and King. In light of this failure of the educational system, it is reasonable to assume that many who read this book do not know much about the historical setting that led to the mass bus boycott in Montgomery that propelled a young, well-trained black clergyman into local, national, and international leadership. Martin Luther King did not seek out such a role. Rather, a confluence of events in Montgomery, Alabama, seems to have sought him out. He said often that he was tracked down by “the spirit of the times.”

This chapter provides a cursory overview of black-white relations from the time Afrikans were stolen primarily from West Afrikan countries and forced into dehumanizing enslavement in Europe and the Americas more than six hundred years ago. From the beginning the Europeans assumed an attitude of racial superiority and tried to paint the Afrikans as savages who needed whites to civilize them.

Most young people of any race today know little about this history and how racism and white privilege became institutionalized through official documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. In addition, during enslavement the judicial system and all levels of government forbade blacks to marry, learn to read, or own property. Black skin was perceived as a liability. What all whites have shared in common during and subsequent to the enslavement period, Andrew Hacker observes, is their white skin. This means that in the crunch all white people can boast, “At least I am not black.” One’s white skin ensures that he or she “will not be regarded as *black*, a security that is worth so much that no one who has it has ever given it away,” says Hacker. Therefore, “to be black is to be consigned to the margins of



American life. It is because of this that no white American . . . would change places with even the most successful black American.”¹ This is a very significant claim, for it means that white skin is a symbol of privilege to be respected in this society in ways that black skin never has been. As used in this book, “white privilege” entails unearned benefits, advantages, and privileges inherited by generations of white people from the time of enslavement. White privilege also entails a sense of being entitled to these benefits, which may be material, symbolic, psychological, or a combination of these.

Sociologist Joe Feagin points out that few whites have a sense of “the reality of this whole society being founded on, and firmly grounded in, oppression targeting African

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Americans (and other Americans of color) now for several centuries.”² In fact, race oppression is not an accident of United States history, “but was created intentionally by powerful white Americans” beginning in the seventeenth century.³ Powerful white Americans felt justified in creating this state of affairs, and many work hard to sustain and enhance it today. Race oppression and white privilege are embedded in the very foundation of this nation. After all, fifty-five white men (40 percent of whom were enslavers) met in Philadelphia in 1787 to create the Constitution. No Afrikans, other people of color, or women of any race were present. American society and the Constitution on which it is based were from the beginning “structured in terms of white gains and white group interests. Once this system was put into place . . . white privileges soon came to be sensed as usual and natural.”⁴

If one does not have a sense of the history of systemic racism and white privilege and how these developed in this country, it will be virtually impossible to appreciate Martin Luther King’s struggle for civil and human rights nationally and internationally, and why forty years after King’s assassination Afrikan Americans still complain about being victimized by racism, by its many tragic manifestations and consequences. In these early years of the twenty-first century many young white people have little sense of why there is tension between themselves and their Afrikan American peers. In part this is due to their not having lived through periods of sustained blatant racism as King did when he was growing up in the 1930s and 1940s. Another contributing factor is the failure of the educational system—at every level—to teach students this history. Consequently, it is important to set the historical stage for the ensuing discussion on Martin Luther King as a man of faith, ideas, and social activism.



The Slavery Question

The various peoples of Afrika had long and distinguished histories and cultures prior to being forced into enslavement in the so-called New World in the fifteenth century. How and why did the Afrikans come to be in this part of the world, and what affect did this have on their culture and fundamental beliefs? How were they treated by the whites who enslaved them?

The practice of enslaving human beings likely existed in the earliest days of history on all continents. The elements of cruelty and oppression undoubtedly existed wherever enslavement occurred. However, scholars maintain that the Europeans introduced new elements into the enslavement

practice. These included: (1) the sheer inhumanity of the way they practiced the enslavement of Afrikans; (2) the fact that the West Afrikans were traded and sold like any other commodity at the market; and (3) the perpetual and automatic enslavement of Afrikans' offspring.

Some scholars argue that persons captured during tribal wars in old Afrika were frequently enslaved, but these persons retained most of their human rights and were often treated more like domestic servants and family members than like people forced into enslavement. It is also of interest to note that generally Afrikan rulers who participated in the European enslavement trade only rarely sold people from their own society, and these were usually from the ranks of criminals and outcasts. In addition, the enslaved were not removed from the land in which they were born, reared, and lived their lives before captivity. In this regard, being enslaved and the enslavement trade were not precisely the same thing. We therefore need to distinguish between enslavement practiced during pre-colonial times or the period of old Afrika, and the enslavement trade on the western coast of Afrika that was introduced by the Europeans.

The type of enslavement practiced on the Afrikan continent and that practiced by the Europeans were to a large extent qualitatively different from each other. The Afrikans captured and enslaved during tribal wars remained on the continent and thus in relatively familiar surroundings. In addition, they were generally treated like human beings. But the Europeans not only forcibly removed them from the continent, packing them into steamy, putrid holds of large ships for the excruciatingly long, dehumanizing voyage across the Atlantic Ocean (the Middle Passage), but upon being sold the Afrikans, especially those whose destination was the American colonies, were frequently sub-

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jected to unspeakable brutalities. It is not far-fetched to argue, as Kevin Shillington does, that, “the greatest evil of the transatlantic trade in people was the extent of human suffering involved, and the callous disregard for human life and dignity displayed by those who dealt in slaves.”⁵ To make things worse, Afrikans sold in the Atlantic trade were not only in completely unfamiliar surroundings, but the color of their skin made it virtually impossible for them to blend in with the surrounding population even if they succeeded in escaping their enslavers. In addition, they could not possibly get back to the Afrikan continent.

The Afrikans resisted at virtually every stage of their capture by the Europeans. Recognizing their own sense of humanity and dignity, they did not willingly go into enslavement. Martin Luther King held that they resisted as best they could, but because they had no organized military, and no desire to steal the land of other people and perpetuate racism



all over the world, “they were conquered, and taken, and chained to ships like beasts.”⁶ But at every point, King argued, the Afrikans resisted their captivity, both during the journey across the Atlantic and in the colonies.

Whites presented the Afrikans as savages and then tried to justify enslaving them as a means of rescuing them from savagery. From the beginning to the end of the enslavement trade (approximately three hundred years), the Afrikan continent was depopulated by an estimated thirty to forty million people, mostly younger, stronger persons. This was the greatest forced redistribution of a people in history. The effect on the Afrikan continent and Afrikans in diaspora was devastating, and the consequences are still being felt.

By 1640—barely twenty years after the arrival of the first Afrikans in the colony of Virginia—the indentured status of the Afrikans was already showing signs of changing to the more permanent state of enslavement. One sign of this was the case of Afrikan indentured servant John Punch who, along with two white servants, escaped to Maryland. When they were captured and returned to Virginia, all three received thirty lashes. In addition, the two white servants were ordered to serve out their indenture plus one year, and afterward “to serve the colony for three whole years apiece.” The major difference in the sentence of John Punch was that he was ordered to “serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural life here or elsewhere.”⁷

In effect, Punch, unlike the two white servants, was condemned to permanent enslavement. One cannot help but see the racial implications in this, despite the fact that Virginia was slower than some other colonies in coming to see the advantage of the perpetual enslavement of the Afrikans. White indentured servants often tried to sue for one reason or another. In addition, many of the white men England sent for indentured servitude were of the criminal and



lower classes. Furthermore, when white indentured servants would run away it was easy for them to blend in with the population. Neither the Indians nor the Afrikans were so fortunate. Between 1660 and 1662, statutes in Virginia recognized the existence of enslavement and supported its continued development.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) Thomas Jefferson spoke for many whites when he responded negatively to the question of whether Afrikans should be incorporated into the state of Virginia as citizens. In the process of responding to this query, Jefferson also gave his own views on the moral, spiritual, and intellectual capacity of the Afrikans. The reason for not incorporating them into the state was quite simple, according to Jefferson: “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never

end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.” Jefferson believed the Afrikans were inherently “inferior to the whites in the endowments of body, mind, and imagination.”⁸ Statements such as this led King to say that “the social obstetricians who presided at the birth of racist views in our country were from the aristocracy,” and not solely the poor, uneducated whites.⁹

According to Jefferson, the Afrikans knew nothing of sentimental love, for “love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.” In addition, Jefferson said he had never known an instance in which “a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration,” nor had he seen evidence of their ability to be artists or sculptors, although they seemed more musically inclined than whites.¹⁰ Furthermore, Jefferson argued that there was no poetry among the Afrikans. At this point he disparaged the poetic works of Phyllis Wheatley, concluding that any progress toward civilization made by the Afrikans was due to their association with whites.

Clearly, neither Jefferson, Washington, nor any of the other Founding Fathers had a clear sense of the full humanity and dignity of blacks. According to King, “not one of these men had a strong unequivocal belief in the equality of the black man.”¹¹ While applauding the words “all men are created equal,” King concluded that this meant for Jefferson what it meant for most whites—“all *white* men are created equal.”¹²

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution

The Declaration of Independence (1776) declared self-evident the truth that “all men are created equal, that they

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are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” When the time came to draft the Constitution a dispute arose in the Congress between Southerners and Northerners over how or whether to count enslaved Afrikans in determining the number of representatives each state could send to Congress. Since most of the enslaved were in the South, it was advantageous to southern representatives to have them counted when determining the number of representatives. However, the Southerners did not want the enslaved Afrikans counted when determining taxes to be paid. Northern representatives saw that it would be to their advantage were it the other way around. The matter was settled by introducing the controversial *three-fifths compromise* clause. In article 1, section 2, paragraph 3 of the United States Constitution we find that the number of representatives “shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other persons.”¹³ “All other persons” were the enslaved



Afrikans, although it is interesting to note that since they were generally considered not to be full-fledged human beings, they were referred to in the document as “persons.” Unquestionably, the drafters of the Constitution meant something qualitatively different by “person” where the Afrikans were concerned. By no means did they intend to grant constitutional rights to blacks.

Dred and Harriet Scott and the Supreme Court

The idea that the Afrikans were not fully human was institutionalized in this country long before the writing of the Constitution and was given further legitimacy by rulings of the Supreme Court, not least the ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). Scott and his wife Harriet were enslaved Afrikans who “belonged” to an army surgeon named John Emerson. When Emerson was transferred from the enslavement state of Missouri to the free state of Illinois, he took the Scotts with him as his servants. When he moved to the free Wisconsin Territory he again took the Scotts with him. When Emerson died, some abolitionists helped the Scotts sue for their freedom. The suit was based on the idea that the Scotts had lived in a free state and in a free territory. Their lawyer argued that this made them free persons. The case went to the Supreme Court. The question before the Court was whether or not the opening words of the preamble to the Constitution, “We the people,” included persons of Afrikan descent.

Chief Justice Roger B. Taney read the majority opinion, which made clear that persons of Afrikan descent were not citizens of the colonies when the Declaration and Constitution were written. Therefore they could not bring suit against whites in the courts. In addition, the Court said that even if the Scotts did have the right to sue, the fact

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that they lived in Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory did not make them free. After all, an enslaved Afrikan was thought to be the “property” of his owner, and the Constitution protected a person’s property, even when it did not provide protection for specific groups of persons. As a property owner, then, one could take his property anywhere in the United States, but this would not in any way alter the status of said property. Once enslaved, always enslaved! According to Taney, the Afrikans were granted no rights either in the Declaration or the Constitution, and they had no rights that whites were bound to respect.

In its 7-2 ruling, the highest court of the land had declared that the famous statement on basic human rights in the Declaration of Independence did not include the Afrikans in the colonies, for they were considered by the “civilized portion of the white race” to be so far inferior to whites that their only value was in being enslaved to whites. The Afrikans were thought to be subhuman in comparison to whites. Essentially, then, racism was embedded in the basic human rights documents of the United States from the outset.



Reconstruction

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 ostensibly liberated the Afrikans from enslavement. However, they were given nothing of substance to help them make the transition from enslavement to a life of freedom. King observed that with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation "the nation didn't give the Negro one penny, or any land to make the freedom meaningful."¹⁴ It was at best an abstract freedom.

After the Civil War, the Reconstruction era (1865–1877) was initiated by Congress to aid the transition to freedom. Although this turned out to be a short-lived experiment, blacks throughout the South made tremendous strides in the political process. For these few years, they were able to vote, run for and gain election to office, and have some degree of influence in the political process. This was aided by the passing of three civil rights amendments during the Reconstruction period: the thirteenth, passed in 1865, abolished enslavement; the fourteenth, passed in 1868, guaranteed equal protection under the law; and the fifteenth, passed in 1870, outlawed voting restrictions based on race or "previous condition of servitude." These amendments have been referred to as "a second Bill of Rights" for Afrikan Americans, although we will see that the federal government and the Supreme Court offered no leadership in enforcing the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments up to and during the Montgomery bus boycott in the mid-1950s.

Blacks served as elected officials at the city, state, and national levels during Reconstruction. The first blacks served in the U.S. Congress during this period. Twenty blacks served in the House of Representatives. Hiram Revels served one year in the Senate, and Blanche K. Bruce (both representing Mississippi) served a full term. It speaks



volumes that Bruce was the only Afrikan American to serve a full term in the Senate for almost a hundred years, until the election of Edward Brooke from Massachusetts in 1966, then Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois (the first black woman) in 1992, and Barack Obama of Illinois in 2004. Mr. Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States on January 20, 2009.

Unfortunately, the Reconstruction period also saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group founded in 1866 by Confederate veterans to terrorize blacks and their white allies. During this period the Klan

worked mainly to keep blacks from voting. In addition, it also helped to restore power to conservative Democrats in the South.

The Compromise of 1877

The election of Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency in 1877 was based on a two-pronged compromise: (1) that he would withdraw the federal troops from the South and pursue a policy of conciliation toward that region, and (2) that Congress would provide a federal subsidy to Northern and Southern businessmen to build the Texas and Pacific Railroad as well as make other improvements in the South. Hayes also promised both to get pledges from white Southern leaders to protect the civil rights of blacks and to use the authority of his office to ensure such protection. However, Hayes placed adherence to peace, order, and harmony above that of compliance with the civil rights amendments.

Although Hayes tried to make good his promise to ensure the protection of the rights of blacks, he naively trusted the white Southerners to keep their part of the bargain. Their aim was to return to “states’ rights” or “home rule.” Historian Rayford Logan depicts Hayes as “the principal presidential architect of the consolidation of white supremacy in the South, during the post-Reconstruction period.”¹⁵ By naively trusting white Southerners and withdrawing the troops, Hayes gave the South a clear path to decide how it wanted to relate to blacks during the post-Reconstruction period. Blacks and democracy were the sacrificial lambs in the Great Compromise. The South once again had the authority—without fear of federal intervention and reprisal—to decide how it would handle the matter of race, which it did up to and beyond the Montgomery bus boycott.

Separate but Equal

In 1890, Louisiana passed a law providing for separate accommodations for whites and blacks in public transportation. Then in 1892, Homer Plessy, who was one-eighth black and seven-eighths white, was arrested after refusing to leave a “whites only” train. Plessy and his supporters sought to test the constitutionality of the Separate Car Law on the basis that it contradicted the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments. The case went to the Supreme Court. In 1896, the Court ruled in favor of the Louisiana law in an 8-1 vote, thus establishing the constitutionality of the “separate but equal” doctrine that became the law of the land for fifty years.

The ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* essentially nullified the civil rights amendments of the Reconstruction era and became the foundation for the system of segregation and all that it stood for. Justice John Marshall Harlan, himself a former enslaver from Kentucky, wrote a blistering dissent in which he criticized his colleagues for retreating from the principle of racial equality, believing as he did that the law is colorblind when it comes to the civil rights of its citizens. Harlan concluded, “The destinies of the two races in this country are indissolubly linked together, and the interests of both require that the common government of all shall not permit the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law.” Moreover, and quite prophetically, Harlan said that “the judgment of this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious as the decision made by this tribunal in the Dred Scott Case.” Harlan was anticipating the reversal of the decision in *Plessy*.

In 1915, William J. Simmons expanded the Ku Klux Klan into a national organization. Its purpose was to frighten and intimidate blacks and their white allies. In



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addition, the Klan hated Jews, immigrants, and Catholics. By the 1920s, the Klan was known for its terrorist activities against these groups, but its membership declined significantly when a number of its top leaders were successfully prosecuted and convicted of serious crimes, and when members were not able to pay dues during the Depression years of the early 1930s. Then, in the early 1950s, when Martin Luther King began his ministry in Montgomery, Alabama, a revived Klan terrorized and murdered some civil rights workers and black voters.

The 1950s

In the mid-1930s the legal defense team for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began challenging the “separate but equal” decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* by challenging in state and federal courts the Jim Crow laws that legalized racial segregation in public facilities and in schools. In *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 the Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, unanimously ruled against “separate but equal.” In a separate ruling one year later, referred to by some as *Brown II*, the Court instructed the states to begin implementing *Brown* “with all deliberate speed.” Intended or not, this gave rebellious states just the opening they needed to construct schemes to delay desegregating public schools. Consequently, by 1964 only 1 percent of black children in the South attended integrated schools.

In August 1955, only a few months after the Court’s “all deliberate speed” ruling, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago was visiting an uncle in Money, Mississippi, when he allegedly touched and whistled at a white woman in a store. Till, a child, was kidnapped from his uncle’s home and made the victim of one of the most brutal murders in

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the annals of civil rights history. He was shot in the head and his face so disfigured by the murderers that he was unrecognizable. When his body was returned home to Chicago, Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, rejected the advice that she have a closed-casket funeral. She opted to have it open because she wanted the whole world to see what racist whites had done to her son. Till's (self-confessed) murderers went to trial but were not convicted by the all-white jury.¹⁶

Martin Luther King had been pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery for only one year before the brutal murder of Till. Deeply affected by this tragedy, he said in a number of sermons that too often those who



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murder black children and throw their bodies into rivers (as happened with Till) attend church every Sunday. King was certain that they worshiped God aesthetically and emotionally but not morally. He was convinced that such people knew nothing of ethical Christianity.

Four months after the brutal murder of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks was arrested for violating the segregation ordinance in Montgomery, Alabama. This was the event that catapulted the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King into the national spotlight. But before these events, King's leadership abilities were being shaped. It is to King's background and upbringing, the foundations of his intellectual development and his social activism, that we now turn.