

## Has Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream Come True? Tracing Historical and Contemporary Interpretations

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### Abstract

Delivered in 1963 during the March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech has left an enduring legacy in American history. It powerfully exposed the suffering of millions of African Americans who faced systemic discrimination, segregation, and denial of fundamental rights. King emphasized that, one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Black Americans were still deprived of essential civil rights such as freedom, equality, justice, and economic opportunity. By invoking the promises of the American Constitution and Declaration of Independence, he framed civil rights not as special privileges, but as guaranteed rights owed to every citizen. The speech was received in complex ways. For many African Americans and civil rights activists, it became a source of hope, unity, and moral strength, energizing the broader Civil Rights Movement. However, some political figures and institutions perceived King's activism as disruptive or even threatening to national stability during a tense Cold War climate. As a result, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) initiated surveillance operations targeting King and other leaders of the movement, reflecting the suspicion and resistance that surrounded calls for racial justice. This paper examines how public and political interpretations of King's speech have evolved nearly six decades later. Now regarded as one of the most iconic pieces of American rhetoric, the speech is frequently celebrated in educational, political, and cultural contexts. Yet, a critical analysis reveals both progress and ongoing challenges. While significant legal advancements have been achieved, disparities persist in income levels, incarceration rates, access to quality education, and employment opportunities within the Black community. Using historical and comparative analytical methods, this research traces shifts in discourse and public perception over time. It argues that although the legal framework of civil rights has improved, structural inequalities remain. Ultimately, the study concludes that Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream continues to serve as both a milestone of progress and a reminder of unfinished work toward genuine equality.

**Keywords:** African Americans; Civil Rights; Discrimination; Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream*; Rhetorical Evolution.

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## Introduction

There is a stark difference when portraying the word 'dream'. While some people regard dreams as achievable goals that only require hard work, others perceive them as unattainable illusions due to the countless obstacles they experience. The concept of the American Dream embodies the same paradox. Expressed differently but holding the same notion, the American Dream sparked considerable debate over its realization, for some even over its existence. In their relentless struggle for civil rights, African Americans reveal the multifaceted sides of the American Dream, bringing to the surface a new dream, that of equality. A dream stemming from long years of social, economic, and political discrimination and segregation exercised by White American citizens. In their pursuit of integration and civil rights, African Americans have engaged in several undertakings, leading to the creation of the Civil Rights Movement in 1954. The movement, which lasted from 1954 to 1968, gained steadfast support from several diligent leaders, remarkably Martin Luther King, Jr. From a young preacher, King grew to become one of the most memorable figures in American history. Unwavering in his commitment, King took part in several undertakings. Importantly, he delivered a wide range of speeches. The *I Have a Dream* speech is a prominent piece of work that is considered a hallmark of American culture. Other than his inspiring words, King engaged in several actions, showing great support for militant nonviolent direct action exercised through marches, protests, sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience. The African American social revolution, although largely peaceful, led to fierce reactions among White opponents who felt threatened by the movement, raising much controversy over King's strategy. While some considered him a peaceful leader with passive actions, others accused him of igniting violence, leading to social disorder. Regardless of these controversies, Martin Luther King Jr. is now remembered as one of the most revered figures in America. A leader quoted by famous political and public figures. He even has a National Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. A statute, named the Stone of Hope, inspired by his famous speech *I Have a Dream*, depicting the United States in its post-Civil Rights movement. However, as racial inequalities persist, the current interpretation of King's legacy has sparked a major debate over the fulfillment of his dream.

### 1. The American Dream: One Dream of Many Dreams

Forever enshrined in American history, the American Dream is one of the foundational ideals of the nation. Emerging from its founding documents, the concept has encountered various interpretations, shaping American popular conceptions. While some hold positive views on the dream, arguing its possible attainment through hard work and commitment, others, including marginalized groups, tend to maintain a less favorable view.

Tracing its origins, journalist Patrick J. Kiger provides an overview of the evolution of the American Dream. The idea of this concept first appeared in 1630 in John Winthrop's sermon entitled "City Upon A Hill." In 1776, the idea was formally adopted when President Thomas Jefferson introduced the Declaration of Independence, asserting that "all men are created equal." Over the course, the American Dream received significant attention, discussed in many newspaper articles and books.

Beginning in the 20th century, this dream was closely linked to the practice of economic upward mobility. That is, based on the principle of meritocracy, the only obstacle people might encounter on their path to success was their own hard work and commitment, which gained widespread popular recognition (Kiger, 2011).

However, the Great Depression that started in 1929 reshaped the American public perception, putting the American Dream at stake. Experiencing a severe economic downturn, Americans began to be skeptical about the success provided by the land of opportunities. Concerned about the loss of American ideals, James Truslow Adams, an American historian, presented *The Epic of America* (1931). Considering it one of the significant themes in American history, Adams introduced the concept of the

American Dream, a dream that "all our citizens of every rank" could fulfill (P. xx). However, that dream was at risk as people were now facing new hurdles that might divert them from the path of social order, argued Adams.

Not long after, the American Dream re-emerged to the surface, particularly with the end of World War II and the rise of the United States as one of the most powerful nations in the world (Kiger, 2011). However, this time, there are diverging public perceptions. Misconceptions, portraying the United States as the land of opportunities, have been challenged by the resilient Black struggle for civil rights.

Despite its long history and worldwide prevalence, and importantly, its several mentions, the concept of the American Dream still lacks a precise definition. "It's as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands, which today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough", argues Jim Cullen (P. 5).

In fact, understanding the dream depends largely on seizing the "anything". Alternatively, it may be that not everyone has the same vision about the American Dream. While some coins it to materialistic features leading to economic prosperity, others link it to ethical and intellectual manners ensuring freedom, equality, and justice. Just the way African Americans think. Hence, the American Dream cannot be associated with one definition, because:

there is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity. What James Truslow Adams called in the epilogue of *The Epic of America* "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" may be fine as far as it goes, but the devil is in the details: just what does "better and richer and fuller" mean? (Cullen, P. 7).

Furthermore, characterized by long-standing racial segregation, the United States has been a land of struggle rather than a land of opportunities, notably for African Americans. That struggle began in the 18th century when Black individuals were enslaved seeking freedom and evolved later into a movement of African American citizens demanding their total rights.

Though the struggle for Black civil rights had long occupied a crucial part of the United States' history, the Civil Rights Movement experienced a significant peak in the period spanning from 1955 to 1968, with the remarkable contribution of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Born on January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the distinguished figures in the history of the Civil Rights movement. Despite growing up in a secure middle-class family, Martin endured social indignities, nurturing his compassion for the segregated Black community (California Department of Education). African Americans differed in their way to seeking their rights. While some adopted a violent strategy, others preferred a more peaceful method based on non-violent direct action led by Dr. King.

## **2. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Intertwined Legacy**

In pursuit of justice and equality, King participated in numerous civil rights campaigns aimed at breaking down the barriers of racial segregation and ensuring social integration for the Black community. His actions centered on a legacy of nonviolence, ranging from speeches, boycotts, protests, marches, and civil disobedience. Among King's most notable protests were the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedoms during which he delivered his renown speech 'I Have a Dream'.

His career encompassed a range of positions and responsibilities. In 1948, Martin Luther King, Jr. graduated from Morehouse College. Then, he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. He pursued his studies at Boston University, where he obtained a PhD in theology. By 1955, King's civil rights activism flourished as he was elected president of the Montgomery

Improvement Association and led the 382-day Montgomery bus boycott. Notably, he founded and served as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (California Department of Education). In addition, King Jr. engaged in several protests and marches, including the historic march from Selma to Montgomery. Determined to attain his dream, he expanded his actions from the south to the north of the United States.

Known for his oratory skills, King delivered several speeches. For instance, in 1956, he spoke before the platform committee of the Democratic Party in Chicago, urging the government to take federal action on desegregation. In addition, he delivered two speeches at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., one of which was his renowned “I Have a Dream”. The following year, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway (California Department of Education).

Though not the only civil rights advocate, Martin Luther King Jr. stands out as an iconic, inspiring leader and, for some, a “superstar” in American history, society, and culture, raising questions about why he commands such admiration. In *The Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources*, Keith D. Miller investigates how language was crucial to King’s career, arguing it played a pivotal role during the Civil Rights Movement.

The language employed by Martin Luther King Jr. has sparked intense scholarly debate. While some historians attribute King’s language to his Black preaching tradition, others emphasize his intellectual formation under white European thinkers. However, the majority, including David J. Garrow and Keith D. Miller, argue it reflects both his preaching and white schooling.

In his book *Bearing the Cross* (1988), David J. Garrow provides a profound narration of King’s experience in preaching and formal education. Reflecting on King’s years at Morehouse College and Crozer Seminary, Garrow links the evolution of King’s thoughts to his extensive readings of white philosophers and thinkers. Garrow emphasizes that King’s engagement with white scholars helped him develop his academic skills, moving from grades C and B in his first two years at Crozer to an A in his final year (P. 37).

Importantly, Garrow attributes King’s developing philosophy of non-violence to his readings of Mahatma Gandhi, drawing on the observations of L.D. Reddick, King’s MIA colleague and later biographer, who noted that “during this early period, King’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance was only gradually taking form” (P. 32).

Further exposure to White thinkers, such as Niebuhr, stimulates King’s thoughts, moving him “away from his earlier blind attachment to the optimism that pervaded not only Rauschenbusch’s social gospel but indeed all of the evangelical liberalism that George Davis had suffused him with” (Garrow, P. 42).

Regarding his intellectual ability, King confirmed, on several occasions, the valuable contributions of his father, Martin Luther King Sr., and the panel of black preachers who had taught him in his early years, nurturing his basic religious and social views. Still, many have attributed his thoughts to the European American thinkers.

In *Composing Martin Luther King Jr.* (1990), Keith D. Miller criticizes several scholars for limiting their analysis to King’s *Pilgrimage to Non-violence*, dated in 1960, when tracing his intellectual development. Indeed, in that work, King extensively attributes his thoughts and views to white European thinkers, such as Karl Marx, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Edgar S. Brightman. However, Miller contends that King’s ‘Pilgrimage’ essay does not provide a reliable basis for covering his intellectual evolution, as he exaggerated in citing his white schooling (P. 71).

In what he calls “Voice Merging”, Miller explains that King’s speeches have gained recognition not for their originality but for his ability to integrate voices from different sources, reaching both the black

and white communities. Providing several instances, Miller draws attention to the variety of King's rhetorical and intellectual resources. Blending his voice with Black preachers and Euro-American thinkers, King could skillfully differentiate himself from other Black activists, who, according to Miller, had made the same initiatives and sacrifices as King but lacked his oratory skills. Miller's focus is not on proving the originality of King's rhetoric, but on uncovering the overlooked black preaching traditions and highlighting King's skill in "orchestrating the words of others" (*Voice of Deliverance*, P. 6).

Michael J. McTighe offers a more defensible interpretation, arguing that King's early years should be taken into consideration when documenting his intellectual maturity. When reflecting on his famous I Have a Dream speech, Michael noted that many of the ideas it embodied were already present in a speech King gave during a high school Elks competition when he was just 15 years old. Hence, Michael insists on the cumulative effect of these documents of King's early years to make a strong case that the essential elements of his theology, his social attitudes, even his strategy for social change, were formed well before he had extensive contact with white teachers and intellectuals. His family and the black community- particularly the black church - were the crucibles of King's early development (P. 348).

Martin Luther King was influenced by different figures, including his father, Martin Luther King Sr., pastor Vernon Johns, and Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, whose notions and philosophies contributed to the development of his intellectual character. He built his conceptions and values from multiple sources. Merging his earlier preaching educational experiences with profound readings about Rauschenbusch's social gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realm, Gandhi's nonviolence, among others, King succeeded in gathering different interpretations of theologies and philosophies and combined them to produce a compelling rhetoric calling for civil rights (Miller, "Composing", p. 70). One of the most memorable speeches he delivered is I Have a Dream, which still resonates to this day.

### **3. King's Dream of Equality**

The dream of freedom that enslaved blacks had sought for centuries was eventually realized by the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. However, "Abraham Lincoln may have made the slaves free, but not even he, as he pointed out repeatedly in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, was prepared to make them equal" (Cullen, P. 107). Deprived of political, civil, and social rights, African Americans extended their dream of freedom to a dream of equality. The post-abolishment period was characterized by an increased level of inequality in race relations, through the Jim Crow Laws that denied blacks most of their constitutional rights. Black people realized that freedom from slavery was not enough to grant them their equal rights as American citizens.

The basis of that struggle lay in the creation of the Civil Rights Movement. The central issue of the movement was to invalidate the Southern Jim Crow laws that were introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, entrenching "the equal but separate" doctrine. One of the iconic figures who stood at the forefront of the movement is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Black preacher who ignited public support to an unprecedented level. King left an enduring legacy, praising the ideology of non-violence as the most effective vehicle to reach the American Dream.

Delivered in 1963, *I Have a Dream* is a renowned speech through which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expresses the urgent need for radical change regarding racial injustice, a dream that the black community has been seeking for centuries. Aware of its illusion, King was not seeking the ordinary "American Dream". In fact, he was hoping for "an American Dream of Equality" (Cullen, P. 125).

King expressed on several occasions his view on the American Dream, insisting that it was "a dream yet unfulfilled" (Cullen, P. 126). In his speech, King addressed "the nation of the United States, and more specifically the Congress" (Alvarez, P. 348), calling for legal regulations. For instance, in his

speech *The Three Evils of Society*, delivered on August 31, 1967, during the National Conference on New Politics, King expressed his displeasure, stating that, "Unemployment rages at a major depression level in the black ghettos, but the bi-partisan response is an anti-riot bill rather than a serious poverty program"(Editors, *The Black Agenda Review*, 2024).

Initially, King points to the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order under which Blacks were set free from the shackles of enslavement. However, their sufferance persisted with ongoing racial injustice embodied within severe white segregationist and discriminatory acts.

Those acts led to the raising of racial inequalities, leaving African Americans "on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (King). Hence, King demanded that "freedom ring- a freedom defined by, not against, equality" (Cullen, P. 126). A right guaranteed by the official documents on which the United States has been founded; the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The right that "all men, yes, black men as well as white men" (King) are entitled to.

The dream, however, was not King's only. It was deeply rooted in every black individual's thought. Blacks were aware of the interchangeable relation of freedom and equality even prior to the Civil War. As stated by the former enslaved Fredrick Douglass<sup>2</sup> in an address he wrote in 1883, "making the nation's life consistent with the nation's creed". Blacks had long wondered "Why then should we not have equal rights with a foreigner, who comes to this country to fight for the preservation of the Government?", as expressed by a black soldier who participated in the Civil War (Cullen, P. 114).

Hence, the King's dream is not a result of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, it is a feature forever installed in every American's mind, whether white or black, a leader or an ordinary citizen. Regarding his language, King's dream might not be original, simply because it is not his only dream. It is a dream that early black people fought for, and current African Americans are still hoping for.

#### **4. The Dream of Equality: Reality Check**

In their pursuit of happiness, African Americans endured different forms of systematic oppression, including segregation, discrimination, inequality, and injustice. Eager to gain their "inherited right" of "political equality", black communities launched the transformative Civil Rights Movement, which aimed to achieve political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

A prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., engaged in several undertakings centered on the legacy of nonviolence, ranging from speeches, boycotts, protests, and marches to civil disobedience. His actions proved impactful, leading to the desegregation of Montgomery city buses. In addition, King's efforts led to the passage of two pivotal regulations: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Both legislative initiatives sought to end racial barriers, ensuring the principles of equality.

Aimed at racial integration and equality, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provides the black community with their equal rights to voting, public accommodations and facilities, education, and employment. Regarding employment, in addition to other protected traits, Title VII of the act prohibits discrimination based on race in the labor market (Alvarez *et al.*). Importantly, Section 705 of the title establishes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission aimed at preventing discriminatory employment practices and allowing Affirmative Action as a remedy to previously discriminated segments. Regarding employment practices, Section 703 deems it unlawful "for an employment agency to fail or refuse to refer for employment, or otherwise to discriminate against, any individual because of his race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, or to classify or refer for employment any individual on the basis

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<sup>2</sup> Fredrick Douglass (1818-1895) was an African American abolitionist and one of the distinguishing civil rights leaders during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

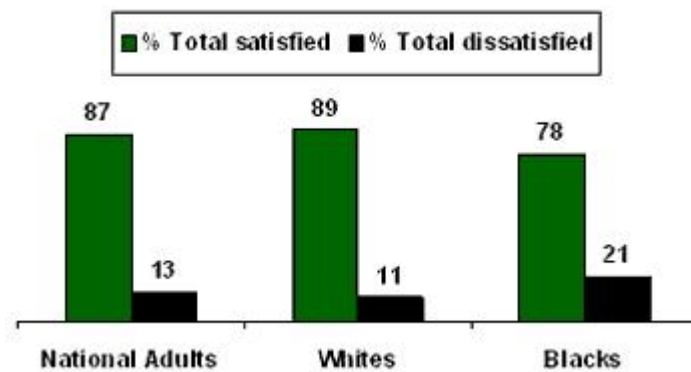
of his race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d., para.1).

In addition, signed on August 6, 1965, by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Voting Rights Act invalidates discriminatory measures that were used to deprive African Americans of their voting rights on a racial basis. Now eligible for registration, the rate of black voters increased from "7% in 1964 to 67% just five years later" in Mississippi (Cobb). Over the decades, the new measure helped improve voting rights for the black community in all states. Accordingly, "by the mid-1980s, there were more black people in public office across the South than in the rest of the nation combined. Although the share of public officeholders still fell well short of the black share of the population, by 2001 the gap outside the South was nearly 4 times greater than within it" (Cobb).

Public perception of Martin Luther King Jr. has drastically changed over time. Based on several opinion polls conducted during the 1960s, King was ranked among the most disliked figures. However, opinions shifted favorably towards him in the following decades. During his lifetime, particularly in the early 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. was among the most resented figures in the U.S., especially among white Americans, argues Sheldon Appleton (P. 11). For example, in a 1963 Gallup survey on public sentiment towards various political figures, King received about 37 percent negative ratings. Despite facing such opposition, King remained relentlessly committed to the movement. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which increased his recognition among the American public. However, in subsequent Gallup surveys conducted in 1965 and 1966, the share of negative sentiments towards him continued to rise, reaching 45 percent and then 63 percent, respectively (Gallup News Service). Behind King's peaceful movement lied a strong will and demand for radical social and economic reform, putting the status quo at risk, a move that most Americans rejected.

A 2011 Gallup survey revealed a stark difference between pre- and post-21st-century opinions about King, with 94 percent of respondents, perceiving him positively. Almost as many people viewed his dream positively; in 2011, 74 percent of Americans polled believed that King's dream "has been realized or that major progress has been made." Specifically, 51 percent said it had been fully realized, and 23 percent said major progress had been made toward its realization (Bruyneel, P. 77). These positive views about King and his dream reflect favorable opinions on progress in civil rights for the Black community.

Although public perception has been disproportionate regarding the degree of improvement in civil rights for the black community, the share has not fallen below half. A 1995 Gallup survey shows that 83 percent of Americans agreed that civil rights had improved. In 2011, the rate reached its highest level, with 89 percent. These rates reflect widespread public optimism about the status of African Americans. According to a 2004 Gallup survey, the majority of Americans hold positive views regarding the educational attainment of the black community, with 87 percent satisfied with their personal education. Although the shares differ between white and black respondents, most blacks, 78 percent, responded positively (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1: American Public Views on Education of African Americans**

**Source:** Carroll, *Race and Education 50 Years After Brown v. Board of Education*, Gallup (2004).

Although moderately holding lower positive views regarding economic integration, most Americans, 58 percent, state that "Black and White adults have the same chances of getting any kind of job for which they are qualified" (Brenan). Public judgment regarding racial equality in wealth has also been relatively optimistic, arguing that "Black American family had about 50% of the amount of wealth of the average White American family in 1963, and believe this had grown to 90% by 2016" (Browman and Miele).

Nevertheless, comparing these optimistic views with the social and economic status quo of the Black community highlights common public misperceptions. In "Misperceptions of progress towards racial equality in educational attainment and their implications for policy preferences", Alexander S. Browman and David B. Miel argue that despite legal initiatives, social inequities persist and, in some cases, have even increased.

Based on three studies involving 813 undergraduate and online respondents, Browman and Miel conclude that individuals overestimate the progress African Americans have achieved in degree attainment rates by more than twice. While they agree on the incremental progress resulting from the Civil Rights Acts, their study provides several instances of lasting racial inequities in education. Notably, from 1980 to 2015, the gap in degree attainment between White and Black Americans increased by 8.31 percentage points in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics).

With regard to economic advancement, positive public perceptions have increasingly conflicted with studies revealing the factual economic conditions of African Americans. Despite some progress, economic disparities between Black and White Americans are still sustained, especially in terms of income and wealth. Compared to previous decades, the Black community has experienced a remarkable improvement in its economic well-being, with higher employment, income, and wealth rates. For instance, the number of employed African Americans increased from approximately 8,000 to more than 20,000 in the period from 1975 to 2025 (See Fig. 2). Black median household income also improved, from \$41,000 in 2011 to almost \$53,000 in 2022 (Asante-Muhammad and Austin, 10). Similarly, median Black wealth increased from \$ 17,000 in 2013 to \$45,000 in 2022 (Asante-Muhammad and Austin, 14).

**Figure 2: The Number of Employed African Americans (1975-2025)**



**Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (FRED).**

Even with these improvements, the gap between Black and White Americans is yet to be bridged. Drawing on the prime-age population (25-to 54-year-olds), a 2024 study by Dedrick Asante-Muhammad and Algernon Austin shows that the White employment rate is higher than the Black rate by 3.4 percentage points, with 81.4 percent and 78 percent for each group, respectively (Asante- Muhammad and Austin, 8-9). Disparities persist, with median income for Whites rising to \$80,000 in 2020, compared to \$50,000 for Black people (Asante- Muhammad and Austin, 10). With an estimated \$190,000 to \$570,000 as the wealth necessary to reach middle-class status, African Americans are less likely to attain economic security, with a median income of \$45,000 (Asante- Muhammad and Austin, P. 14).

About the criminal legal system, a report on *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons* finds that African Americans still need to fight for racial justice within the criminal legal system, as disparities still persist. The study shows that the incarceration rate of Black Americans is 4.8 times higher than that of white Americans (Nellis, P. 6).

In sharp contrast to public misperceptions, several studies have documented growing inequities between Black and White Americans in different fields. Hence, achieving racial equality is still an open question, bringing to discussion the true accessibility of the American Dream. In *The Closeting of the American Dream*, Victor Tan Chen and Timothy Beryl Bland explain that: "Popular conceptions of the American dream have shifted, in turn, from desires for a freedom-loving and virtuous community to aspirations for individual advancement and material success" (P. 5). These changing patterns play a pivotal role in the evaluation of the ideals of the American Dream. Standpoints vary between those who still believe in the dream, particularly those who benefited from generational wealth. On the contrary, others question the dream's accessibility to all members. These stark viewpoints urge the United States to reconsider the ideals of the American Dream, paving the way for a more realistic vision that meets systemic inequalities.

## 5. Misinterpretation

Following his leadership of the Montgomery Bus boycott, Martin Luther King Jr. rose to national prominence. The nascent leader demonstrated a keen appreciation of disciplined peacefulness, challenging the continued white, racially motivated mistreatment. In his delivered speech on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955, King quite markedly stated his deep commitment to the rule of law, the Christian doctrine, and more importantly, the non-violent approach. He explicitly emphasized his respect for the law and the legal legitimacy of his struggle, stating: "Now I think I speak with, with legal authority—not that I have any legal authority, but I think I speak with legal authority behind me." As a preacher, King also asserted his commitment to Christian doctrine, indicating, "We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus." Deeply rooted in his beliefs, King repeatedly confirmed his unwavering adherence to the non-violent ideology, maintaining: "I want to say that we are not here advocating violence." He further explained the strategies of his ideology, indicating: "The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest." He also denied any use of violent actions, affirming that, "There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery."

The black struggle, however, was met by fierce white resistance, leading to several violent incidents. White disenfranchisement persisted with continuous racial bias exercised in manifold ways, including segregation in interstate transportation, public schools, housing, and employment. Following the decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared the "separate but equal" doctrine unconstitutional allowing for the desegregation of schools, several white political leaders in the Southern states opposed the decision. For example, Senator James Eastland confirmed that "the South will not abide by nor obey this legislative decision by a political body" (Legal Defense Fund, n.d.). This Legal opposition escalated into fierce white public resistance. Arkansas witnessed one of the most violent incidents, where massive white riots prevented nine black students from attending Central High School in Little Rock (National Park Service, n.d.). Yet despite the difficulties encountered, the resilient Black population persisted, asserting their deep commitment to the movement. As support grew, so did the movement's demands and criticism.

Violent reactions from the movement's opponents led to increased criticism of King's strategy, questioning its real commitment to non-violence. Despite his current widely recognized non-violent character, King was accused of provoking violence. In fact, this controversial standpoint derives "from the paradox inherent in the strategy of nonviolent protest" (Colaiaco, P. 16). Colaiaco agrees with King's critics, stating that "his nonviolent method was most successful when it provoked violence from defenders of the racist order" (P. 17).

In his non-violent struggle, King adopted two different positions. By the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott, when King first became involved in the leadership of the movement, he was keen on the idea of converting segregationist whites "by reason and love". However, as tension grew, King became aware of the "realistic view of humanity and the nature of political power, he saw that most racists were compelled rather than converted" (Colaiaco, P. 18).

With his new vision, King, along with other activists, expanded the movement to include a wide spectrum of practices and demands. Concerned about the deep-seated contempt of his black peers, King "became increasingly aware of the intimate relationship between racial and socio-economic impediments and tried to broaden and reorient the Movement's aims", argued Randall Kennedy (P. 1063) The struggle for integration changed into a fight for major socio-economic and political rights.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of equality and justice for the Black community was consistently reflected in his sermons and actions. However, he was widely recognized for his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The speech has gained significant public and political attention. However, "*One line in particular has achieved resonance in the public consciousness at a level*

*nearly on par with the first words of the Declaration of Independence*" ("Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech").

The quote stating, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," has been misinterpreted by many figures, argues Liz Tracey. Critically, Professor Michael Eric Dyson contends that despite the many biographies about Martin Luther King Jr., "most Americans have lost sight" of him (P. IX).

In fact, misinterpretation has expanded to impact not only 'The I Have a Dream', but the general image of King and his legacy. In "The King's Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory", Kevin Bruyneel examines the current contrasting views on how to remember Dr. King. From one angle, King is perceived as "a haloed consensual figure", depicting the idea that the U.S. has reached a post-racial era characterized by neoliberal governing priorities reigning supreme. In contrast, others remember King as a confrontational and radical figure, rejecting the idea that the U.S. has succeeded in fulfilling "his dream".

Of these two, the winning side is that picturing King as a haloed figure, misinterpreting the leader's legacy and political identity, argues Bruyneel. Represented by "elite political actors from the two major political parties, multinational corporate interests and a large portion of the American population, especially the white American population", this view has deprived Dr. King "of the confrontational and radical politics that he pursued while he was alive" (Bruyneel, P. 76). This portrayal aims to eliminate the idea of racial division and inequality, arguing that the United States has overcome this dilemma. This view, however, stands in stark contrast to the real legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Conclusion**

From one of the most reviled to one of the most admired figures in American history, perceptions of Dr. King are likely to change because of misinterpretations of his legacy. Maintaining his confrontational and radical persona would likely have perpetuated negative views of him. The widespread support Dr. King currently receives can be attributed to the saintly figure of King, picturing the U.S. as a racial egalitarian nation. From a revolutionary speech, I Have a Dream has been misinterpreted, being used in ceremonial events, praising individualism and upward mobility. The speech has deviated from its original message. While King's speech and movement in general sought radical change to America's materialistic vision, inappropriate use has undermined the core value of achieving racial equality. Despite lagging, African Americans still have the chance to make King's dream a reality with further political and institutional reforms. Instead of focusing on a partial aspect, Americans should strive to achieve a comprehensive vision of the American Dream as articulated by King. The existence of the American Dream as an idea is undeniable, but it has no unique definition. Understanding the American Dream and its existence depends on the interpretation offered by a particular segment of American society at a specific period. To fully grasp the general concept, one must trace American history and cover all its aspects. Regarding King's dream, the whole picture cannot be clearly demonstrated if not entirely unveiled.

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