

Gandhi and American Civil Rights

Howard Thurman travelled to India and returned to the U.S. intent on bringing nonviolence to the struggles of African Americans, writes Walter E. Fluker.



Howard Thurman's image on Howard University chapel's stained glass window. (Fourandsixty from Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA)

By **Walter E. Fluker**, Boston University

The Conversation

Director Martin Doblmeier's new documentary, "**Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story**," is scheduled for release on public television in February. Thurman played an important role in the civil rights struggle as a key mentor to **many leaders of the movement**, including **Martin Luther King Jr.**, among others.

I have been a scholar of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. for over 30 years and I serve as the editor of Thurman's papers. Thurman's influence on King Jr. was critical in shaping the civil rights struggle as a nonviolent movement. Thurman was deeply influenced by how Gandhi used nonviolence in India's struggle for independence from British rule.

Visit to India

Born in 1899, Howard Washington Thurman was raised by his formerly enslaved grandmother. He grew up to be an ordained Baptist minister and a leading religious figure of 20th-century America.



Journey of the delegation in South Asia. (Marc Korpus, [CC BY](#))

In 1936 Thurman led a [four-member delegation](#) to India, Burma (Myanmar), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), known as the “pilgrimage of friendship.” It was during this visit that he would meet Mahatma Gandhi, who at the time was leading a nonviolent

struggle of independence from British rule.

The delegation had been sponsored by the Student Christian Movement in India who wanted to explore the political connections between the oppression of blacks in the United States and the freedom struggles of the people of India.

The general secretary of the Indian Student Christian Movement, A. Ralla Ram, had argued for inviting a “Negro” delegation. He said that “since Christianity in India is the ‘oppressor’s’ religion, there would be a unique value in having representatives of another oppressed group speak on the validity and contribution of Christianity.”

Between October 1935 and April 1936, Thurman gave at least 135 lectures in over 50 cities, to a variety of audiences and important Indian leaders, including the Bengali poet and Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, who also played a key role in India’s independence movement.

Throughout the journey, the issue of segregation within the Christian church and its inability to address color consciousness, a social and political system based upon discrimination against blacks and other nonwhite people, was raised by many of the people he met.

Thurman and Gandhi

The delegation met with Gandhi towards the end of their tour in Bardoli, a small town in India’s western state of Gujarat.

Gandhi, an admirer of Booker T. Washington, the prominent African-American educator, was no stranger to the struggles of African-Americans. He had been in correspondence with

prominent black leaders before the meeting with the delegation.

As early as May 1, 1929, Gandhi had written a “Message to the American Negro” addressed to W.E.B. DuBois to be published in “The Crisis.” Founded in 1910 by DuBois, “The Crisis” was the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Gandhi’s message stated,

“Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is no dishonour in being slaves. There is dishonour in being slave-owners. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past. Let us realise that the future is with those who would be truthful, pure and loving.”

Understanding Nonviolence

In a conversation lasting about three hours, published in The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Gandhi engaged his guests with questions about racial segregation, lynching, African-American history, and religion. Gandhi was puzzled as to why African-Americans adopted the religion of their masters, Christianity.



Gandhi,
spinning cotton, in a photo from 1931. ([AP Photo](#))

He reasoned that at least in religions like Islam, all were considered equal. Gandhi declared, "For the moment a slave accepts Islam he obtains equality with his master, and there are several instances of this in history." But he did not think that was true for Christianity. Thurman asked what was the greatest obstacle to Christianity in India. Gandhi replied that Christianity as practiced and identified with Western culture and colonialism was the greatest enemy to Jesus Christ in India.

The delegation used the limited time that was left to interrogate Gandhi on matters of "ahimsa," or nonviolence, and his perspective on the struggle of African-Americans in

the United States.

According to Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's personal secretary, Thurman was fascinated with the discussion on the redemptive power of ahimsa in a life committed to the practice of nonviolent resistance.

Gandhi explained that though ahimsa is technically defined as "non-injury" or "nonviolence," it is not a negative force, rather it is a force "more positive than electricity and more powerful than even ether."

In its most practical terms, it is love that is "self-acting," but even more – and when embodied by a single individual, it bears a force more powerful than hate and violence and can transform the world.

Towards the end of the meeting, Gandhi proclaimed, "It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."

Search for an American Gandhi

Indeed, Gandhi's views would leave a deep impression on Thurman's own interpretation of nonviolence. They would later be influential in developing Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolent resistance. It would go on to shape the thinking of a generation of civil rights activists.

In his book, "Jesus and the Disinherited," Thurman addresses the negative forces of fear, deception and hatred as forms of violence that ensnare and entrap the oppressed. But he also counsels that through love and the willingness to nonviolently engage the adversary, the committed individual creates the possibility of community.

As he explains, the act of love as redemptive suffering is not contingent on the other's response. Love, rather, is unsolicited and self-giving. It transcends merit and demerit. It simply loves.

A growing number of African-American leaders closely followed Gandhi's campaigns of "satyagraha," or what he termed as nonresistance to evil against British colonialism. Black newspapers and magazines announced the need for an "American Gandhi."

Upon his return, some African-American leaders thought that Howard Thurman would fulfill that role. In 1942, for example, Peter Dana of the Pittsburgh Courier, wrote that Thurman "was one of the few black men in the country around whom a great, conscious movement of Negroes could be built, not unlike the great Indian independence movement."

King, Love and Nonviolence

Thurman, however, chose a less direct path as an interpreter of nonviolence and a resource for activists who were on the front lines of the struggle. As he wrote,

"It was my conviction and determination that the church would be a resource for activists – a mission fundamentally perceived. To me it was important that the individual who was in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a moment, when a person could declare, I choose."



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., speaking at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta.

(AP Photo)

Indeed, leaders like Martin Luther King did choose to live out the gospel of peace, justice and love that Thurman so eloquently proclaimed in writing and the spoken word, even though it came with an exacting price.

In his last letter to Martin Luther King, dated May 13, 1966, Thurman expressed his regret for the time that had elapsed since he and King last spoke. He ended the short note with a rather foreboding quote from the American naturalist and essayist Loren Eiseley,

“Those as hunts treasure must go alone, at night, and when they find it they have to leave a little of their blood behind them.”

King, like Gandhi 70 years ago, fell to an assassin's bullet on April 4, 1968.

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King's Legacy Betrayed

The legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated 50 years ago today, has been cynically exploited by corporate and political leaders who care more for the needs of their rich donors than black constituents, comments Margaret Kimberley.

By Margaret Kimberley *Special to Consortium News*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the preeminent leader of the black liberation movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Millions of people engaged in the struggle against America's shameful apartheid system but King was the most influential. His actions are remembered, his words are quoted by activists, politicians, and pundits. His birthday is a national holiday. Only the worst and most retrograde racists dare to speak ill of King.

But the lionizing is mostly a sham. In fact there are very few people who remember the importance of what King said, what he did or why and how they should replicate his work. His legacy has been subverted and is now understood only by the most conscious students of history.

Nothing illustrated this state of affairs more clearly than the use of King's words in a Ram truck commercial broadcast during the 2018 Super Bowl football championship. Viewers were told that Ram trucks are "built to serve."

The voice over is provided by King himself speaking exactly 50 years earlier, on February 4, 1968. The Drum Major Instinct sermon was a call to reject the ego driven desire for attention in favor of working for more altruistic pursuits. "If you want to say that I was a drum major say that I was a drum major for

justice.”

The commercial’s creators deliberately ignored the portion of the sermon in which King derided the influence of advertising. He even mentioned vehicle advertising specifically. He warned that “gentleman of massive verbal persuasion” can influence people to act against their own interests. “In order to make your neighbors envious you must drive this type of car.”

A Nation Going Backwards

Corporate interests are not alone in pretending to honor King while actually attacking him. King’s legacy is severely diminished because it has been used by cynical individuals for corrupt purposes. As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of his assassination we see a nation that has moved backwards on nearly every front. Legalized discrimination was eliminated but powerful forces undermined progress and America in 2018 is devoid of the change that King fought to make real.

Much of the blame lies at the feet of the Democratic Party, who have an undeserved reputation for enacting progressive policies. In reality, Democrats actively targeted black people for joblessness, poverty, imprisonment and disenfranchisement. Democrats became the party of corporate interests and aligned themselves with every neoliberal initiative. They forsook the union movement, working hand in hand with finance capitalists to take living wage jobs out of the country. Bill Clinton oversaw the end of public assistance as a right, destroying what Franklin Roosevelt enacted 60 years earlier. He built on the work of Ronald Reagan and massively increased the prison population.

Barack Obama offered a “grand bargain” of austerity to Republicans and continued the George W. Bush policy of tax cuts for the wealthiest. The banks which created the 2008 financial collapse were rewarded with huge bailouts of public funds. Black people ended up losing the small bit of wealth they held before the crash and now lead only in the negative measurements of quality of life.

Democrats destroy public education through charter schools and refuse to raise the minimum wage even when they control Congress and have the power to act. They were never the party of peace and they are now most outspoken in encouraging an anti-Russian resumption of the Cold War and supporting imperialist interventions.

After the legislative victories of the 1960s black Americans were ignored, subjugated or co-opted. It is true that there are thousands of black elected officials, when in King’s day there were hardly any. But this political class is a traitorous one and works for its own benefit, its patrons in corporate America

and the civil rights organizations that are subsidiaries of the Democratic Party. The black political class went along with every sordid deal that Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama pursued. Their positions are secure but the rest of black America is anything but.

Prison Population Explodes

A glaring example is the enormous increase in incarceration rates. When Martin Luther King was alive there were only 300,000 incarcerated Americans. There are now more than 2 million. The exponential increase is not coincidental. Mass incarceration was a direct reaction to the freedom movement. Segregation put black people under physical control and the system devised new ways to secure the same result when it ended.

Black men became the face of drug dealing, or deadbeat fatherhood or anything else that the press and politicians told white Americans to fear and hate. The ripple effect is terrible and damages family life, the ability to earn a living and even to vote. In 48 states felons either lose the franchise permanently or are prevented from voting until all supervision is lifted. In Florida alone 1.5 million people cannot vote because of past convictions. A recent court case declared this rule unconstitutional and if a November 2018 ballot measure passes they may have their voting rights restored. That will be a happy result but there are 5 million more Americans, disproportionately black, who elsewhere lose the ability to vote due to criminal convictions.

Until incarceration becomes a mass movement, political issue, the Voting Rights Act amounts to very little. Actually the act already amounts to little because the Supreme Court nullified its most important provisions requiring southern states to seek permission before changing voting rules. The Democrats are less concerned with getting out the vote than in making their wealthy patrons happy and protecting the Senate majority and federal judiciary they claim is so important.

Of course the Democrats are in a bind. They don't want to get out the vote because that would mean fighting for the issues that the masses need addressed. The wishes of wealthy, corporate America don't dovetail with those of working people. Fat cat funders don't want an increased minimum wage. Getting out the vote would mean biting the hand that feeds. So the people be damned.

King's Challenge to Militarism Defied

King began his fight for the particular needs of black people in a uniquely oppressive system. As years went by he also opposed the economic system itself and the war in Vietnam. In 2017 the Democrats, including most Congressional

Black Caucus members, went along with Donald Trump's request for a 10% increase of an already huge military budget. They will go through the pretense of complaining when that increase inevitably restricts federal spending for social needs, but they are connivers who hope we miss their charade.

The liberation movement succeeded against great odds. Most black people then as now lived in the southern states and could not vote. Yet their coordinated mass action won them the franchise anyway. That lesson must not be forgotten as the juggernaut of neoliberal plots threatens everyone.

Every major American city is undergoing an onslaught of gentrification which displaces millions of black people at the whim of finance capital. The politicians who will speak in praise of King today do nothing to stop them. In fact they depend upon their largesse to stay in office.

They do nothing to stop the continued terror of billionaire rule. Instead they assist the richest in grabbing more and more. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos this year became the richest person on the planet. His plans for a new Amazon HQ could be funded entirely by his corporation. Instead cities across the country scramble to give away property and tax dollars to help fund the race to the bottom for workers.

Hollow Admiration

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. should be remembered for his tremendous courage in speaking out against the power of money and the military industrial complex. The poseurs who go along to get along should be silent today. The past 50 years have been so tragic because the hard won victories were deliberately destroyed.

King inspired the people to fight for their needs. He did so when the New York Times and Washington Post vilified him. He spoke against the Vietnam war when his compatriots feared angering Lyndon Johnson. The mass action movement that he led forced LBJ to act when he didn't want to. If politicians act on behalf of the people it is never because they have the right motives.

That is what we must remember about King. The admiration is hollow unless we do as he and millions of others did and commit ourselves to challenging the system. That will mean openly and loudly denouncing the people committed to destroying what they worked and died to achieve. The worst traitors are the most prominent and well respected. But the respect is undeserved and quite dangerous. The night before he was killed King spoke of getting to the promised land. That won't happen until the scoundrels are named and opposed. Honoring King's legacy demands that we do just that.

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A House Sit-in Against the Gun Lobby

Elevating the gun crisis to the moral level of the 1960s civil rights struggle, Rep. John Lewis led a House floor sit-in to demand a vote on a bill to restrict access to deadly weapons, write Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

On March 7, 1965, 25-year-old John Lewis, already a veteran of the Freedom Rides, Mississippi's Freedom Summer and Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, walked ahead of 600 civil rights activists as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on the first leg of what was meant to be a peaceful march for voting rights.

As they stepped off the end of the bridge, a posse of 150 state troopers and deputy sheriffs attacked them, wielding clubs, bullwhips and tear gas. Lewis was beaten to within an inch of his life. But he took the horrible pummeling of "Bloody Sunday" and survived to lead another march a week later. This time they kept going – all the way to the state capitol in Montgomery, 50 miles away.

Fifty-one years later, on the floor of the House of Representatives on Wednesday, John Lewis, now 76 and a member of Congress for nearly three decades, took another courageous and principled stand. Many of his Democratic colleagues joined him for a sit-in on the floor of the House chamber itself, the same kind of protest he and his fellow activists used so effectively during the 1960s.

This time they were agitating against one of the most grievous human rights horrors of all: the gun violence running amok in America, including the recent abomination of 49 deaths at that nightclub in Orlando, Florida. There have been nearly 100,000 gun deaths in the United States since the school murders in Newtown, Connecticut, just three and a half years ago.

In Selma in 1965, television cameras sent pictures of what was happening on the Pettus Bridge around the country and a shocked American public took to heart how deep the wounds remained between black and white. On Wednesday, Republican House leadership, as cruel and cold-of-heart as those Alabama state troopers, gaveled the House out of session so the cameras of C-SPAN could not show the American people the courage of those House members sitting on the floor and telling the National Rifle Association and its bought-and-paid-for politicians to go to hell.

Despite the loss of television's probing eye, the demonstrators used social media like Facebook and Twitter to get out their story, putting their cell phones to good use and sending out photos and video of their action across the country and the world.

Lewis tweeted, "Sometimes you have to get in the way. You have to make some noise by speaking up and speaking out against injustice and inaction. #goodtrouble."

In a letter to Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, Rep. Lewis and his colleague Rep. Katherine Clark asked, "What is this Congress waiting for? ...We stand with thousands of brokenhearted families who have not been served by this Congress and millions more who are counting on us to find the moral courage to do the right thing. We stand together in our refusal to sit by while this Congress abdicates its fundamental responsibility to protect American families from harm."

Once again the Republican leaders of Congress have been revealed for what they are: useful stooges of the gun merchants who would sell to anyone – from the mentally ill to a terrorist-in-waiting to a lurking mass murderer. And the Republican Party once again has shown itself an enabler of death, the enemy of life, a threat to the republic itself.

Today, John Lewis said, "The time is always right to do right. Our time is now." The heroism on the Pettus Bridge turned the tide against the inhumanity of segregation. Today's protest in the House of Representatives just might mark the beginning of the end of the gun industry's grip on American life and liberty.

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