

# History A Level Non-exam assessment (NEA) Specimen Answer 1

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# GCE History: NEA

## Specimen Answer 1 (Martin Luther King)

### **Within the context of the years 1865 to 1968, how important was Martin Luther King in the pursuit of black civil rights in America?**

'If King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did.'<sup>1</sup>

Verney states that there is no 'mono-causal' answer to who, or what, is the most important factor in the pursuit of black civil rights.<sup>2</sup> Verney's point, along with many others, chimes with the more recent historical review of the movement, which has challenged the 'King-centric'<sup>3</sup> outlook upon this whole period of social change for African Americans. Historians such as Carson have sought to move away from the idea that King was the most important factor in the struggle for black advancement. Such historians have analysed King's role and sought to recognise the contribution of other groups before and during King's time of prominence.

One of the key factors is the huge disillusionment of early Civil Rights leaders with Radical Reconstruction. After the Civil War in 1865 hopes of racial equality soon dissipated as some did not want to alienate white southerners. One such leader, Booker T. Washington, believed that African Americans would go on to political and civil equality. This belief led Washington to establish the National Negro Business League in 1900, whilst also providing vocational education for blacks through the Tuskegee Institute. However, Washington's key contribution to the movement came with his 1895 Atlanta 'Compromise' speech, where he confirmed himself as an advocate of non-violent protest. He stated that blacks should conform to the rules of segregation, whilst seeking economic advancement and eventually political equality. To his predominantly white audience, who were comfortable with Washington's accommodationism, he claimed: '*No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.*'<sup>4</sup> He believed that steady progress in an era of conservatism was the right policy to adopt. If the demands were too radical then the support of leading whites would be lost.

At Atlanta Washington stated that white families '*will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen...In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.*'<sup>5</sup>

The value of Washington's speech is significant as it highlights the context and dilemma facing the black community at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Its purpose was to mark a new era in race relations but in many ways it pleased neither black nor white. Many blacks said it did not solve the

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, C., *Charismatic leadership in a Mass Struggle*, *Journal of American History* (Vol.74 No 2) 1987 pp 448-454

<sup>2</sup> Verney, K, *The role of Martin Luther King and other individuals/groups in the civil rights struggle, 1870-1980*, Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Washington, Booker T., The 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech in Harlan, Louis R., ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, 1974, pp 583-587

<sup>5</sup> Washington, Booker T., The 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech in Harlan, Louis R., ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, 1974, pp 583-587

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'negro problem' and was a betrayal. Washington would now be known as the great accommodator. By pandering to white southerners, it appeared he approved of white supremacy. There are two obvious limitations to Washington's speech. Oblique in places, it does not spell out what 'social equality' might mean and so whites took it as an endorsement of racial segregation. Secondly, the speech did not address how blacks might improve if the education they received took place in rundown schools with poorly paid teachers.

Nevertheless, he has received favourable comparisons to Martin Luther King. Meier likens the two leaders in his 1965 article '*The Conservative Militant*' where he states '*King thus gives white men the feeling that he is their good friend, that he poses no threat to them. It is interesting to note that this was the same feeling that white men received from Booker T. Washington.*'<sup>6</sup> Meier highlights how white support was needed for the success of black equality. Whilst it is debatable that the most significant developments happened during the time King was connected to the movement, there are many reasons why Washington was thwarted as an activist. The period of time in which Washington operated, 1890 to 1915, coincided with a southern backlash following the end of Reconstruction in 1877. Verney states that this was the '*lowest point in US race relations since the abolition of slavery in 1865.*'<sup>7</sup> Washington also had to contend with a Supreme Court that declared '*separate but equal*' measures to be constitutional in '*Plessey v Ferguson* (1896).'

King was fortunate that he was able to protest for rights that blacks had acquired constitutionally as a result of the '*Brown v Board of Education*' (1954) case, one year prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Washington was clearly hindered by the Jim Crow laws and also limited in the funding he received for his Tuskegee Institute from the Alabama state government.<sup>8</sup> Washington states in his autobiography that he achieved as much as he could, considering the constraints.

One leading historian who questions the overall importance of King is Carson. Carson points towards the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois and the significance of the organisation he founded, the NAACP, in the pursuit of civil rights. Carson labels Du Bois as '*the most significant African American intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century...and a preeminent political thinker of the 20th Century.*'<sup>9</sup> Du Bois was a superb speaker and this is typically an attribute associated with King, as people praise his rhetoric and charisma. Yet both Verney and Carson point to Du Bois's role in the production of '*The Crisis*'<sup>10</sup> the NAACP's magazine that was published nationwide informing African Americans of political issues and awareness of the struggle.<sup>11</sup> He stated that blacks should integrate into society, strive for equality and that they would not lose their heritage as a result of desegregation.

He even accused blacks of cowardice and inertia. '*We have been cheerfully spit upon and murdered and burned. If we are to die, in God's name let us perish like men and not bales of hay.*' He encouraged black men to '*kill lecherous white invaders of their homes and then take their lynching like men. It's worth it!*'<sup>12</sup>

*The Crisis* is a very important source as Du Bois was a brilliant polemicist and its value showed that he was able to frame the black experience like no one before him. Du Bois used *The Crisis* to repudiate Washington's policy of 'submission'. Here he directly advocated militant self defence

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<sup>6</sup> Meier, A and Rudwick, E., quoted in *Along the Color Line: explorations in the black experience* (Illinois, 2002), p.178

<sup>7</sup> Verney, K., *To what extent were African Americans the Architects of their own success in the civil rights struggle, 1865-1980?* Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, V., *Race Relations in the USA 1863-1980* (London, 2006) p. 48

<sup>9</sup> Carson, C., *Course Introduction and W.E.B. Du Bois* <http://academicearth.org/lectures/intro-and-web-dubois>

<sup>10</sup> Verney, K., *To what extent were African Americans the Architects of their own success in the civil rights struggle, 1865-1980?* Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>11</sup> Carson, C., *Course Introduction and W.E.B. Du Bois* <http://academicearth.org/lectures/intro-and-web-dubois>

<sup>12</sup> 'A university course in lynching', June 1923, in '*The Seventh Son: The Thought and writings of W.E.B. Du Bois*', Vol 2, New York, 1971, pp 4-17

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when faced by lynch mobs and he used *The Crisis* as a vehicle for black protest. The introduction of *The Crisis* was a pivotal event in the struggle. The limitation of the source is that *The Crisis* briefly became a personal mouthpiece for Du Bois as opposed to the official organ of the NAACP. It did attempt to instill pride in black accomplishment but the words that demonstrate his eloquence, often antagonised many who felt that Du Bois, a self-confessed egoist, failed to develop a strategy beyond mere verbal agitation.

His creation of the Niagara movement in 1905 had been the predecessor of the NAACP. This ultimately led to 'Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka' (1954). This victory by Thurgood Marshall and his legal team laid the foundations for the eradication of Jim Crow and the NAACP claimed that '*The Brown decision inspired the marches and demonstrations of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. These wide-spread protests ultimately led to the enactment of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.*'<sup>13</sup> Although Du Bois's had little influence on the NAACP's educational campaign, his outspoken views on lynching and desegregation were very radical in an age where white supremacist films such as '*Birth of a Nation*' were endorsed by leading white politicians. King was also outspoken, perhaps for which he has not received enough credit yet Du Bois in the first half of the Twentieth Century massively raised awareness of the problems facing African Americans.

Despite the praise lavished on Du Bois, historians such as Carson and Verney are not blind to other factors which aided Du Bois and also King. Verney points towards the influence of the great migration and urbanisation of African Americans between 1915-1925 and 1941-46.<sup>14</sup> This mass migration to northern cities enabled them to start to exercise their political rights and build up influence. Carson highlights how African Americans shifted their allegiance from Lincoln's and Hoover's Republican Party during the 1930s to the Democratic Party of Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>15</sup> Carson suggests this change could be due to the economic effects of the Great Depression and the benefits from the New Deal, particularly the FERA.<sup>16</sup>

Both of the migration periods coincide with two world wars, in which 367,000 served in the armed forces.<sup>17</sup> Verney has suggested that there was little change for African Americans as a result of the role in World War One and this led to an increase in militancy through the use of *The Crisis*.<sup>18</sup>

A key factor in the progress of civil rights was the role of the Supreme Court. Pre-1930, with cases such as '*Plessy v Ferguson*', (1896), the Court was very conservative and a hindrance. However, the landmark 'Brown' ruling (1954) was a hammer blow for segregationists. Rathbone has stated that '*Brown was the catalyst for the massive expansion of the civil rights movement which took place in the 1950s and 1960s.*'<sup>19</sup> The role of certain presidents became crucial in the development of the Civil Rights Movement as the selection of judges often reflected their own personal attitudes towards the CRM. Rathbone cites Eisenhower's key decision to appoint Chief Judge Earl Warren in 1952, an apparent conservative, who was to have an immense influence in the passing of the 'Brown' ruling.<sup>20</sup> Supreme Court rulings were reliant on factors such as grassroots activism and federal government to transfer rulings from simple de jure to de facto. For example, at Little Rock in 1957, where 9 school children attempted to test compliance with the 'Brown' ruling, Eisenhower

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<sup>13</sup> NAACP Legal History <http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-legal-history>

<sup>14</sup> Verney, K., *The role of Martin Luther King and other individuals/groups in the civil rights struggle, 1870-1980*, Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>15</sup> Carson, C., *Du Bois and the Great Depression*, [academicearth.org/lectures/du-bois-great-depression](http://academicearth.org/lectures/du-bois-great-depression)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Verney, K., *To what extent were African Americans the Architects of their own success in the civil rights struggle, 1865-1980?* Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>18</sup> Verney, K., *The role of Martin Luther King and other individuals/groups in the civil rights struggle, 1870-1980*, Lecture, Edge Hill University, February 2012

<sup>19</sup> Rathbone, M., *The US Supreme Court and Civil Rights* <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docid=5002100279>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

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had to send in state troopers to ensure the children received their constitutional rights. This infers that that there can be no 'mono-causal' reason given for the success of the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King's influence in the civil rights movement is still keenly contested and he has often been judged, perhaps somewhat unfairly, on his character rather than his actions. Propelled into the limelight in 1955 through his involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King did not organise the event; this was planned by local activists and the NAACP. Ling suggests that this is a common theme in the activism of King: '*King had never been a master strategist. Others had launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Birmingham and Selma movement.*'<sup>21</sup> This once more distances King and credits others, particularly women. Awele Makeba <sup>22</sup>puts the success of the boycott down to the African American women of Montgomery whereas Sanders stresses the power of mass, non-violent action, and highlights the economic importance of African Americans to white businesses.<sup>23</sup>

Carson asserts that King's persona has been misinterpreted and that his abilities as a leader have been relegated to purely his 'charisma'. Carson dismisses the 'King-centric' idea that his charisma carried the movement but suggests that portraying him as charismatic prevents him from receiving full recognition for his important qualities. He also states that King was a reluctant leader<sup>24</sup>, something that is challenged by Clarence Jones when discussing the Birmingham campaign. He speaks of King's decisiveness and bravery in Birmingham and how he was influential in highlighting the racial nature that was so entrenched in the south of America, personified by Bull Connor.<sup>25</sup> King himself was not afraid to chastise black people who were '*not willing to take part in the fight...if you can't stand up with your people, you are not fit to be a preacher.*'<sup>26</sup>

The initial 'King-centric' accounts of the struggle often lavished praise on King. Accomplishments were lavished on him, something he neither deserved nor indeed would have claimed. He was criticised by leaders of some groups, mostly during the latter part of the 1960s, which saw Black Power as the more effective way to bring about change and saw King as an integrationalist who would allow blacks to lose their identity as African Americans in order to be equal to white Americans.<sup>27</sup> Roy Wilkins, leader of the NAACP, disputed this and said that '*No matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term 'black power' means anti-white power. It is a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Ku Klux Klan...We of the NAACP will have none of it. We have fought it too long. It is the ranging of race against race on the irrelevant basis of skin color.*'<sup>28</sup>

This article is a major, personal statement by an influential individual at a critical time in the civil rights movement's history. Roy Wilkins was leader of the NAACP and did not like the way other black groups such as the SCLC or SNCC operated. The SCLC criticised the failure of the NAACP to use its large membership and that its aims were too conservative. This speech reflects Wilkins' exasperation with other organisations whom he viewed as too militant. Having achieved legal equality Wilkins suggests that Black Power would be totally counter-productive. He said it would alienate white liberals and split the civil rights movement. King himself merely did not like the sloganeering and vagueness of Black Power as opposed to its actual concept. Wilkins's tone

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<sup>21</sup> Ling, Peter. "Martin Luther King's Half Forgotten Dream." *History Today: The World's Best History Writing*.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, C., *The Women who made the 'Montgomery Bus Boycott*, (1998) <http://academicearth.org/courses/african-american-history-the-modern-freedom-struggle>

<sup>23</sup> Sanders, V. *Race Relations in the USA 1863-1980* (London, 2006) p. 107

<sup>24</sup> Carson, C., *Charismatic leadership in a Mass Struggle*, *Journal of American History* (Vol.74 No 2) 1987 pp 449

<sup>25</sup> Carson, C., *Clarence Jones on Martin Luther King Jr.* [academic.earth.org/lectures/jones-martin-luther-king](http://academic.earth.org/lectures/jones-martin-luther-king)

<sup>26</sup> Cone, J., *Martin and Malcolm and America: A dream or a nightmare?*, Orbis Books, 1991

<sup>27</sup> Carmichael, S. and Hamilton, C., *Black Power* (1992) p. 55

<sup>28</sup> Roy Wilkins, '*Steady as She Goes*', in *Black Viewpoints*, A.C.Littleton and M.W. Burger, (New York, Mentor, 1971), pp. 295-96

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suggests that only the NAACP were worthy leaders of the civil rights movement by dint of their past efforts. The speech seeks conciliation and as such can be criticised as it does not take into account other, more moderate black groups who did not believe the NAACP had a right to speak for them and believed that Wilkins was jealous of their tactics. What it does imply is that Black Power might shatter the fragile coalition that had held between 1960 and 1965. Hence Wilkin's tone is very blunt and heartfelt, especially from a man who had been on the March on Washington in 1963 and clearly did not want his or the NAACP's work to go wasted.

It is important at this point to assess two of the key historians writing about Martin Luther King. Both were civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s but differ in their evaluation of his importance with Meier offering a less critical view than Carson. Meier, a white professor who taught at black colleges, was writing at the height of the civil rights movement and his experiences naturally shaped his views. Although his experiences may not have included discrimination like those endured by African Americans, he perhaps can be viewed as an 'expert outsider', meaning he has good knowledge of events as they unfolded. Meier held King in high esteem, seeing him as a bridge between blacks and whites and saw this as the way to build a dialogue for civil rights. His most valuable contribution is to portray King as a paradox – a conservative militant, who adopted a pragmatic approach to the delivery of civil rights. Meier can be criticised for over praising King and for reliability, as his writings were influenced to some extent by the media of the time.

Carson, on the other hand, writing from the 1970s to the 2000s, has argued that King should be seen more as the face of the movement. He should not take the credit due to grass roots activists which was achieved over a longer period of time. This may appear surprising as Carson is an African American, a professor at Stanford University, a civil rights activist and the director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute. He attended the March on Washington in 1963 and has said that the biggest impression on the day were the people he met there, not King's speech.

Therefore, even though he was selected by King's wife to front the Research and Education Institute, his view of the importance of grass roots activism and the role of previous leaders such as Du Bois takes priority over the King-centric viewpoint.

King has also been criticised in that he never had to endure the hardships and constraints of his predecessors. Americans became aware of the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom in Europe when black Americans were barely in a better situation back home.<sup>29</sup> King was fortunate to encounter presidents more in tune with progress, particularly Johnson. Whilst all of these factors are important in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is important to dispel the view that King, or other activists, had an easy ride in securing civil rights. He was hounded by the FBI but persevered in spite of threats against himself and his family.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, for much of the time following his death, his importance in the pursuit of civil rights has been much exaggerated and misinterpreted. The 'Montgomery to Memphis' timeline fails to credit the groundwork of early leaders such as Washington and Du Bois, the New Deal, NAACP and the role of certain presidents. It also fails to recognise that the movement continued after King; for example the Griggs decision in the Supreme Court in the 1970s that brought greater employment for African Americans. Nor does it acknowledge the 'multi-faceted' nature of the movement, such as the influence of Ella Baker and students with the 'sit-in' movement, nor the importance of CORE and the 'Freedom Rides'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Verney, K., *To what extent were African Americans the Architects*, Lecture Feb.2012

<sup>30</sup> Garrow, D., *Bearing the Cross-Martin Luther King Jr.* (1999) pp.373-374

<sup>31</sup> Carson, C. , *Reconstructing the King Legacy: Scholars and National Myths*

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However, questioning of this interpretation has led to unfair criticism of King as some of his achievements in places such as Birmingham have been challenged to a point whereby he has received less credit than he deserves. It is also important to consider the psychological effect of the March on Washington and how King's ability to rally the white community was of major importance to the progress of African Americans.

Overall King cannot be seen as the 'mono-causal', most significant individual in the struggle for rights. Ella Baker's comment that '*the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement*'<sup>32</sup> is very apposite for, in contrast to Du Bois and Washington, King was part of a massive grassroots movement. It was a long struggle with countless, changing factors among which King can be considered significant but not in the way he has been portrayed following his assassination and definitely not as insignificant as more recent studies have appeared to suggest.

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<sup>32</sup> Ella Baker, interviewed by John Britton, June 19, 1968 on RBOH-DHU

