

Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement

Grade Level: 10 – 12

Time Required: About 30-45 minutes per activity

Historical Thinking Skill: Analysis

Objective: Students will analyze primary source readings and editorial cartoons to better understand the purpose and tactics of the Civil Rights movement while exploring connections with related contemporary issues.

Required Materials:

1. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
2. Selected editorial cartoons from the period
3. “The 1964 Civil Rights Bill Explained in 8 Minutes” Video, Made From History
4. Key provisions of Civil Rights Act of 1964

Civil Rights: guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics. (Source: Britannica)

I. Civic Rights and Rhetoric (Persuasive Speech)

Perhaps no individual in American history was more eloquent and moving than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Below are two passages from his now world-famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Dr. King addressed it to local ministers who had criticized him for causing civil disorder in the city.

Directions: Read the two passages from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” together with students. Stop after each section and let them work in small groups on the question sets.

Part I.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms...

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its

leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind anesthetizing security of stained glass windows...

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?... Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Reflection Questions: Students should complete these questions independently. Sample answers and topics for discussion are included after each question.

1. What is Dr. King's goal in the first paragraph of his letter? Why does he refer to his critics as "men of genuine good will" and their "criticisms sincerely set forth"?
 - This is a very old rhetorical trick: imply your opponent is X, when they are really Y.
 - This suggests they have created a false narrative about themselves, and notes that they are just another in a long list of tireless critics that he would probably not answer unless he was confined in jail and thus not able to do "constructive work."
 - In other words, they are holding back potential progress.
2. Why is he critical of religious leaders in Birmingham?
 - Note the attempt to shame religious leaders ("where were they...?"). This implies that merely attending church ("behind the security of stained windows") does not make one holy and the "beautiful churches and lofty spires" might point to heaven, but the congregations will not reach it.
 - King comes from a long line of ministers and feels strongly about this issue.
 - You could link this to the late 19th or early 20th century Social Gospel movement (Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, etc.) which maintained that Christians and Jews had a moral and religious obligation to improve society. It was not enough to simply attend houses of worship.



Part II.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience...It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country’s antireligious laws...

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant starts of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

*In 1956 Hungarians rose up and attempted to overthrow their tyrannical pro-Soviet government. Russian forces invaded and brutally suppressed the rebellion, killing an estimated 25,000.

Reflection Questions: Students should complete these questions independently. Sample answers and topics for discussion are included after each question.

1. What does Dr. King mean by “civil disobedience”?
 - Discuss this term with students. Link it back to Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi. Ask them why it can be more effective than violence.
2. What is his point in comparing what he and African Americans are doing to the Boston Tea Party?
 - He is referencing what is considered to be a patriotic and justified act. It is almost a creation story of the United States.
 - In this context, one who opposes the civil rights movement appears un-American
3. Why would his reference to Germany be effective?
 - Remind students that World War II, at this point, had only ended 18 years earlier.
 - People were very aware of the Holocaust and other Nazi horrors (much more so than many people today) which were prominently covered in news, literature, and film. There were literally millions of veterans of the war still alive.



- You could also discuss the issue as to whether one should obey an unjust law, even though it is the law. Bring up the Nuremberg trials and that Nazi leaders' defense was that they were just following orders (which the court did not accept).

Historical Overview: Protest Today

During Dr. King's era, protesting injustice entailed marching, boycotting, meeting in churches, and other forms of physical activity. Though there are still public protests today, much activism has shifted online in the form of Twitter mobs, doxing individuals, sending screenshots of earlier messages or images someone posted to their schools or employers, etc. Much of this form of activism is anonymous.

Class Discussion: What are your thoughts on this new form of activism compared to that which King and his supporters employed? Is it equally courageous and effective? Does it encourage us to become better human beings as Dr. King had hoped?

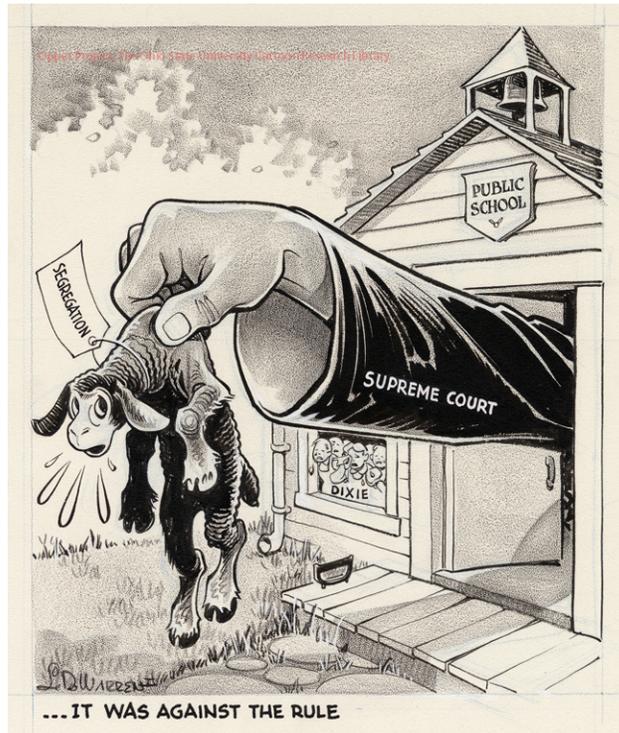


II. Cartoon Analysis

Editorial cartoons have long been an illuminating means of expressing opinions on current events. Visual images can be as effective, if not more so, in exposing peoples' hypocrisies, inconsistencies, and immorality. When looking at them, the first thing to determine is the point of view. Is it negative or positive? Is it for or against a specific issue? What is the purpose of the cartoon? Is it simply ridicule, or is it designed to change someone's opinion? Is it meant to help people to see an issue in a different light?

Below are four cartoons. Have students study them and answer the reflection questions. Some notes are included with each question.

A.



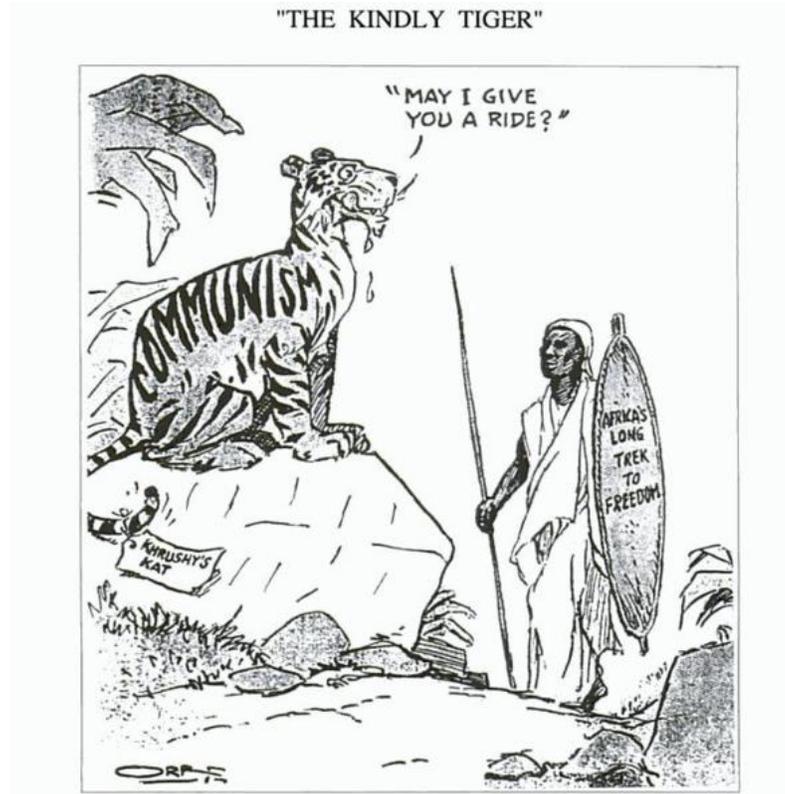
Cincinnati Enquirer, 1954

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?
 - In favor of Brown vs. Board of Education
2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?
 - To show that the Supreme Court's ruling is decisive
 - This cartoon reminds readers that segregation is unlawful (14th Amendment)
3. What are some details you notice?
 - The court removes segregation from the public school
 - The Supreme Court hand is large and strong
 - Segregation is a black sheep



- This is a very old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse (few students would have attended them)
- Dixie refers to the south
- The children inside are fearful

A.



(The tag on the tiger reads “Khrushy’s Kat”)

This famous editorial cartoon won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960.

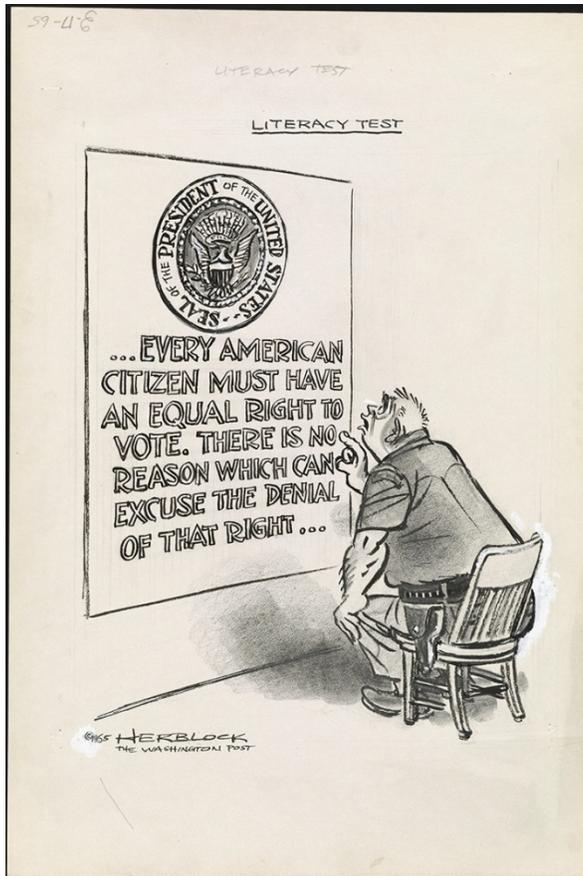
Context: After World War II, African and Asian peoples began winning their independence from colonial powers. The United States and the Soviet Union both attempted to win over the support of these newborn nations, often offering financial and technical assistance. “Khrushy” is short for Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union.

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?
 - Anti-Soviet. It links to the old proverb about riding a tiger’s back.
 - The African seems puzzled
 - The tiger is salivating
2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?
 - Aid from the Soviet Union will lead to a loss of freedom.
 - Soviets are untrustworthy and sneaky



3. Who would have a better chance of winning over the support of African and Asian peoples, the Americans or the Soviets?
 - In theory, communism promised racial and economic equality
 - Soviets had industrialized their economy very quickly, much faster than the United States (though there was a great human cost to its citizens).
 - Soviets highlighted violence against Black Americans (e.g.—Selma, Birmingham, etc.) to African and Asian peoples.

C.



March 17, 1965

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?
 - Strongly against literacy tests
 - Herblock was a strong supporter of liberal causes
2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?
 - Highlight that the president had affirmed the right of all Americans to vote (the Voting Rights Act will be passed later this year, 1965)
 - To reveal that law enforcement officials are part of the problem and need to be enlightened



3. What are some details of the cartoon that you notice?
 - The subject is a police officer
 - The text is very large, easily readable, but he is struggling to do so
 - The officer does not look terribly bright or physically fit
 - The cartoon plays on the term “literacy” since he is struggling to read it

D.



Los Angeles Times, 1965

Context: In 1965, Alabama state police viciously attacked a large peaceful group of African American marchers in Selma. It was filmed and thus became a major news story.

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?
 - Pro-civil rights and supportive of the Civil Rights Movement
2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?
 - Elicit pity for the soldier
 - Illustrate the incongruity of him fighting for a nation that does not give him equal rights
 - Provokes shame at the injustice
3. What are some details of the drawing you notice?
 - The soldier is alone, he seems abandoned
 - He’s in a literal and proverbial hole
 - He learns about this from his mother or father

III. Primary Source Analysis

In 1964 Congress passed, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Watch the video as a class, an overview of history behind the bill and how it finally became law. Then have students read the key provisions of the act and answer the reflection questions.

Video (8 minutes):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVMH5u6bPGA&ab_channel=MadeFromHistory

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Some of the key provisions of the historic legislation:

1. Barred unequal application of voter registration requirements.
2. Criminalized discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in all public accommodations engaging in interstate commerce, i.e., restaurants, hotels, motels, theaters. Private establishments or clubs were exempt.
3. Prohibited state and local governments from denying access to public facilities (e.g., public swimming pools) on grounds of race, color, religion, or national origin.
4. Provided legal mechanisms for the desegregation of public schools.
5. Expanded the Civil Rights Commission which studies, researches, investigates and publicizes discriminatory practices.
6. Prevented discrimination by government agencies that receive federal funding.
7. Prohibited discrimination by employers with 15 or more employees on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.
8. Criminalized discrimination against any individual because of his or her association with another individual of a particular race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, (e.g., an interracial marriage).
9. Allowed for moving civil rights cases from state courts, which often had segregationist judges and all-white juries, to federal courts.

Reflection Questions: These can be answered by students individually, or you can host a group discussion. Possible responses and ideas for discussion are included with each question.

1. Which three provisions do you think would have done the most to change American society? Rank the three and explain your reasoning.
 - There are no right or wrong answers
 - Consider highlighting #8 because women are now included
 - Also perhaps highlight #7 since it will cover the majority of businesses and today an even greater percentage due to the trend of consolidating companies.



2. Why is #6 so important and consequential?
 - Discuss the extent and depth of federal funding in the economy (e.g., healthcare, universities, defense contracts, etc.) and all the industries and jobs affected by this provision.

3. Do you see any loopholes that will allow for continued discrimination?
 - Number 2 exempts private clubs from abiding by the anti-discrimination regulations. Ask students their opinions on this.

