

Heroes and Villains: MLK

Seldom has a public figure been so vilified as Martin Luther King Jr.; disrespected and demonized during his lifetime, only to be elevated to cultural sainthood after his assassination at age 39 in 1968.

According to detailed accounts in Wikipedia, the Baptist minister and civil right leader was arrested 29 times, had his house bombed, and was targeted multiple times for assassination. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover considered him a national security threat, and led a campaign to target, investigate and harass King that continued up to his death.

An early King arrest came in 1960 after a police stop near Emory University. He was cited for "driving without a license" because he had not been issued a Georgia permit, even though his Alabama license was still valid. King paid a fine but was unaware his lawyer agreed to a plea deal that included [probation](#). When he was arrested months later at a civil rights action, Georgia authorities released everyone but King, because of that probation deal. He was sentenced to four months of hard labor. The arrest and harsh sentence drew nationwide attention. (Presidential candidate [John F. Kennedy](#) and others intervened and he was soon released.)

In 1961 King was arrested with other peaceful protesters in Albany, Ga. He declined bail, and chose jail over a \$178 fine. (Days later, the fine was paid discreetly by Billy Graham.)

King was jailed early in the Birmingham campaign

in 1962 — his 13th arrest. From his cell, he composed the now-famous "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," in which he was as hard on his allies as his adversaries. In a reflective moment later he observed: "I was



Here they are folks: the two U.S. postage stamps honoring Martin Luther King Jr. The first appeared in 1979 as part of the Black Heritage series, the other in a souvenir sheet celebrating the 1960s. In my opinion, neither portrait looks much like MLK. What do you think?



Niger, India, Ireland and Mali had better luck with their tribute stamps based on photographs.



politically unwise but morally wise. I think I have a role to play which may be unpopular.”

In his last years, King spoke frequently in opposition to the war in Vietnam, and about the need for fundamental political and economic change. In 1966 he said: “Call it

democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God’s children.”

In 1967 he said: “The evils of capitalism are as real as the evils of militarism and the evils of racism.” King was planning a mass encampment in Washington, D.C., in 1968, to be called the [Poor People's Campaign](#), when he was shot April 4 in Memphis, Tenn.

Shortly before his death he said: “There will be no rest, there will be no tranquility in this country until the nation comes to terms with our problem.”

The working title for the sermon MLK was to deliver on April 8, 1968, the Sunday after he was killed: “Why America May Go to Hell.”

Posthumous honor came grudgingly to MLK. Some political leaders in cities and entire states balked at Martin Luther King Day, not to mention a national holiday, which finally came in 1986. King was awarded the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#) in 1977, the [Congressional Gold Medal](#) in 2003. The MLK memorial in Washington was dedicated in 2011 — 43 years after his death. Petty anti-MLK revanchism surfaced recently when the Trump administration cancelled free days at national parks for MLK’s birthday.

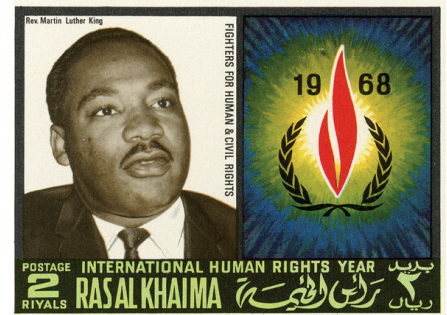
If the nation was slow to celebrate King, it was quick to condemn. Criticism came early, from all quarters.

** 1955 — Pastor William E. Gardner of First Baptist Church of Elmhurst, Queens, referred to MLK’s “attitude of aloofness, disdain and possibly snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people. Also, a smugness that refuses to adapt itself to the demands of ministering effectively to the average Negro congregation.”

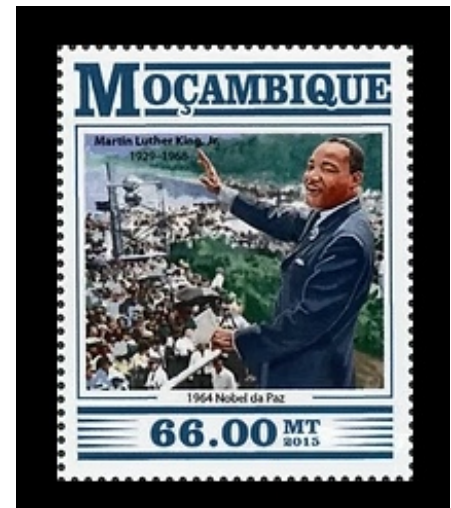
** 1956 — King received this anonymous note: *N****r, we are tired of you*



This effort from Niger falls short. He looks earnest enough, but he doesn’t look like MLK. I have yet to find a decent painted rendering on a stamp.



The portrait above is not flattering in this Persian Gulf tribute stamp. At least it was issued the year of MLK’s death, unlike the U.S. stamps that came much later. The Mozambique stamp below is more dynamic — one of the best I think.



and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.

** 1963 — Fellow civil rights leader Julian Bond said of King: “He has been losing since he left Montgomery. He lost when he didn't go on the Freedom Ride ... And I think eventually that more Negroes and more white Americans will become disillusioned with him, and find that he after all is only another preacher who can talk well.”

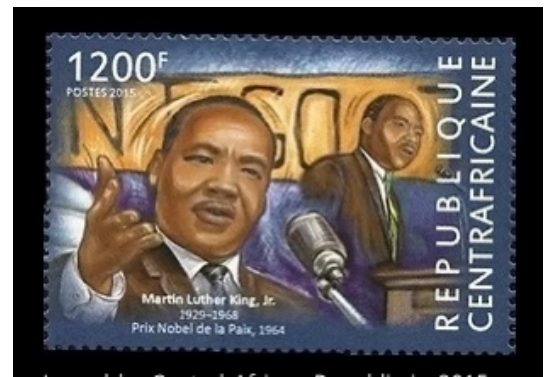
** 1964 — MLK learned FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had labeled him the “most notorious liar” in America in an interview with women journalists. In an off-the record comment leaked to King, Hoover called him “one of the lowest characters in the country.”

After MLK's fiery anti-Vietnam-war speech at Riverside Church in 1967, the critics piled on. The Washington Post editorialized: “(MLK) has done a grave injury to those who are his natural allies ... and ... an even graver injury to himself. Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country and to his people. And that is a great tragedy.”

The Pittsburgh Courier accused MLK of misleading his black followers on issues “too complex for simple debate.” Sen. Jacob Javits called the speech “harmful.” Life magazine said it was “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi ... (MLK went) beyond his personal right to dissent ... King comes close to betraying the cause for which he has worked so long.”



In one philatelic gesture, the Republic of Togo issued twice as many stamps honoring MLK as the U.S.A. Too bad none of them look like King. Not sure I trust any of these guys either.



This one from the Central African Republic verges on the creepy. It is vividly designed to present two figures who bear some resemblance to MLK. They are supposed to be the same person, right? Somehow, neither of them looks much like King. I don't trust either one. And what's with the banner?

Said LBJ adviser John P. Roche:

“(MLK) who is inordinately ambitious and quite stupid, (has) thrown in with the commies ... in desperate search of a constituency.” Hoover told LBJ: “Based on King's recent activities and public utterance, it is clear that he is an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation.”

In the New York Review of Books, Andrew Kopkind opined: “He has been outstripped by his times, overtaken by the events which he may have obliquely helped to produce. ... (H)e is not likely to regain command ... (MLK)

had simply, and disastrously, arrived at the wrong conclusions about the world.”

In 1964 King received an anonymous letter later, since attributed to Hoover deputy William Sullivan. Here are a few excerpts:

King. ... In view of your low grade ... I will not dignify your name with either a Mr. or a Reverend or a Dr. you are done. Your "honorary" degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce) and other awards will not save you. King, I repeat you are done.

... You, even at an early age have turned out to be not a leader but a dissolute, abnormal moral imbecile.

...King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. ... You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.

At around the same time, the Nobel Committee delivered its tribute to King:

... He is the first person in the western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence. He is the first to make a message of brotherly love a reality in the course of his struggle, and he has brought this message to all men, to all nations and races. ...

Today we pay tribute to Martin Luther King, the man who has never abandoned his faith in the unarmed struggle he is waging, who has suffered for his faith, who has been imprisoned on many occasions, whose home has been subject to bomb attacks, whose life and the lives of his family have been threatened, and who nevertheless has not faltered.

Reflecting on the heroes/villains theme, my friend Don Wolf observed: “I’m thinking ‘good trouble’ makers aren’t appreciated when they’re alive because they are active threats to the status quo/those in control. After death, in hindsight, they can be appreciated for achievements and sacrifices. But they’re gone and non-threatening.” He added astutely that “stamp recognition may even serve to placate the troublemakers’ constituencies.”

That recognition comes a bit late. Don is being too kind. A word hovers over this paradox of villainizing in life and lionizing in death. It’s a favorite of H.L. Mencken’s as he skewered America’s cultural phantoms and shibboleths. The word is hypocrisy. — **FMF**



Well, hold on. Togo has outdone itself with a fifth stamp honoring MLK. I’m afraid it misses the mark so widely that it deserves special comment. This MLK looks like just another African Big Man autocrat, scheming to enrich himself and amass power in a cruel parody of his former colonial masters. It presses my buttons. I’ve done research on the rogues’ gallery of African leaders who have misruled their nations in the 60 years since independence. To read more of this sad tale, go to: <https://mancryfmf.com/2017/05/>



Here is the MLK monument in D.C. I don’t think it’s a very good likeness. Do you?