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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

In January 2009 Barack Obama asked that his Inauguration ceremony recall the US Civil Rights struggle, one of whose leaders was Martin Luther King.

King's significance comes partly from his being the moderate face of the Civil Rights movement with an outstanding style of speaking. His was the voice that mobilized a nation.

His status has increased as the years have rolled by since his death in 1968. Most Afro-Americans have now rejected the extremist alternatives that were being offered at the time and there is recognition that he was right after all.

One extreme was to accept the status quo. The US Civil War (1861-5) was supposed to have ended slavery and the second class status of Afro-Americans.

But white racists found ways of keeping them down, such as the requirement to have a "literacy test" before being able to vote (one question was: "How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?") Most Afro-Americans could not vote.

Many Afro-Americans accepted that they were second class and followed the racist rules. It just seemed to be the natural order of things in the Old South.

What Barack Obama's parents did by getting married – a white woman and an African man – was illegal at that time in many southern states. They were only able to marry because they were in Hawaii.

The other extreme was to reply with violence. Whites had often used violence against Afro-Americans. Slavery itself was a form of violence. Some Americans still alive today can remember seeing or hearing about mob lynching.

In the 1960s a generation of young angry Afro-Americans emerged who refused to accept the status quo as their forebears did. The 1960s were a time generally of youth rebellion and they saw themselves as part of that angry wave of violence sweeping across the western world.

After World War II young white families left the cities for the new outlying suburbs. The American inner cities became rundown, poverty-stricken, crime-ridden centres of violence.

Political authorities figured that Afro—Americans had to live somewhere and so keeping them penned up in ghettos was a way of keeping an eye on them. A police officer in Boston told me in 1970 that “Ghettos weren’t the problem – they were the solution”.

Young activists called for violent revolution because that was the only way to get their view across to the 90 per cent of Americans who were white. They wanted to torch the cities.

Martin Luther King helped create a moderate middle of the way approach. He had no training in conflict resolution. He had to work it out as he went along, plus reading about other leaders such as the struggle for independence in India led by Mohandas Gandhi.

King was born into (by Afro-American standards) a moderately wealthy family in Atlanta, Georgia. His father was a Baptist minister and his mother was a teacher. Being good at sport, entertainment or (to a lesser extent) religion were the three main routes for Afro-Americans to get out of poverty. King had a very good start in life compared with most Afro-Americans.

But King accepted segregation as the norm. For example, he spent the first night of his honeymoon in a funeral parlour. In the Old South Afro-Americans were not allowed to stay at hotels but segregation did not apply to funeral parlours. It was customary for Afro-Americans with enough money for a honeymoon to leave the state and if they could not get across the state line before evening, they rested at a funeral parlour.

King accepted his lowly status as an Afro-American and did not think that much could be done about it. It was just the way things were. He was not politically motivated.

After completing his religious training in 1955, King became pastor to a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. He expected to follow the example of his father and have a life focussed mainly on Christian Afro-Americans in the Old South.

But 1955 was a turning point in American history – and he was right at the centre. Afro-American Rosa Parks – now belatedly honoured in American history – triggered the revolution by refusing to accept segregation on the local buses. Local Afro-American leaders wanted to use this flashpoint to create a civil rights campaign.

They needed a place to meet and so they approached the new young pastor to borrow his church hall. King suddenly realized that segregation was wrong and that there should be a campaign for civil rights.

His life was transformed.

The bus campaign went on for 382 days but eventually it was successful and the segregation ended. The campaign caught the mood of the moment and achieved national publicity.

In 1957 he was one of the leaders of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference formed to co-ordinate protests against discrimination. He advocated non-violent direct action based on the successful methods of Gandhi against British rule in India.

But his non-violence was often met with white violence. Many campaigners were killed and a very large number beaten up by racists. Meanwhile impatient Afro-American activists criticised his methods for being too gentle and they turned to violence in reply to white violence.

The US, bogged down in a losing war in Vietnam, seemed to be also breaking up at home.

Gradually the politicians and media realized that King had the right approach – immediate reforms to forestall looming violence. The 1965 Civil Rights Act – exactly a century after the Civil War ended – at last gave more opportunity for Afro-Americans to vote. Much other legislation has since followed.

But King was still living a dangerous life. He now had an international status and had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965. He was assassinated on April 4 1968 by a white man during a visit to Memphis, Tennessee.

The January 2009 inauguration of an Afro-American President comes directly from the King campaign. Barack Obama is not a seed of the Civil Rights era – he is a flower.

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