

MLK's Assassination: Calming a City Amid Chaos

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"I have some very sad news for all of you, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee." – Robert F. Kennedy, April 4, 1968



[June 1963 Civil Rights Leaders meet with the Vice President, Attorney General, and other officials. White House. Photo credit: Abbie Rowe, National Park Service/John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Boston.]

Fifty years ago, news of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination shook an already divided nation, sparking riots, fires, and violence in more than a hundred cities across the country.

But not in Indianapolis.

“It could’ve been a really bad situation,” recalls [SPEA lecturer Bill Foley](#). “A crowd is one step away from a mob.”

The [public safety](#), homeland security, emergency management and national security expert remembers that night all too well. He and his wife, Mairin, were campaign workers for Robert Kennedy. They helped secure a spot for him on the Indiana ballot, and set him on a path that could have turned this red state blue.

That night, Kennedy was slated to deliver a campaign speech to a predominately African-American crowd at 17th and Broadway Streets in the heart of the city. The [Indianapolis Star](#) reports that among the 2,500-person crowd were attendees from several “somewhat radical black groups, like the College Room, the Watoto Wa Simba, the Black Panthers and the Black Radical Action Project.”

Many more people, including the Foleys, were listening to that speech on the radio. They thought they’d hear a candidate speak about issues such as poverty and the Vietnam War. Instead, what they heard was a tragic moment in history.

“Kennedy got the news of MLK’s assassination as he arrived in Indianapolis,” Foley says. Media reports indicate that then-Mayor Richard Lugar wanted Kennedy to cancel the speech amid concerns of a race riot. He told Kennedy’s team the city could not guarantee their safety. Yet Kennedy insisted his team continue.

“He didn’t have to make that speech,” Foley says. “He could’ve cancelled and had his staff make an announcement. No one wrote that speech for him. He just talked about what he believed.”

“For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act – against all white people – I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling,” Kennedy said. “I had a member of my family killed, and he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.”

Kennedy implored people to return home to pray for the King family and the nation. History credits him with calming the Indianapolis crowd, preventing the chaos and violence that erupted in dozens of other cities as news of the assassination spread. Foley says years of frustration and discrimination fueled that violence.

“This was a divided nation. There was no compromise between the ballot and the bullet,” Foley says. “We had extreme race riots against poverty and discrimination, and protests against the Vietnam War. From 1963 to 1968, you had John Kennedy, Malcom X, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy all killed. [George Lincoln Rockwell](#), the president of the American Nazi Party, was murdered. [George Wallace](#) was shot and paralyzed in 1972. These are many of your candidates – shot. This was an era of very little compromise, much worse than today.”



[SPEA lecturer Bill Foley has amassed a collection of memorabilia from the height of the MLK movement and RFK campaign.]

Foley recalls the events of April 4, 1968, as he sits among a massive collection of history and political memorabilia, spread out across tables and chairs. It's just a sampling of the many historical heirlooms he owns. Foley has witnessed some of the biggest moments in our nation's history. He served in Vietnam, worked in voter registration in the Deep South, protested against President Richard Nixon, and worked in the Kennedy campaign.

"The Kennedy campaign supported everything that Dr. King stood for," Foley recalls. "Martin Luther King started his career appealing to democracy and the right to vote, then he appealed to freedom, and finally to equality, particularly social and economic. Equality is harder to come by. Some groups have fought against equality throughout our country's history. King's message tried to create it and preserve it, but that's where his message was cut short."

While Dr. King's message may have ended, his mission and impact did not. Despite the violence and turmoil of the 1960s, Foley stresses students today must remember that we have made progress.

"One of Martin Luther King's legacies is making the peaceful demonstration credible," Foley remarks. "Taking to the streets is all-American, it goes back to the American Revolution. But King made a demonstration and a march credible for everyone. He brought it into modern times from Washington D.C., to Selma, Alabama, and to Memphis, Tennessee."

Tamra Wright, SPEA's director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, says we're seeing Dr. King's legacy lived out through headline-making protests, such as the recent March for Our Lives campaign following the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida.

"Students may think these demonstrations are new, but it's very much the same thing that what was happening in our nation years ago; students just don't know that history," Wright says.

“That’s why we need programs here on campus to serve as a bridge for students and help them make those connections.”

Wright represents SPEA on IUPUI’s Intergroup Dialogue committee, as well as serving in the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. She says helping students understand, remember and appreciate King’s legacy is key to keeping the momentum going. That’s why the Intergroup Dialogue is partnering with the [Kennedy King Memorial Initiative](#) to host [events on the anniversary](#) of Dr. King’s assassination.

There are events on- and off-campus beginning April 3 to help students commemorate King’s assassination. On April 4, the groups will host a community conversation at 10:30 a.m. at the Landmark for Peace Memorial, located at 1702 N. Broadway Street in Indianapolis. Congressman John Lewis and Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, will participate in the discussion. That evening, the group also will host a commemoration ceremony at 5 p.m. at the Memorial. Students may sign up for a free shuttle ride from campus to the ceremony [at this link](#).

“These events strengthen the connection, but conversations in the classroom are even more impactful,” Wright says. “As faculty, the classroom is where we can truly help students understand social issues, from the past through today. We are not only supposed to educate students on our course’s curriculum, we are supposed to prepare them to be competent citizens.”

Both Wright and Foley say connecting students with these experiences is critical so they understand that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy is not only an inspirational story, but part of a road map guiding us into the future.

“If you shine the lamp of history properly it tells us who we are, where we came from, and, most importantly, it tells us what to embrace and what to reject,” Foley says.

“This was not long ago when we lived in a segregated society,” Wright says. “Some students don’t know the history and don’t know the significance of what it means to truly put your life on the line for a cause. We had people dying for what they believed in, including Dr. King and Robert Kennedy.”

The commitment to their beliefs set Indianapolis as the stage for one of the most memorable moments in our nation’s past, linking the city to two of history’s greatest advocates for equality.

“Martin and Bobby are now bound together in time forever beyond the veil of tears,” Foley says. “These were sad times for the people and the nation, but the progress engendered by King and Kennedy was so sound and so righteous that in a half century it has not been reversed. It has been carried further by others, as they would have wanted.”

You can read and listen to Kennedy’s full speech [at this link](#). To learn more about the events planned for the 50th anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination, visit the events section of <https://igd.iupui.edu>.

