“Now I realize that there are those all over who are telling us that we must slow up. ... But we cannot afford to slow up. We have a moral obligation to press on. We have our self-respect to maintain. But even more we can’t afford to slow up because of our love for America and our love for the democratic way of life. ... We must keep moving. We must keep going.”

From “The Montgomery Story,” an address to the 47th annual NAACP Convention
San Francisco, June 27, 1956
Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement

1954 Martin Luther King, Jr., educated at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, is appointed pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. He is recently married to his college sweetheart, Coretta Scott.

1955 Dr. King receives a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Temple University. On Dec. 1, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery city bus and is arrested. Four days later, Dr. King is elected president of the newly created Montgomery Improvement Association and helps lead the subsequent 381-day bus boycott that marks the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

1956 Dr. King, with the Rev. Charles K. Steele and the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization of black clergy. A bomb is thrown at the King home, but no one is injured.

1957 Dr. King meets with Vice President Richard Nixon in January to press for a ban on atomic testing.

1958 Dr. King, along with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Mel King, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Lester Granger meet with President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

On a visit to Harlem, King is stabbed with a letter opener — barely missing his aorta — by Izola Ware Curry while signing his new book, Stride Toward Freedom.

1959 Dr. and Mrs. King spend a month in India studying Gandhi’s protest techniques of nonviolence as guests of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

1960 The King family moves to Atlanta, Ga. Dr. King becomes co-pastor, with his father, of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is founded to coordinate student protests at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. Dr. King and James Lawson are the keynote speakers at the Shaw University founding. A sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. triggers similar actions across the South.

In Atlanta, Dr. King is arrested for participating in one.

1961 Freedom Riders press the desegregation of buses with a long trip into the South. On May 14, they are attacked at Anniston, Ala., and one of their buses is burned. Six days later, in Montgomery, the Freedom Riders are savagely attacked and beaten by a mob near the Greyhound station. The following day, Dr. King, in a rally in Montgomery, calls for a nonviolent campaign against segregation.

1962 Despite violent riots and opposition by the governor, James Meredith becomes the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi.

1963 Sit-in demonstrations in Birmingham, Ala., protest segregation of eating facilities and quickly grow in strength. School children join the protests, which authorities try to disrupt by using police dogs and firehoses. Dr. King is arrested during a demonstration, and while incarcerated writes “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In nearby Tuscaloosa, Gov. George C. Wallace tries to stop the court-ordered integration of the University of Alabama by “standing in the schoolhouse door.” President John F. Kennedy responds by federalizing the Alabama National Guard. After negotiations with federal authorities, Gov. Wallace steps aside and students enter the university.

Jackson, Miss., Madger Evers, held secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi, is murdered outside his home.

Dr. King delivers his famous “I Have a Dream” speech to 200,000 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. A week later, he and other Civil Rights leaders meet with President Kennedy in the White House. A bomb kills four young girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas.

Freeedom Summer brings hundreds of students to register black voters in the South. Three Movement volunteers — James E. Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — are murdered near Philadelphia, Miss. Dr. King attends the signing of the Public Accommodations Bill (part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House. Dr. King receives the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway.

1965 A group of marching demonstrators, led by SCLC’s Hosea Williams and SNCC’s John Lewis, are beaten on “Bloody Sunday” when crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their planned march from Selma, Ala., to Montgomery. President Johnson addresses the nation and Congress. He describes the voting rights bill he will submit in two days and uses the slogan of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome.” Over 3,000 protest marchers, protected by federal troops, leave Selma for a second attempt at the 50-mile march to Montgomery. They are joined along the way by an estimated 25,000 marchers from around the country. Upon reaching the Alabama state Capitol, they are addressed by Dr. King. The 1965 Voting Rights Act is signed by President Johnson.

1966 Dr. King rents an apartment in Chicago to bring attention to urban poverty through his “Campaign to End Slums in Chicago.” Disputes over strategies and goals within the Civil Rights Movement intensify, principally among SNCC, the SCLC, and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). In Oakland, Calif., the Black Panther Party is founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The panther icon is borrowed from a symbol used by the Lowndes County (Alabama) Freedom Organization, a voting rights group founded by Stokely Carmichael. Dr. King meets with Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, in Chicago.

1967 Dr. King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam,” at the Riverside Church in New York, advances his criticism of the war, and widens a rift with President Johnson. Dr. King further expands his social agenda with the announcement of the formation by SCLC of a Poor People’s Campaign to represent the problems of poor blacks and whites. Thurgood Marshall, famous for arguing Brown v. Board of Education before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, becomes the highest Court’s first African-American justice.

Dr. King leads 6,000 protesters on a march through downtown Memphis in support of striking sanitation workers on March 28. His last speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top,” is delivered at Mason Temple. The next day he is murdered on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He is 39. A week later, Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1968, extending the 1965 bill to include nondiscrimination in housing. In May, the SCLC goes ahead with its Poor People’s March on Washington, D.C. In June, U.S. Sen. Bobby Kennedy is assassinated in Los Angeles. In August, Chicago is rocked by riots at the Democratic convention, and in November, Richard Nixon is elected president.

1968 President Ronald Reagan signs a bill into law declaring the 3rd Monday in January a federal holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.