

# The attorneys who helped Martin Luther King build a movement

Clarence Jones and Fred Gray helped craft legal guidance that helped Martin Luther King build a movement. Their stories are more important than ever.



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington on Aug. 28, 1963, as National Park Service ranger Gordon "Gunny" Gundrum, left, stands guard. AP

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On the evening of Aug. 27, 1963, [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and several other civil rights leaders huddled](#) in a secluded section of the lobby of the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. The matter at hand was an address that King was scheduled to give the next day.

The oration would become an image etched in American history: King, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to [more than 200,000 people](#) on the National Mall.

Those gathered with King in the hotel had been there to influence his remarks. Included in the group was [Clarence Jones](#), who served as King's lawyer, speechwriter and adviser.

Lawyers like Jones played an unromantic but vital role in the Civil Rights movement.

Against the backdrop of history, it's easy to forget that King, such a transcendent figure, needed a lot of assistance, including legal help, to power the engine of his civil rights activism.

## Attorneys at King's key moments

I've spent a good amount of my career interviewing lawyers and know how much history is often changed in the little-known legal memos, briefs and guidance these attorneys provide. Many of these attorneys are older, and getting their accounts in their own words is important as they reach their golden years. As we remember King's legacy this year, I was fascinated to hear stories from Jones and another attorney, [Fred Gray](#), who were there at key moments in King's life of service.

In a December interview, Jones, 91, recalled the efforts made for King's most iconic speech. The Rev. Ralph Abernathy was forceful, urging King to preach. But Lawrence Reddick, a professor at Coppin State Teachers' College in Baltimore, disagreed, saying the attendees needed practical guidance and didn't want to just hear another sermon. Other ideas flowed, the hour was late and King became frustrated.

Unbeknownst to the others, Jones had prepared an opening for the speech for King to consider. "I'd been around him. I knew how his mind worked. Sometimes the hardest thing for him was the point of departure – starting the speech," Jones explained.

The next morning, Jones saw what King had prepared.

"Oh my God, he must have really been tired," Jones told me. "The first seven paragraphs of the 'I Have a Dream' speech are exactly as I had drafted them."

After that it was all King, announcing a list of visions that are some of the most famous words spoken in the nation's history.

It was Jones who filed the papers to [copyright King's "Dream" speech](#), as well as successfully securing a preliminary injunction, from a New York federal court, to [prevent 20th Century Fox from selling phonograph records](#) of it. Monies earned from the speech funded King's civil rights work.

Jones made clear to me King was very capable of writing his own speeches. That he was assisted was a practical necessity. Jones explained that an important source of revenue for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King headed, was modest fees he received for giving speeches. As a result, King did so three or four times a week.



Clarence Jones, Martin Luther King Jr.'s attorney who helped draft King's "I Have a Dream" speech, in 2008. Robert Deutsch/USA TODAY

It took research, Jones said, to "make the speech relevant" to the organization that he was addressing: "I was one of the principal guys that did that research."

More than just a ghostwriter and lawyer for King, Jones was also a close confidant. He recounted the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy and King being "besieged (by) the domestic and international press for a statement."

The day after the president was gunned down, Jones and King met at LaGuardia Airport in New York and crafted King's words. Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, had just become president. King understood, Jones told me, that it was "unlikely that there would be any significant or major change on the issue of civil rights unless it was under the leadership of a white, Southern, politician."

With this in mind, [King's statement](#), after expressing shock and sadness over Kennedy's death, added: "The finest tribute that the American people can pay to the late President Kennedy is to implement the progressive policies that he sought to initiate in foreign and domestic relations."

## Defending King in court

Fred Gray of Montgomery, Alabama, had an outsize role as a lawyer for the civil rights movement, starting with his [representation of Rosa Parks](#) following her 1955 arrest for a historic act of civil disobedience on a bus. He then served as counsel for the city's subsequent bus boycott, for which [King was its spokesman](#).

The following year, Gray persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court, in [Browder v. Gayle](#), to declare segregation on the city's buses unconstitutional.



Civil rights attorney Fred Gray, left, and Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., in 2011. In 1961, Gray represented Lewis and others in a lawsuit that desegregated buses and facilities throughout the country. Four years later, Gray filed a lawsuit that protected Lewis and others in their march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. Lloyd Gallman/USA TODAY Network

[Gray represented King](#) after his role in the bus boycott led to him being criminally prosecuted by Alabama for violating Montgomery's anti-boycott statute. Gray, along with co-authors Dan Abrams and David Fisher, [are publishing a book](#) in May about that historic, but long-forgotten, trial.

In an interview in early January, Gray, 91, shared a conversation he had with King in the aftermath of the [Selma-to-Montgomery march](#), which was cut short when participants were beaten by law enforcement as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The event came to be known as Bloody Sunday.

In an effort to prevent a repeat of the violence, Gray filed suit in Alabama federal court [seeking protection for the marchers](#). Judge Frank Johnson got wind that the marchers intended to move forward before the court ruled. Johnson called Gray to his chambers and delivered a stern warning not to let that happen.

Gray told me what happened next. He immediately went to Selma and found King, telling him that "this is the most important case that we've had. And we can win it, I believe. But you need to give me your commitment that you're not gonna take them across that bridge."

As Gray recalled, King replied, "Fred, you got it."

The following summer, Congress passed the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), giving legislative action to the movement that King, Jones, Gray and so many others worked in both large demonstrations and quieter actions to produce.

As we celebrate a day in King's honor this year, let's also give thanks for those who fought alongside him.

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