

Comparative Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Founding Fathers

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects: U.S. History, Civics, U.S. Government

Time Required: One 50-minute class period

Historical Thinking Skill: Compare and Contrast, Primary Source Analysis

Note:

This lesson was designed to be a standalone lesson that could be used regardless of familiarity with King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Depending on the course, it might be more appropriate to start with an in-depth analysis of King's letter first. For example, AP U.S. Government and Politics students need to have a deep understanding of the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" for the exam. In that course, it may work best to do this activity after analysis of the letter and as an extension activity or even as a review closer to the exam.

Objective: Compare excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and writings from the Founding Fathers (e.g., the Declaration of Independence, Federalist Papers) to identify shared themes such as justice, liberty, and the role of government.

Materials: Student Handout (Attached)

Background:

This lesson explores how Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" reflects and reinterprets the principles articulated by the Founding Fathers. Both King and the Founders grappled with the challenges of injustice, the moral and civic duty to resist oppression, and the tension between laws and higher principles of justice.

This comparison allows students to see the continuity of American ideals over time and how different leaders adapted these ideals to address the injustices of their era. It also highlights the relationship between historical principles and contemporary social



movements, encouraging students to reflect on their own roles in promoting justice and equity in today's world.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm Up Activity (5-10 minutes)

Ask students the following questions as a bell-ringer activity:

- 1) What makes a law just or unjust?
- 2) Can disobeying a law ever be justified? Why or why not?

Have students independently write their own responses. Allow time to discuss in small groups or as a class. Briefly introduce how both King and the Founding Fathers grappled with these questions in different historical contexts.

Part 2: Setting the Stage (10 minutes)

Give a mini-lecture providing an overview of key historical context:

- Historical Context - Founding Fathers
 - The American Revolution (1775-1783) was a response to British colonial policies that the American colonists deemed oppressive, including taxation without representation and violations of individual rights.
 - Founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence, The Federalist Papers, and speeches by figures like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison outlined the principles of liberty, equality, and self-governance.
 - These writings often invoked natural law and universal rights as the foundation for revolution, emphasizing the moral and legal justifications for their actions.
- Historical Context - Martin Luther King Jr.
 - By the 1960s, the United States faced significant racial and social inequalities, particularly in the South, where segregation laws and systemic discrimination were pervasive.



- King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) was written in response to a group of white clergy who criticized his methods of nonviolent protest during the Birmingham Campaign, a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement.
- In his letter, King appeals to the same natural law and moral principles that the Founders used, arguing for the urgency of civil disobedience against unjust laws.
- Review of democratic principles – justice, equality, liberty, etc.

Part 3: Primary Source Analysis Activity (25 minutes)

Prepare students to do primary source analysis by examining the two sample excerpts found on the student handout. Discuss with students how the quotes showcase that both King and Madison emphasize the importance of equality in governance.

Then, in pairs, or small groups, have students analyze the excerpts. On the student handout, students should summarize the author's argument (in their own words), identify the democratic principle(s) being addressed (justice, equality, liberty, etc.), and compare the similarities and differences between the quotes. You may prefer to assign each pair or group one excerpt set to look at and have them share out, as opposed to having all groups look at all quotes.

Discussion Suggestions:

Excerpt Set 1: Justice

- Consider asking: how do King and Jefferson each appeal to universal moral principles to justify resistance to unjust authority?

Excerpt Set 2: Protection of minority rights

- Both authors recognize the vulnerability of minority groups in democratic systems. While King advocates for grassroots activism and moral responsibility, Madison promotes institutional safeguards like federalism to prevent tyranny of the majority.

Excerpt Set 3: Justice

- Both King and Madison see justice as essential for a stable and ethical society. However, King focuses on collective responsibility to challenge systemic



injustices, while Madison considers justice the primary goal of institutional design to balance power and protect rights.

Part 4: Assessment (5 minutes)

You may collect the student handout as a formative assessment. Additionally, you may ask students to reflect and write a written response to the following prompt:

In what ways do Martin Luther King Jr. and the Founding Fathers provide similar or different perspectives on justice and the role of government? Which perspective do you think is more relevant today, and why?



Name _____

Comparative Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Founding Fathers

Objective: Compare excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and writings from the Founding Fathers to identify shared democratic ideals.

Warm Up Questions

What makes a law just or unjust?

Can disobeying a law ever be justified? Why or why not?

Sample Excerpt Analysis:

Democratic Ideal - Equality

"Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority." – Martin Luther King Jr. (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

"The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society..." – James Madison (Federalist No. 57, 1788)



Excerpt Set 1:

"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." - Martin Luther King Jr. (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." - Thomas Jefferson (Declaration of Independence, 1776)

Author	Summary (in my own words)	Democratic Ideal(s)	Comparison
MLK			Similarities:
Jefferson			Differences:



Excerpt Set 2:

"Complaints are every where heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens... that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority." – James Madison (Federalist No. 10, 1787)

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'" – Martin Luther King Jr. (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

Author	Summary (in my own words)	Democratic Ideal(s)	Comparison
Madison			Similarities:
MLK			Differences:



Excerpt Set 3:

"Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been, and ever will be pursued, until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit. In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign, as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger..." – James Madison (*Federalist No. 51*, 1788)

"Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." – Martin Luther King Jr. (*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963)

Author	Summary (in my own words)	Democratic Ideal(s)	Comparison
Madison			Similarities:
MLK			Differences:

