

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

The Eternal Oughtness

Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1964 Nobel Peace Prize

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA VI • Oslo, Norway

The Announcement

On October 14, 1964, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that Martin Luther King Jr. would receive the Nobel Peace Prize "for his non-violent struggle for civil rights for the Afro-American population." King was resting in an Atlanta hospital when the news reached him. At thirty-five he was, at the time, the youngest person ever to receive the prize, awarded in full rather than shared. The Committee's chairman praised him as "the first person in the Western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence."

A Year Behind It

The award arrived less than a year and a half after King delivered "I Have a Dream" at the March on Washington in August 1963, and just over three months after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2 of that year — the immediate backdrop the Nobel Committee is generally understood to have weighed.

Oslo, December 10, 1964

King traveled to Oslo by way of London, where he preached at St. Paul's Cathedral. At the ceremony he framed the honor as belonging to the movement rather than to himself, accepting it "in the name of the thousands of people in the civil rights movement" whom he called a "mighty army of love." His acceptance speech contains the line most often quoted from it since.

"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him." — Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Acceptance Speech, 1964

"Unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality." — Martin Luther King Jr.

King donated the prize money to the movement rather than keeping it for himself — commonly cited figures put the total at roughly \$54,000, split among the Gandhi Society for Human Rights, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and organizations including CORE, the NAACP, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Council of Negro Women, the National Urban League, and SNCC. A frequently repeated figure of \$54,123 appears in popular accounts but was not independently confirmed against a primary source in this research pass — the entry treats the exact total as approximate.

Opposition

The award was not universally welcomed at home. Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor dismissed the selection as "scraping the bottom of the barrel." FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who had already targeted King for surveillance, saw the prize sharpen his hostility: in November 1964, in the weeks between the announcement and the Oslo ceremony, an anonymous package — almost certainly from the FBI — reached King containing surveillance recordings and a letter that mocked the honor directly: "Your 'honorary' degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce)... will not save you." The letter, long suspected to have been drafted by FBI official William C. Sullivan, was found

among Hoover's confidential files and became public only after its rediscovery at the National Archives in 2014.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County connection specific to the 1964 Nobel Prize itself was found in this research pass. This entry does not claim one for the prize period specifically; it is scoped to the award, not to King's broader movement work, which the Two Americas archive documents in other entries.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Exact prize-money figure: commonly given as \$54,000 or \$54,123 depending on source and currency-conversion convention — treat as approximate rather than pinning to one exact figure without a primary citation.

Exact distribution breakdown: the specific dollar amounts per recipient organization should be verified against SCLC records or contemporary press before stating them as precise figures.

NC connection for this period: this research pass could not access newspaper archives (DigitalNC, Fayetteville Observer archives) that might surface local 1964 reaction coverage — a gap, not a confirmed absence.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Martin Luther King Jr. — Facts," The Nobel Prize, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/facts/>.
2. Martin Luther King Jr., "Acceptance Speech" (Oslo, December 10, 1964), The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/acceptance-speech/>.
3. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1964 — Summary," The Nobel Prize, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/summary/>.
4. "Nobel Peace Prize," Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/>.
5. Beverly Gage, "What an Uncensored Letter to M.L.K. Reveals," The New York Times, November 11, 2014 (on the 2014 rediscovery of the FBI letter).

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.