

# The anthem of the civil right's movement: a rhetorical criticism of "we shall ove..."

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



## **The Anthem of the Civil Right's Movement: A Rhetorical Criticism of " We Shall Overcome" Essay Sample**

### Introduction

The American traditional " We Shall Overcome," is the song of the Civil Right's struggle. From its roots in early spirituals to its re-imagination in twentieth century gospels, " We Shall Overcome" encompasses the history of the civil rights movement. Its collective longevity and deep roots in the African American community make it the perfect song for the movement. From performances by Pete Seeger and Joan Baez to singing led by John Lewis in SNCC, " We Shall Overcome" became a rhetoric molded idiosyncratically by its different rhetors. However, " We Shall Overcome" was criticized by civil right's leaders such as Malcolm X saying, " We want freedom now, but we're not going to get it saying ' We Shall Overcome.' We've got to fight to overcome." i Because of its complex legacy and seminal importance, " We Shall Overcome," specifically Pete Seeger's version, became a powerful rhetorical anthem that many civil rights advocates used to galvanize the country into fighting for equality.

### Setting and History

The legacy of the song begins in the pre-civil war south as " No More Auction Block For Me." This song contained a similar melody to " We Shall Overcome" and contained a theme of overcoming slavery that later connected it to gospel versions in the twentieth century. Of course, this song doesn't sound much like the current version, but the thematic content is quite similar. Both of the songs deal with overcoming the racial struggle and

have an optimistic goal of attaining equality and growing past the racism in the country. Typically, these spirituals contained a christian theme and were sung as a way of raising moral in the slave groups and moreover these spirituals gave hope for the future. Interestingly, this song became didn't become popular on southern plantations; rather, it became popular in black union regiments during the Civil War. Black soldiers would sing this song as a way of boosting moral and as a way of celebrating their freedom or fight for the larger liberation of slaves. ii These themes and usages carried into the later gospel renditions of the song and moreover fitted it with the hopeful theme of "overcoming" the racial struggle of the twentieth century.

However some historians believe that the song takes its roots from "I'll Overcome Someday," a hymn composed by Reverend Charles Albert Tindley. iii His hymn, along with other hymns, sprung up in 1901 as a part of a collection of African American music. iv This version of the song was slower and featured a narrow range of notes so that anybody could sing the song, which made it accessible. v Later in 1946, the song took further change in a workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. vi Here many of the students were involved in the economic struggle plaguing the US, so, many people who congregated at the Folk School came from many different backgrounds. vii

One group in particular came to the school and taught Zilphia Horton, the cofounder's wife, the song and she was so enamored by the song that she subsequently taught many students her version. viii There, Pete Seeger learned and added verses to the song which turned "We Shall Overcome"

into the version we know today. He also changed the song's style from a slow, and dirge like one to a more energized one with a triplet feel. ix

Another notable student of Highlander Folk, Guy Carawan, learned the song and taught it to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which led to a spread of the song in most of their civil right's demonstrations—whether it be in their sit-ins, jail-ins, or marches.

From then on, " We Shall Overcome" was recorded and performed by different artists—notably Joan Baez, Frank Hamilton, Joe Glazer, and very recently even Bruce Springsteen—and was used in many notable speeches, gatherings, and protests. President Lyndon Baines Johnson quoted the song in his address to congress in 1965 concerning voting legislation and Dr. Martin King Jr. quoted the song in his final sermon before his death in 1968. x xi Furthermore, the song made its way into many of the speeches, gatherings, and conversations in the history of the Civil Right's struggle. No matter who references " We Shall Overcome," its anthemic message stands strong. Significance

From its pervasive performances and influences, " We Shall Overcome" deserves the title of anthem—it truly is " a rousing or uplifting song identified with a particular group, body, or cause." xii While its structure and word choice may seem simplistic, the song's simplicity and universal message makes it powerful and easy to perform. The song is also significant because of how well known it was. Because of Pete Seeger's and countless others' influence, the song found its way into the voices of hundreds of northern and southern protesters during the movement. Everybody in the movement knew

the song and furthermore, everybody could join together in it. " We Shall Overcome" also made its way into speeches ranging from the " March on Washington" to jails in the South. John Lewis remarked in his book " Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement" that SNCC would sing the song as a group walking towards demonstrations and would even sing it during their jail-ins even if it meant losing their beds.

This song was powerful enough to be sung during police violence and picketing but also during funerals and celebrations. xiv It's as if the song represented a communion for the congregation of protesters who joined together in the fight against racism and inequality, because the song was normally sung in groups as a way of empowering and motivating the protestors and individuals in the Civil Right's struggle. The song also brought Civil Right's to the forefront of the country's attention. The folk music scene was beginning to become popular in the early sixties and artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez brought these issues to mainstream audiences. The folk scene also gave importance to issues of war, wealth, and politics which gave " We Shall Overcome" a springboard to be catapulted from into the forefront of both the folk and Civil Right's scene.

People from both sides of the movement could join together in this song to protest the injustices of America. The song's message was powerful and encapsulated the movement's agenda and moreover it exemplified the feelings of the time. Ultimately, its significance lies in its representation of an entire movement and its powerful message of overcoming adversity.

## Exegesis

Now what exactly does “ We Shall Overcome” say? Simply put, the song argues that one day, all injustices will be “ overcome.” The song doesn’t really say much more than that and moreover, it repeats the same lines over and over again: “ We shall overcome” and “ Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, We shall overcome someday.” xv The simple diction is powerful. “ We” suggests that everyone involved in the Civil Right’s movement stands together and that together, they will “ overcome” racial injustices “ someday.” xvi The song also uses an incremental refrain common of its hymn roots. While each verse says something along the lines of “ We shall” or “ We will” such and such, the action or message changes. xvii In each verse it changes from walking hand and hand to becoming free to not being afraid or being alone. All verses say basically the same thing: that together, everyone will become free and by being together, the Civil Right’s movement is powerful. Moreover, the song claims that change and action will only happen if done collectively.

Individually, not much can be done, but together they won’t be “ afraid” or “ alone” and can “ overcome” the battle. xviii This applies to the group singing of the song and in concerts, everyone would sing along to this popular protest song. Also, “ We Shall Overcome” wouldn’t have been possible without the cumulative additions and changes that it experienced.

Consequently, Pete Seeger acknowledged the contributions of the song for songwriting royalties knowing that without the Folk School or Carawan and Horton, the song wouldn’t have become what it was when he recorded and

performed it. Most importantly, the song unites the members of the Civil Right's movement and reminds them that they're not alone and that change will happen when they work towards it together. The song also represented a generation of people who were different from the older generations and who sought change both culturally and politically. The song ultimately represented a change that was occurring during the mid twentieth century and also persuaded audiences to fight for the Civil Right's cause.

### Rhetorical Strategies

Because of its significance and power, " We Shall Overcome" is a powerful rhetorical text. The song's main purpose is to galvanize the audience into working towards change together. Performances of the song were sung in unison, and as such, the singing invoked a sense of power and confidence in the rhetors while sparking attention from audiences on the outside. In any situation, " We Shall Overcome" motivates the singer and audience to believe that change is attainable and it's in its performance that mainly influences audiences to join the Civil Right's cause.

While the song was mainly sung in Civil Right's demonstrations, the song was also heard by many Americans in folk concerts and even record stores. People who went to Joan Baez or Pete Seeger's concerts were exposed to the issues of the time—namely racial issues. Since these audiences connected over common issues, the concerts developed a community of socially aware folk lovers who fostered an interconnected conversation over racism and discrimination.

Of course, many of these people would have already been exposed to the issues of the time since the folk scene perpetuated the discontent of the protesters throughout the country. Many people were upset about the issues of the country—namely Civil Right's and Vietnam—and music was one way of expressing their discontent and protest. Music was also a way of conveying the universal message of conquering hardship that all listeners could grasp and use in their own vernacular.

Furthermore, the song's message of overcoming adversity challenged Americans to participate in the battles being waged inside the country concerning Civil Rights and Vietnam. The song intentionally includes "we" to persuade its audience to realize that the struggles to destroy all injustices are collective and only in acting together can these injustices be overcome. Also, while the imagery and language is simple, the message strikes at the fundamental issue of justice and human rights. The song implicitly hints that because of unity, we are all equal and furthermore that we all deserve equal procedure in the justice system. Moreover, this idea suggests that we all deserve equal say in our society and that everyone deserves equal treatment. Being treated equally is the cornerstone of human rights; without that foundation, we cannot foster a peaceful, civic environment, which songs like "We Shall Overcome" pursue.

## Conclusion

"We Shall Overcome" encapsulates the sentiments of the Civil Right's movement. From its simple lines and refrains to its multiple variations, the song takes on a message of hope and overcoming adversity. Its rich history



cements it as a song of many generations and its simple lyrics give the song a universal message. Through the song's various performances and recordings, " We Shall Overcome" became a centerpiece in the Civil Right's protests and demonstrations. Ultimately, its through the song's powerful message and popularity that makes " We Shall Overcome" the anthem of the Civil Right's movement.