

How far was the civil rights movement in the united states a 'revolution from bel...

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



When slavery was abolished in the United States in 1863, one would assume that the most logical outcome of this would be for black people to have had the same rights as whites: the right to own land, receive a good education and so on. However, this was certainly far from the case, as especially in the southern areas, where black slavery had been an entrenched part of local white culture, black people found themselves constantly discriminated against, often in inhuman ways. Indeed, between 1890 and 1910, over two thousand mob murders of blacks occurred, largely in the rural 'Black Belt' counties stretching from Virginia to Texas. However, after the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, it became clear that the so-called bastion of democracy was behaving rather undemocratically in denying voting rights (among many others) to most of its black citizens. That the racial situation in post-war America was unjust was realised by all black Americans, and in the ensuing civil rights movement voices were given to this cause.

But to what extent was this campaign created by a social movement at grass roots level – there can be little doubt that the grass roots were in full support of the movement, but there remains the question of leading the movement. Social movements by their very nature thrust certain figures to the forefront, the best example in this case being Martin Luther King Jr. His role was, of course, fundamental to the movement, yet there is a mistake of seeing him as the prime instigator rather of the movement rather than the major national spokesman for it. A large degree of local initiative was displayed throughout the black struggle for freedom, certainly enough to suggest that the revolution was, in many respects, coming from below.

Post-World War II, a growing number of religious, civic, labour and intellectual spokesmen addressed the issue of segregation as a challenge to national values, a conviction only bolstered by the publication of such works as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, which charted the gulf between America's democratic ideals and the reality of discrimination. Afro-Americans had made some gains during the 'Second New Deal' of 1936 to 1940, such as the creation of a civil rights section in the Justice Department, and the president had made it clear that there were to be 'no forgotten men and no forgotten races' in his symbolic speech at Howard University – he had also increased the number of black federal employees from 50 000 in 1933 to 200 000 by 1946. Yet the United States' collective mind had been deeply affected by the doctrinal depravity of Fascism, the solidarity of the war effort, and the trauma of the Holocaust, and the fact that after this conflict another began, the Cold War, made the conditions all the riper for attempts to change the way American blacks were treated. The US could not claim to be a truly democratic country when 10% of its population were denied voting rights, which gave the USSR a chance to attack its nemesis as 'a consistent oppressor of under-privileged peoples. Thus, as Manning Marable states, 'in a real sense, the watershed of Afro-American history occurred during the 1940s. ' Over three million black Americans had registered for the services, while at home, the war effort brought another million black men and women into factory lines of production.

Returning home after having been prepared to lay down their lives for their country, it is no surprise that after the war the feelings of injustice on the

part of the black population experienced a massive upsurge. Activities within the White House were slowly beginning to reflect these feelings. In 1947, a presidentially impanelled ' Committee on Civil Rights' was established, and in 1948, another presidential committee produced a searing expose of the social consequences of segregation, recommending that it should be brought to an end. Furthermore, the nation was becoming increasingly aware of a string of ' exemplary' African-Americans: Jackie Robinson joining the Dodgers in 1947, Gwendolyn Brooks winning a Pulitzer prize, and Ralph Bunche receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950.

It was in this atmosphere that the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), began a stream of Supreme Court victories, as in 1947 with ' Sweatt v. Painter' and in 1950 with ' McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents. ' That same year the NAACP filed the first public school segregation case, contesting the education policies of Clarendon County. However, many saw the NAACP's actions on civil rights as elitist and only being protective of middle-class blacks, who wished to find themselves tolerable enclaves to raise their children. Indeed, Martin Kilson states that until the mid-1960s, ' civil rights politics was largely a middle-class affair, and the Negro lower strata had little political relationship to' it.

This is somewhat overly dismissive, but there were certainly some good reasons why the NAACP was sometimes referred to as the ' National Association for the Advancement of Certain People. David Levering Lewis states of the early 1950s that ' the cumulative impact of balance of power politics, rising incomes, federal court decisions, coalition with organized

labour, and the string of exemplary racial 'firsts', had primed much of the nation for an end to segregation. 'It had definitely done so for the black section of the nation at least, and small gains continued: 'Smith vs. Allwright' in the South brought Afro-American voter registration from 250 000 in 1944 to 1 008 614 in 1952, but this was still only 20% of the voting age population.

However, it is not until after the landmark ruling of the Supreme Court in 1954 that the Civil Rights Movement began in its full form. Five separate cases were grouped together under the title of 'Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas', and on May 17, 1954, a unanimous decision was made in favour of Brown. Separate schools for blacks and whites were made illegal. The president Eisenhower's disappointed reaction did not help matters, as he proclaimed the appointment of Earl Warren as Chief Justice had been a mistake, and refused to endorse the ruling in any other way except as law. Furthermore, the decision to attach the term 'with all deliberate speed' in reference to when state educational authorities should desegregate merely allowed for the obstructionist policies of most southern states over the many years to come: two years later, only 700 of the 3 000 southern school districts had been desegregated.

It was clear that in the white-ruled south, white leaders wished to retard the implementation of the ruling through legal casuistry and administrative procrastination. This was certainly the case in much of Alabama, yet it was the issue of segregation on public transport in this state that provided the first major direct action of the movement for civil rights. In December 1955,

Rosa Parks was arrested on a Montgomery bus for sitting in the section reserved for whites. This was apparently a spontaneous decision, yet the fact that Rosa Parks had been involved in the campaign for civil rights for over a decade, and the subsequent rapid boycott of the buses, indicate that it may not have been as spontaneous as many historians have claimed. Within one week of the event, a black boycott of the buses was well under way, guided by the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) who had practically drafted Martin Luther King Jr as its leading figure.

The boycott gained notoriety and leadership suspiciously quickly, yet the fact that practically every black citizen, especially those in the grass roots, took part in the boycott is significant. Furthermore, as Clayborne Carson states, the Montgomery Bus Boycott ' began as an outgrowth of local institutional networks rather than as a project of any national organization. The importance of local initiative over central planning in the civil rights movement cannot be underestimated, and this can be found in the next major stage of the black struggle, the sit-ins of the 1960s. The first occurred in Durham, North Carolina in 1959, yet it was the Greensboro sit-in soon after which lit the spark.

Within one week, the rising tide of protest had spilled over state borders into Hampton, Virginia and South Carolina: and sit-ins quickly began occurring in places such as Chattanooga and Nashville. Essentially these sit-ins involved black students sitting in white sections of restaurants and diners. The students were the central force for this period of civil rights history. But to what extent do students represent the ' grass roots'? Their tactics were

certainly something approaching revolutionary, and more significantly, no national organization or leader initiated these events.

The SCLC, CORE and the NAACP all attempted to provide ideological and tactical guidance for the student protests, but the student activists themselves insisted on forming their own local groups under student leadership. Indeed, Martin Luther King was initially reluctant to throw his weight behind the students for fear of ruffling senior black leaders, such as his father, but by May 1960 began making decisive contributions. And as Weisbrot has stated of the sit-ins and their impact, ' despite mutual misgivings, students were becoming one part – the critical shock troops – of a movement that increasingly drew in other vital elements of the black community. The success of the sit-ins, although in many cases difficult to gauge, should not be underestimated: in all, by the summer of 1960, some 300 Southern cities had established some kind of community organization to conciliate local blacks, the sit-ins and protests themselves involving over 7 000 blacks and whites, mostly students, and thousands more with financial and moral aid. The student campaigns also heightened national awareness of the civil rights movement, especially when established figures like Martin Luther King gave the protests a new respectability. Yet the fact that barely 10 000 took part in this stream of protest would indicate that there was hardly a revolution occurring at grass roots level.

However, the next phase of the civil rights movement would show that all members of black communities would be willing to physically show their demands for equality. The movement in Albany was the first example of this,

as in late 1961, King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference assumed the direction of a protest movement there, as reform had been resisted despite sit-ins and freedom rides. The movement in Albany ultimately failed due to a combination of bitter internal struggles between different civil rights workers and leaders, the 'vener of civility' tactics of local police chief Laurie Pritchett, and the fact that the president John F. Kennedy shied away from a forceful assertion of executive power on the matter. Yet the movement was significant as it shows that the protest initially arose without the national leadership of King or others (as was the case for Montgomery in 1955 and the student sit-ins), and that it served as a model for subsequent mass mobilizations of black communities elsewhere in the south. Furthermore, by 1963, it had become clear to national black leaders that the black struggle had acquired a vast popular momentum.

Malcolm X recognised and identified with the local leadership, and although his attack on national leadership is somewhat dubious, there is still much truth in his statement that 'In Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson; in Danville, Virginia, and other parts of the country, local leaders began to stir up our people at the grass-roots level. This was never done by these Negroes of national stature. The grass roots were certainly being stirred, yet popular protests and demonstrations rarely occurred without stimulus and leadership. In the South, this fell to many Baptist preachers who could rally their congregations into action. The desire for revolution was certainly there, but it took the input of leaders to utilise it.

This can certainly be seen in the mass demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, one of, if not the most, famous scene of civil rights protest, which occurred under the direction of Martin Luther King Jr. Wyatt Walker stated at the time that ' we've got to have a crisis to bargain with' and this is exactly what was engineered in Birmingham. Boycott targets were carefully selected and extensive fund-raising was carried out by King and Harry Belafonte, and 250 residents were recruited to teach the techniques of non-violence in black churches. During his short imprisonment in Birmingham, King wrote rather tellingly that '.

.. e who engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. ' The demonstrations and boycotts involved the majority of the local black population, even to the extent that nine hundred children were jailed for their street protest on May 2nd.

Yet most importantly, for the first time the American media brought a graphic knowledge of racist violence into every home in the US. There was an immediate public revulsion at the brutal police methods as protesters clashed with the local authorities, and after Kennedy ordered 3 000 troops to draw near the city and prepared to nationalize the Alabama Guard, white-organized bombings and terror halted, and the way was open for the ratification of the pact made between SCLC and the Birmingham authorities, which would bring an end to all segregation in return for an end to the protests. It was, in Reverend Shuttlesworth's words, a victory for ' human supremacy. The Birmingham movement showed the nation and the White

House the new urgency of the civil rights movement: over 100 000 people were involved, with nearly 15 000 arrests made. In 1961, barely 1 200 were involved in the freedom rides.

With mass involvement of this kind, it is hard to deny that there really was a revolution from below being effected. Birmingham was organized and directed by nationally interested leaders and organizations, yet as King wrote in jail, these were behaving as mediums for the demands for justice coming from all levels of black society, rather than them being the only voices for change. After Governor Wallace sought to physically prevent two black students from enrolling at Alabama University, reminding the nation again of the horrors of segregation, Kennedy addressed the nation on television, stating that he would soon request Congress ' to make a commitment that it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law. This signalled a turning point in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, and to Brauer, ' it marked the beginning of what can truly be called the Second Reconstruction, a coherent effort by all 3 branches of the government to secure blacks their full civil rights. ' This and the massive march on Washington in August 1963, involving over a quarter of a million people, helped pave the way for new Civil Rights legislation under Kennedy in 1964, and under Johnson in 1965 (the Voting Rights Act) and in 1968. There was still much bitter white hostility to the reforms, but it cannot be argued that the Civil Rights Movement had failed to make decisive headway.

It would have been inhuman if it had not. The extent to which the movement and the gains it made was the result of a revolution from below is difficult to tell exactly. However, in the final assessment, it can be argued that without significant desire and willingness to effect change from the black grass roots, the movement would probably have failed. The importance of leaders and organizations cannot be underestimated as they provided the channels for change, yet in 1955 with the boycott of buses in Montgomery and in the mass demonstrations and protests of the 1960s, those at the lower socio-economic levels were clearly willing to do their part for their, and their race's, freedom. To say that the Civil Rights Movement was a revolution is perhaps overstating the case, as it can be seen more as a natural progression towards equality accelerated by the war and the post-war situation, but it cannot be denied that stimulus from below was vital to the cause.