

Civil rights movement essay example

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



The Civil Rights Movement was a social movement which accelerated the pursuit of equal rights and fair treatment for African-Americans following World War II. With America established as a world superpower, and the economic recovery the war provided leaving the United States in a secure position as a nation, African-American leaders worked to undo Jim Crow laws, desegregate schools and other public institutions, and provide basic freedoms and rights in the wake of a deeply prejudiced nation. No longer content with what limited freedoms were given to African-Americans throughout the centuries, and fed up with the remaining discrimination, blacks demanded equal treatment and an end to segregation of blacks from whites in schools, businesses and the like. Leaders of this movement included Martin Luther King, Jr., radical Muslim Malcolm X, and other civil rights activists, all working toward similar goals but often taking radically different approaches. The prevailing literature on the Civil Rights Movement demonstrates the discord that the varying civil rights groups had regarding the best ways to achieve their goals, whether it be through peaceful protest or violent retaliation; scholars of the subject have substantially different ideas of how the Civil Rights Movement was (or should have been) conducted.

Some of the greatest tensions that occurred within the Civil Rights Movement were personified most acutely by the differences in ideologies between peaceful preacher Martin Luther King, Jr. and the radicalized, aggressive Malcolm X. These two figures personified the two approaches the Civil Rights Movement wanted to take; King preached nonviolence and peace, focusing on integration with the white man to create an equal society

(Washington 22). However, Malcolm X preached a strategy of overthrowing the white man, simply seeking to change the dynamics of this nation to grant blacks the agency they had been robbed of without a desire to treat their white oppressors humanely (Biondi, 2003) These two leaders were by no means the be-all, end-all of the Civil Rights Movement, but their status as diametrically opposed figures on the battle for civil rights highlights the tensions that occurred between those who wanted to fight for peace and integration and those who wishes to simply take back what they felt was theirs.

While both black and white activists for civil rights worked hard to gain the equal protection of constitutional rights for African-Americans, the conversations soured after that point. Once voting rights were acquired, Dr. King started to push for further examination of the structural and cultural causes of the socioeconomic inequities found between black and white, white liberal activists started to perceive these notions as radical and hazardous. While white liberals were more than happy to grant African-Americans equal rights in something that would not affect them directly, they became much more skittish around the prospect of dramatically changing their culture. As the Civil Rights Movement moved toward more systemic avenues towards equal rights, more and more backlash started to occur as a result of the strained ability of white liberals to tolerate socioeconomic changes that provided more equal ground for blacks.

The Black Power Movement was a natural offshoot of the peaceful efforts of those like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; its roots are inextricably tied to the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and its

split into two decidedly polarized elements that nonetheless ran parallel to each other. The SNCC was at once an idealistic student organization that sought to bring black and white student activists together as a ‘band of brothers’ and a revolutionary force frustrated by their black and white allies’ ineffectiveness, as well as the racism inherent to American society itself. To that end, SNCC began to corrupt itself, sowing distrust and suspicion to become a microcosm of the 1960s mix of violence and revolution in the Civil Rights Movement. The SNCC struggled to maintain its relevance in the black community and to maintain solid leadership; as it had tumultuous relationships with other black civil rights groups, it had a difficult time finding a concrete place in the Civil Rights Movement. Nonetheless, it offered a unique route for the political awakening of American blacks, particularly in higher education, and spearheaded significant changes to the practices of American institutions (Joseph, 2006).

There were many different battlefields on which these civil rights activists fought; New York City in the 1950s and 60s was a terrible place, full of race-related and targeted police violence after World War II (Biondi 3). Though some scholars believe the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was the first blow of the Civil Rights Movement, many think it started in WWII-era New York City. Despite this, *Brown* is still an important ruling: by being set in stone by the Supreme Court, *Brown* forced the South to accept racial change no matter how much they resisted against it; it was a constant, ever-present and unified conversation now. *Brown* was an unambiguous and powerful announcement that southern race relations were set to change, making it the catalyst for other changes down the road in the 1960s that led to greater

civil rights advances in the South. The South needed these changes desperately, as well; Mississippi was a hotbed of race-related violence and discrimination even by the standards of the rest of the south (Dittmer, 1994). The unique kinds of discrimination that would occur in Mississippi towns like Jackson provided a unique and horrifying environment for African-Americans and civil rights activists, which is said to have led to the aggressiveness that the SNCC eventually took on as part of the Black Power Movement (Dittmer, 1994).

One of the most interesting debates that happened within the Black Power movement, and also during the movement in general, was intersecting values between gender and racial activists at the time. There was a strong movement within the Black Power organization that believed that birth control was ‘black genocide,’ as it lessened the chances that blacks could procreate. However, this created a divide between progressive racial social activists and gender activists who wanted women to be able to control their bodies (Caron 545). This conflict illustrates how the Civil Rights Movement’s momentum and importance was often fought over by marginalized groups; because of these intersecting interests, it was hard to gather sufficient momentum for change to occur as a unified group. For many men, the Civil Rights Movement was also a push to reclaim the masculinity that had been robbed of them; black men in particular still had little interest in seeing women’s rights be advanced, but seemingly wanted the same ability white men had to join the patriarchal society that existed in America at the time (Estes 154).

The social and political changes taken in the course of the Civil Rights

Movement were accomplished through dramatic action and powerful organization, using grassroots initiatives and the participation of women in the leadership process (though only at an intermediate level). Women slowly became an increasingly important demographic in the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Women chiefly occupied an intermediate leadership role, providing moderate leadership in many local and regional cells of civil rights organizations. These intermediate layers of local leadership became vital to the Civil Rights Movement, as the inclusion of women in the groups also provided needed gender equality and solidarity. This decision also provided a larger base of activists, increasing mobilization of civil rights efforts throughout America in the 1950s. The ongoing threat of the Soviet Union, and its increasing leftist access to Congress and legislatures can also be credited with some successes of the movement, as antifascism and anticolonialism made the race issue an international one.

Despite the volatility of the Black Power Movement, there is plenty of cause to understand its motivations and actual effects in a more nuanced way. ‘Black power’ exists in the American consciousness through a number of iconic, yet inaccurate images that powerfully evoke the era’s confusing blend of wins and losses. To that end, there is more to the Black Power Movement than the pervading wisdom of a violent group whose radical agenda and activities undermined real racial justice struggles. In essence, the Black Power Movement’s propensity for violent rhetoric, misogyny, and bravado have made them and their good work quick targets for dismiss and discount. The newly-formed subgenre of ‘Black Power Studies’ is starting to advance the pushing of more artful, nuanced and even-handed portrayals of the Black

Power Movement, showing that the good outweighed the bad when it came to the Movement. Black power may have been used in black communities, but its many forms challenged the ideas of liberalism, as well as how we see the practice of democracy at all levels.

In conclusion, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s found substantial progress in the face of changing politics and organization tactics. In the 1950s, legislation and changing attitudes, stemming in part from the Cold War's influence on Americans, led to anti-discrimination legislation finally being pushed through Congress. Increasing mobilization and gender equality in the organization of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole also played a significant factor, as women played an important part in its mid-level leadership. Overall, it was these factors and events that paved the way for an even more successful and politically-charged time for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Despite the hard work of those who fought hard to make civil rights a possibility, the movement itself is often considered a balm in retrospect - there is significant backlash that occurs against further racism due to the fact that the Movement happened (Joseph, 2006). Though it is generally agreed that it made significant progress in civil rights, the fact of its existence is used to downplay contemporary discriminatory practices, as racism was limited to the South and is not considered to happen anywhere else. Considering the advances made in the Civil Rights Movement, it is fascinating to see the vast intersections between peace and violence, men and women, and white and black that took place during this period, making it hard for the movement to have one single voice and purpose.

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