

# The african-american civil rights movement following world war ii research paper ...

[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.

In Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Carson breaks down the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) into two decidedly polarized elements that nonetheless ran parallel to each other. In essence, Carson's thesis is that 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.

Carson's strengths in his approach to his particular subject of the Civil Rights Movement fall within his research, which is well performed – of special mention is Carson's capacity for balance, providing equally strong and unbiased accounts of both factions of the SNCC. The weaknesses are demonstrated in Carson's struggle to contextualize the SNCC strongly within the movement. He argues that 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, Carson's belief is that 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.

In David Howard-Pitney's *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents*, the author discusses the Civil Rights Movement primarily through the two diametrically opposed perspectives of the ostensible leaders of the movement: the peaceful, nonviolent Martin Luther King, Jr., and revolution-minded Malcolm X, who wanted to revolt any way they could. However, despite these distinct differences in their approach, Howard-Pitney's thesis is that that their philosophies and approaches cannot be simplified so cleanly. While the book itself is a broad overview of both figures' lives, they still

provide a great deal of information about both men's perspectives on issues as diverse as integration, struggle, racial philosophy, the American dream, and more.

The book's strengths lean heavily on its use of primary documents; by taking excerpts from Malcolm X's autobiography as well as many of King's sermons, the book is chiefly concerned with providing the direct views of both men from the sources themselves, with very little editorializing. Taking this approach permits the reader to understand more coherently the stances both figures took on the same subjects while minimizing the insertion of a potentially biased authorial party. At the same time, this also leaves the book without a strong authorial voice, which is a bit of a weakness; Howard-Pitney seems to merely assert that these two figures have these opinions on certain subjects related to the Civil Rights Movement without a significant goal beyond that. To that end, the book is a fine historical document without a strong thematic core behind it.

In Hasan Kwame Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, the author investigates the civil rights movement as it pertained to Lowndes Country in the Black Belt of Louisiana. Following the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the aforementioned SNCC set up an independent political party in Lowndes to attempt to elect the first black officials the area could have. Jeffries's thesis is that the 1966 election in Lowndes Country provided an opportunity for black politicians to have a chance to effect real change, and to have a significantly high chance to be elected. At the same time, however, he argues that a new type of black politics squandered these opportunities in the Black Belt of Alabama, "one that privileged mobilizing

voters over educating them, ranked individual interests higher than group interests, and placed winning re-election above fighting for freedom rights". The strengths of the work lie in its tremendously well-researched content; Jeffries does a wonderful job contextualizing all of the information provided and streamlining it into an easy-to-understand narrative. However, the work's biggest weakness is in falling into less evenhandedness when working with the Black Power movement, treating it as an unfortunate and malformed offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement.

Jeffries also discusses the intersection between the 1966 election and the start of the Black Power movement; both Hasan Jeffries and Clayborne Carson talk about the SNCC and its work in Lowndes County, as well as the start of the black power movement and its ideologies. In many ways, their discussion of the struggles of how to operate as a civil rights groups are similar; they both depict the SNCC as an initially-peaceful organization who quickly splintered over the possibility of using violent tactics to get what they wanted in Lowndes Country. Jeffries in particular notes the influence of Malcolm X on the SNCC towards cultivating Black Nationalist Sensibilities: "Malcolm gave voice to the young radicals' hopes and frustrations, and by 1965 his fiery oratory and pointed political analysis made him the unofficial voice of SNCC". Carson, meanwhile, emphasizes the strange organizational structure of the SNCC as something that contributed to its downfall, characterizing it as against discipline, unity and leadership, always scrambling for an ideology to solidify itself behind.

In Pearl Joseph's article "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," the Black Power Movement's origins and intent are explored in great detail.

According to Joseph, “‘Black power’ exists in the American imagination through a series of iconic, yet fleeting images that powerfully evoke the era’s confounding mixture of triumph and tragedy”. To that end, Joseph believes that 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 struggles easy targets for demonization and dismissal”. Joseph’s primary thesis is that 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 harnessed in black communities, but its manifold iterations challenged the scope of liberalism, democracy, and the nation-state, as well as how we envision the practice of democracy at the local, regional, national, and global levels”.

Joseph’s main strength is in its status as a comprehensive history of the Black Power Movement, stemming from post-World War II ideas of racial pride and political self-determination, hand in hand with the “New Negro radicalism of the 1920s”. Well-researched examples of the good that Black Power members did, including serving breakfast to schoolchildren, contrasted with the “spectacular political theater” that ensued in these same regions, from mass protests to violent showdowns. The work’s primary weakness is in its focus on other scholarship of the Black Power movement to the detriment of its own study into this phenomenon, but this falls into the article’s status as scholarship about other scholarship.

In Michael J. Klarman's "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," the author explores the consequences of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, going into detail as to the particular outcomes and benefits of such a ruling. Unlike many scholars of the time, who emphasize the ruling as a significant benchmark in civil rights legislation, Klarman's claim is that "scholars may have exaggerated the extent to which the Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling provided critical inspiration to the civil rights movement". Instead, the thesis of Klarman focuses on the indirect contributions Brown made to racial change - more precisely, the backlash against the ruling leading to greater societal advancements than the ruling itself. 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, highly salient pronouncement that southern race relations were destined 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. Klarman's article works well in its acknowledgement of its controversy. Citing many different scholars who have said similar things before (and those who have not), the author recognizes that this thesis is provocative but well-traveled by other scholars. However, Klarman's greatest strength is in combining all of this existing research into an as-yet-unconnected "causal chain" which links Brown to other civil rights legislation present in the 1960s. However, one major weakness in the article is its central claim that Brown's impact is overestimated - Klarman's thesis holds true in that Brown led to other wonderful advances in civil rights legislation, but this merely seems to

further emphasize Brown's importance (if restructuring it somewhat). The argument seems to only really apply to the possibly nonexistent notion that Brown is the direct thing that ended segregation and brought civil rights to all, when it was merely an extremely important foothold situation.

In Robert Weisbrot's *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*, the author attempts to give as generalized and comprehensive history as possible of the Civil Rights Movement in a single volume. Starting from the simple act of the Greensboro sit-ins and following thirty years and more of civil rights activism and legislation, Weisbrot offers portraits of many important civil rights leaders, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Eldridge Cleaver, as well as highlights the struggles of the simple activists who fought against Jim Crow laws throughout America.

One of the most interesting theses that Weisbrot claims in his work is that the "alliance between black and white liberals, which transformed American race relations during the 1960s, was a source of both power and disillusionment to civil rights advocates". In essence, 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. To that end, "the liberal coalition of the 1960s [brought about] a self-limiting revolution that abolished formal barriers to equality while leaving intact the basic features of a system in which blacks had played a subordinate,



marginal role". 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. The "ascendancy of conservative politics at the close of the decade highlighted the value of gains achieved through liberal coalition and made clear that the limits of liberal readiness for change represented to a great extent the limits of Americans generally". 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.

In many ways, Weisbrot challenges the assertions made by Klarman in his work. While Klarman believes that *Brown v. Board of Education* was not as important as an individual ruling as the myriad other civil rights advances it helped to spearhead, Weisbrot maintains a high opinion of the case.

"[Brown] provided a yardstick of color-blind justice against which Americans could measure their progress toward the ideal of equal opportunity".

Granted, these are the same things that Klarman claims Brown does, but Weisbrot is more open in acknowledging the importance of this barometer for civil rights advances in the South than Klarman. Both authors acknowledge the court ruling's influence on further black activism in the South, the decision providing momentum for activists to start boycotts in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, and more - Weisbrot calls the Brown ruling "a warm memory" in the instance where Rosa Parks refuses to step off the Montgomery bus, citing its influence much more directly and honestly than

Klarman.

Klarman claims that Brown is not nearly as important as the backlash against it, but this presumes the importance of Brown itself as the cause of this backlash – while both authors are effectively saying the same thing, Weisbrot is much more honest about it. Klarman, however, takes the direction that Brown is important because it caused important whites to double down on the “ racial status quo,” in opposition to Wiesbrot’s assertion that Brown spurred black activism to effect change.

Howard-Pitney’s work revolves mostly around the collection of primary documents of King and Malcolm X, providing the students of these two important Civil Rights figures a comprehensive look at their philosophies and perspectives. To that end, there is very little editorializing or opinion placed upon the impact of these two, save that a) King and Malcolm X were perhaps the two most important people in the Civil Rights Movement and b) their viewpoints were not as diametrically opposed as people claimed.

Furthermore, these primary documents seem to bolster the theses of Clayborne Carson and Robert Weisbrot, who simply argue that the Civil Rights Movement was conducted with many different schools of thought – Carson notes the split personality of the SNCC and its split into a Black Power perspective, while Weisbrot notes that more people than just King and Malcolm X were responsible for the many changes that the Civil Rights Movement sought (and succeeded in accomplishing).

Joseph’s portrayal of the Black Power Movement as something that is mischaracterized as needlessly violent is unsupported by the work of Jeffries. Jeffries’ tales of the beginning of the Black Power movement shows a

decided amount of uncertainty regarding the level of violence and antagonism they might have, implying that their characterization as bullies and violent activists is untrue. Nonetheless, Jeffries characterizes the Black Power Movement as a dangerous and radical movement that is cause for much concern even among middle-class blacks. This is much different than the uplifting Joseph provides the Black Power movement: “ For an entire generation, black power’s community and social activism shaped African Americans’ political consciousness, racial solidarity, and domestic and foreign policy imagination”.

In conclusion, these examples of scholarly literature about the Civil Rights Movement demonstrate a wide range of perspectives regarding such issues as the competing ideologies of nonviolence versus violence, the reaction of white activists and government legislation to the movement, and more. Carson argues that the SNCC was a strong black activist group torn asunder by conflicting ideologies, while Howard-Pitney shows Dr. King and Malcolm X as two strong representatives of these ideologies whose priorities shifted over time. Jeffries notes the same struggles the SNCC encountered in Lowndes, along with the start of the Black Power movement, while Joseph claims said movement is unnecessarily vilified in most scholarly literature. Klarman claims that Brown v. Board of Education is not as important as the white backlash that followed, while Weisbrot believes it is one of the most important catalysts for black activism - though he is also mindful of the reticence of white activists to follow along with the endgame of the movement. All of these works and more provide a comprehensive picture of the diversity and breadth of knowledge present in the study of the Civil

Rights Movement, and showcases just how complex this period in American history truly was.

## Works Cited

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981). ISBN 0-684-85013-3.

David Howard-Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents* (2004). ISBN 0-312-39505-1.

Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. (2010). ISBN 978-0814-743317.

Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field". *Journal of American History* 96: 3 (December 2009), 751-776. Michael Klarman, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis". *Journal of American History*, vol 81, No. 1, (June 1994), 81-118.

Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (1989). ISBN 039-333-2438.