

# Historiography of the civil rights movement



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Who was the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) lawyer who successfully argued the NAACP's *Brown v. Board of Education*? Answer: Martin Luther King. Question: Name several people who were involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Answer: Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Question: Who was the first President of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)? Answer: Martin Luther King. Question: Who organized the famous March on Washington? Answer: Martin Luther King. Question: Who started the sit-in movement of the 1960s? Answer: Martin Luther King. (Armstrong 2002)

Does the preceding list of questions and answers sound familiar? If you teach high school history, the answer is probably yes. However, this does not tell the whole story. In reality, Martin Luther King was just one member of the larger Civil Rights Movement sweeping the country. In order to illuminate the larger picture to our students, alternative strategies need to be considered. One such strategy is presented here. This lesson plan tackles the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of nonviolent direct action.

I am not arguing that King is not an important historical figure of the Civil Rights Movement, because he certainly is. The problem, however, is that since the early 1970s, the struggle for civil rights has been taught almost solely in relationship to King and his life. Students graduate from high school viewing the civil rights movement synonymously with Martin Luther King Jr. Such connections are understandable, if grossly uninformed. Students are denied the opportunity to immerse themselves in the complicated and varied histories of the civil rights movement. (Armstrong 2002) According to Armstrong, in the past, most high school history teachers relied on textbooks

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to help them convey the civil rights movement to their students.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of textbooks present a narrative of the civil rights movement of “ King as the embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, textbooks typically begin the movement in 1954 and 1955 with the Brown v. Board decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and end in 1968 with the assassination of King”. (Armstrong 2002, 6) However, this is only a narrow view of what many historians consider a much longer struggle for racial civil rights.

One way to open up this narrative is to provide students with access to primary documents. This lesson incorporates three primary documents – one from each of the leading groups that advocated nonviolent action during the civil rights movement. This methodology not only presents students with alternative perspectives, but it also exposes students to a core tool used by historians. (Armstrong 2002) In any history course, whether it is second grade, high school, or graduate level, aspects of the story will be left out. History is a vast and ever-expanding field, and it is impossible to include everything in one course. However, by showing our students how to think and act like historians, we can give them the opportunity to explore these topics further in the future.

## **National Standards**

The National Standards for United States History: Era 9 Postwar United States, Standard 4 requires students to understand the struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties. (National Center for History in the Schools 2005)

## **Time**

This lesson should be divided into three class sessions of approximately one hour.

## **Student Objectives**

To analyze primary source material.

To analyze the role of nonviolent direct action in combating racism.

To analyze the role of different organizations combating racism in the Civil Rights Movement.

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

## **Background**

### **Nonviolent Action**

According to Gene Sharp, “ Nonviolent action refers to those methods of protest, resistance and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do or refuse to do certain things”. (Sharp 1969) These methods can be divided into three basic groups: nonviolent protest, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Each group contains different examples of nonviolent actions. Nonviolent protest includes such actions as parades, marches, and picketing. Noncooperation includes such actions as walkouts, strikes, and boycotts. And nonviolent intervention, the

most “ militant” forms of nonviolence typically refers to sit-ins. (Wirmark 1974)

Each of these methods of nonviolent action was employed during the Civil Rights Movement. Three of the leading organizations which advocated the use of nonviolent action were the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

### **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**

CORE was founded in 1943, and specialized in nonviolent action to combat racial discrimination. Its first focus was on sit-in demonstrations with the goal that public places, such as restaurants, would become desegregated.

(Wirmark 1974) As the Civil Rights Movement evolved, so too did the goals of CORE, who began to sponsor “ freedom rides” during the early 1960s. [See Figure 1] (Woodward 1966) From 1962-1964, CORE concentrated on voter registration drives throughout the South. It was also responsible for sponsoring direct action protests against unfair housing measures and other types of discrimination against African Americans in the North. Though all three organizations (CORE, SNCC, and SCLC) employed nonviolent techniques in their quest for equality, it was CORE who initiated the practice. (Meier and Rudwick 1973)

### **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**

On February 1, 1960, a group of young African American students were refused to be served in a coffee shop in North Carolina. In protest, the students sat in silence in the shop. This type of protest, known as a “ sit-in”,

rapidly spread throughout the country, bringing many young college students into the civil rights cause. [See Figure 2] (Woodward 1966) The SNCC, the youngest and most militant of the organized groups, came out of the sit-in movement. Students who had participated in sit-ins wanted to control student demonstrations, and thus founded the SNCC in 1960. (Wirmark 1974) By 1966, the SNCC had gained national attention with its use of the slogan “ Black Power”. Some of the most important leaders of the SNCC were Bob Moses of Mississippi, Charles Sherrod of Georgia, and Bill Hansen of Arkansas. These men were most effective because they truly believed in the morality of their cause. They were courageous in the face of adversity and influenced others to not give up hope. (Stoper 1977)

### **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**

After the successful Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. founded the SCLC to bring together the church leaders who had been organizing the boycott. [See Figure 3] Inspired by the actions of CORE, King wanted to apply nonviolent action on a large scale. (Wirmark 1974) Unlike the other two organizations, the SCLC acted as an umbrella organization. It brought together various civil rights groups across the South and the rest of the nation. It also differed from other civil rights groups because it was primarily made up of religious groups. Charles Morgan, a member of the SCLC board of directors said of the group, “ SCLC is not an organization, it’s a church”. (Fairclough 1987, 1) King was certainly a significant force behind the SCLC, but its successes cannot be accredited solely to his larger-than-life personality. The SCLC was extremely effective in combating racial discrimination and segregation, and this was due partially to King, partially

to its belief in a higher moral cause, and partially to its commitment to nonviolent action. (Fairclough 1987)

## **Procedures**

### **Day One**

Briefly discuss the main events of the Civil Rights Movement with students, providing them with a timeline for reference. Have students look up the definitions for segregation, non-violence, and direct action. Provide students with a background on different types of nonviolent direct action protests. Allow students to brainstorm ways to combat racism through nonviolent direct action.

### **Day Two**

Provide students with a background on the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Divide the students into three groups and assign one organization to each group. Groups should make a short presentation to the class on the background and history of their assigned organization.

### **Day Three**

Have students compare and contrast the three civil rights organizations in a 1-2 page in-class essay. Students should work individually, but allow them the opportunity to use reference materials, as well as discuss their questions with you.

## **Discussion Questions**

How do you define segregation? Provide two different examples of racial segregation.

What is nonviolence? Direct action? How can the two be used to combat racial segregation?

What were the goals of CORE? Of SNCC? Of SCLC?

Compare and contrast the three organizations. In what ways does studying them deviate from what you have learned about the civil rights movement in the past?

## **Further Reading**

Armstrong, Julie Buckner. *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedoms Bittersweet Song*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Carson, Clayborne. "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Sep., 1987): 448-454.

Fairclough, Adam. *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Meier, August, and Elliott Rudwick. *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

National Center for History in the Schools. "History Standards for Grades 5-12 United States." *National Standards for History Basic Edition*. 2005.

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<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/> (accessed November 11, 2010).

O’Brien, Michael. “ Old Myths / New Insights: History and Dr. King.” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Nov. 1988): 49-65.

Steinkraus, Warren E. “ Martin Luther King’s Personalism and Non-Violence.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan. – Mar., 1973): 97 – 111.

Stoper, Emily. “ The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization.” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1977: 13-34.

Wirmark, Bo. “ Nonviolent Methods and the American Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965.” *Journal of Peace Research*. Vol. 11. No. 2, 1974: 115-132.

Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

## Day One Handout

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Definitions: Look up each of the following words and write out the definition.

Segregation:

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Non-violence:

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Direct action:

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Non-Violent Direct Action Protests: Read the following list of non-violent direct actions and discuss in your groups.

Sit-ins (restaurants, lunch counters)

Kneel-ins (churches)

Stand-ins (theaters, swimming pools, libraries)

Marches

Mass meetings

Picketing

Vigils

Prayer meetings

Jail-ins (attempt to overcrowd jails)

Fasting

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Nonviolent obstruction (streets, vehicles)

Boycotts

Rent strikes

Voter registration drives

## **Day Two Handout -Page 1**

### **CORE Rules for Action**

Guarantees of the Individual to the Group

A CORE member will investigate the facts carefully before determining whether or not racial injustice exists in a given situation.

A CORE member will seek at all times to understand both the attitude of the person responsible for a policy of racial discrimination, and the social situation which engendered the attitude. The CORE member will be flexible and creative, showing a willingness to participate in experiments which seem constructive, but being careful not to compromise CORE principles.

A CORE member will make a sincere effort to avoid malice and hatred toward any group or individual.

A CORE member will never use malicious slogans or labels to discredit any opponent.

A CORE member will be willing to admit mistakes.

He will meet the anger of an individual or group in the spirit of good will and creative reconciliation; he will submit to assault and will not retaliate in kind either by act or word.

A member will never engage in any action in the name of the group except when authorized by the group or one of its action units.

When in an action project a CORE member will obey the orders issued by the authorized leader or spokesman of the project, whether these orders please him or not. If he does not approve of such orders, he shall later refer the criticism back to the group or to the committee which as the source of the project plan.

No member, after once accepting the discipline of the group for a particular action project, shall have the right of withdrawing. However, should a participant feel that under further pressure he will no longer be able to adhere to the Rules for Action, he shall then withdraw from the project and leave the scene immediately after notifying the project leader.

Only a person who is a recognized member of the group leader in a particular project shall be permitted to take part in that group action.

Guarantees from the Local Group to the Individual

Each member has the right to dissent from any group decision and, if dissenting, need not participate in the specific action planned.

Each member shall understand that all decisions on general policy shall be arrived at only through democratic group discussion.

A CORE member shall receive the uncompromising support of his CORE group as he faces any difficulties resulting from his authorized CORE activities.

## **Day Two Handout -Page 2**

### **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee**

#### Statement of Purpose

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from the Judeo-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate.

Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overcomes injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

## **Day Two Handout -Page 3**

### **Southern Christian Leadership Conference: “ This is SCLC”**

#### Aims and Purposes of SCLC

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has the basic aim of achieving full citizenship rights, equality and the integration of the Negro in all aspects of American life. SCLC is a service agency to facilitate coordinated action of local community groups within the frame of their indigenous organizations and natural leadership. SCLC activity revolves around two main focal points: the use of nonviolent philosophy as a means of creative protest; and securing the right of the ballot for every citizen.

#### Philosophy of SCLC

The basic tenets of Hebraic-Christian tradition coupled with the Gandhian concept of satyagraha - truth force - is at the heart of SCLC's philosophy. Christian nonviolence actively resists evil in any form. It never seeks to humiliate the opponent, only to win him. Suffering is accepted without retaliation. Internal violence of the spirit is as much to be rejected as external physical violence. At the center of nonviolence is redemptive love. Creatively used, the philosophy of nonviolence can restore the broken community in America. SCLC is convinced that nonviolence is the most

potent force available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and dignity.

### SCLC and Nonviolent Mass Direct Action

SCLC believes that the American dilemma in race relations can best and most quickly be resolved through the action of thousands of people, committed to the philosophy of nonviolence, who will physically identify themselves in a just and moral struggle. It is not enough to be intellectually dissatisfied with an evil system. The true nonviolent resister presents his physical body as an instrument to defeat the system. Through nonviolent mass direct action, the evil system is creatively dramatized in order that the conscience of the community may grapple with the rightness or wrongness of the issue at hand.

## Supplementary Materials

### Visual Aids

These photographs can be used to supplement this lesson plan. Pass them out to the class or incorporate them into your classroom presentation. More visual aids can be found at: [www. loc. gov/rr/print/](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/).

Figure 3: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in front of SCLC Headquarters in Atlanta.

Figure 1: Background Map: 1961 Freedom Rides [New York]: Associated Press News Feature. ca. 1962

[http://www. loc. gov/exhibits/treasures/images/s84. 6p1. jpg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/s84.6p1.jpg) [http://www. blackpast. org/files/blackpast\\_images/SCLC\\_King. jpg](http://www.blackpast.org/files/blackpast_images/SCLC_King.jpg)

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Figure 2: Tottle House ... Occupied during a Sit-in by some of America's most effective organizers. Atlanta, Georgia, ca. 1963

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/vc84.1b.jpg>

## **Civil Rights Timeline**

\*Adapted from <http://www.africanaonline.com/2010/08/civil-rights-timeline/>\*

1954 Brown vs. Board of Education: U. S. Supreme Court bans segregation in public schools.

1955 Bus boycott launched in Montgomery, Ala., after an African-American woman, Rosa Parks, is arrested December 1 for refusing to give up her seat to a white person.

1956 December 21 – After more than a year of boycotting the buses and a legal fight, the Montgomery buses desegregate.

1957 At previously all-white Central High in Little Rock, Ark., 1, 000 paratroopers are called by President Eisenhower to restore order and escort nine black students.

1960 The sit-in protest movement begins in February at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N. C. and spreads across the nation.

1961 Freedom rides begin from Washington, D. C: Groups of black and white people ride buses through the South to challenge segregation.

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1963 Police arrest King and other ministers demonstrating in Birmingham, Ala., then turn fire hoses and police dogs on the marchers.

Medgar Evers, NAACP leader, is murdered June 12 as he enters his home in Jackson, Miss.

Four girls killed Sept. 15 in bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

1964 July 2 – President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

1965 Malcolm X is murdered Feb. 21, 1965. Three men are convicted of his murder.

August 6. President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act, which King sought, authorized federal examiners to register qualified voters and suspended devices such as literacy tests that aimed to prevent African Americans from voting.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., unleashing violence in more than 100 cities.

In response to King's death, Seattle residents hurled firebombs, broke windows, and pelted motorists with rocks. Ten thousand people also marched to Seattle Center for a rally in his memory.

1992 The first racially based riots in years erupt in Los Angeles and other cities after a jury acquits L. A. police officers in the videotaped beating of Rodney King, an African American.