

A SEASON OF STRUGGLE

During the 1950s and 1960s, black people struggled to establish a firm hold on citizenship, and thousands acquired education under the GI bill. The voice of the urban ghetto, rhythm and blues, became rock and roll, the music of young America which provided material and style for Elvis Presley and many other white stars. Black artists such as the Supremes, the Four Tops, Stevie Wonder, and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, became teen idols packaged and produced by Motown Records. Johnny Mathis sang love songs that crossed racial boundaries, and Chubby Checker's 'Twist' had blacks and whites dancing the same dance to the same song.

In his novels and in his essays, James Baldwin dared whites to face the hypocrisy of racial inequality in a nation billing itself as leader of the free world. The expanding war in Vietnam spawned conflict at home as disproportionate numbers of black men were killed in Southeast Asia.

The modern civil rights movement typified this period of ferment and change, bringing a new generation into the struggle for racial justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. photographed during one of the great orations of modern times, the 'I Have a Dream' speech delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial following the March on Washington in August 1963. The march was attended by over 200,000 people, up to one-quarter of them white supporters, but there were



THE DECADE AFTER the end of World War II was both a time of hope and a time of discouragement for African Americans. Rapid social changes of the war years fed optimism about black advancement, but postwar racial reform came only piecemeal. Wartime labor demands gave black workers new employment opportunities that often disappeared when white soldiers returned. During the 1940s and early 1950s, more than 1.5 million African Americans migrated from Jim Crow conditions in the South to somewhat more subtle forms of racial discrimination and segregation outside the region. When the Supreme Court announced its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing school desegregation, Roy Wilkins, a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), remembered the ruling as 'one of life's sweetest days. We had won a second Emancipation Proclamation.' But the ruling only promised change – 'another fifteen years of tribulation was just beginning.'

Although the *Brown* decision repudiated the doctrine of 'separate but equal,' the nation was still far from the ideal of racial equality. Indeed, the ruling reinforced the notion that the 'Negro problem' was to be resolved by whites in positions of power. African Americans remained an insignificant political force. Ten percent of the nation's population was black, but there were no black governors or senators and only two black congressmen among the 435 members of the House of Representatives. Black southerners wishing to participate in electoral politics faced daunting obstacles: poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, and sometimes violent retaliation. On Christmas Eve 1951, Florida NAACP leader Harry T. Moore, founder of the Progressive Voters League, was killed along with his wife by a bomb at their home. In 1953, Mississippi voter-registration activist, George Lee, was shot. In neither case were the killers tried.

Throughout American history, black people had used their limited resources to struggle for advancement. Adeptly working within the dominant political system and improvising unconventional tactics outside it, they had resisted racial subordination and sometimes forced concessions from white political leaders. During the 1950s, however, the NAACP's strategy of working within the system through litigation and lobbying faced little competition from once-vibrant traditions of black political radicalism.

Black nationalist militancy had declined after the heyday of Marcus Garvey in the early 1920s, and street corner orators, isolated urban intellectuals, and a few small organizations represented what remained of the nationalist tradition. Malcolm X, the era's most effective black nationalist advocate, recalled that his own organization, the Nation of Islam, was almost unknown in 1954: 'Even



Above: In the nation's capital, Washington, DC., African-Americans had long constituted a majority, yet the situation of discrimination, poverty, and disadvantage in their community remained overlooked by the country's lawmakers.

among our own black people in the Harlem ghetto, you could have said "Muslim" to a thousand, and maybe one would not have asked you "What's that?"²

African-American leftist politics had also declined since its high point in the 1930s. Cold War repression of political dissent led to the persecution of leftist black leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, and Benjamin Davis. In 1950, the NAACP's board of directors voted to expel all communists in the organization. Only leftists who had broken or hidden their ties to the Communist Party could play significant roles in the major civil rights groups. Moreover, the effects of McCarthyism extended beyond the few black members of the Communist Party, inhibiting discussion of Marxian and socialist ideas that had long influenced African-American political thought.

Participants in the black protest movements increasingly drew their inspiration from con-

temporary movements rather than older radical traditions. Some saw anticolonial movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as models for the mass movement they hoped to build in the United States. The success of the Indian independence movement in 1947 strengthened the longstanding African-American interest in Mohandas Gandhi's strategy of nonviolent protest. Besides elements of leftist, nationalist, and Gandhian thought, the most significant influence on black activism of the 1950s was social-gospel Christianity, a tradition deeply rooted in African-American culture. These existing traditions would themselves be transformed as new radical ideas emerged from the series of sustained protest movements that spread throughout the South during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott Movement

The initiators of the modern freedom struggle were typically not national civil rights organizations and leaders but rather black activists of southern communities who launched grassroots campaigns against segregation and other forms of racial discrimination. There were many individual protests against the Jim Crow



system, but a spontaneous act of rebellion by a woman became the catalyst for a major movement – the Montgomery bus boycott.

News accounts later described Rosa Parks as a seamstress to emphasize the fact that an ordinary black woman had taken the first step, but she was also a civil rights activist, prepared for the role she played. Since the 1940s, Parks had been an active NAACP member, working closely with the head of Montgomery's chapter, E. D. Nixon. During the summer of 1955, she attended workshops at Tennessee's Highlander Folk School, a training center for labor and civil rights organizers.

Boarding a Montgomery city bus on the afternoon of 1 December 1955, Rosa Parks did not plan to launch a protest movement, but she had long resented the humiliation of being forced to sit at the back of the bus behind all the white passengers. Several times before, after she had paid her fare, white bus

Above: A 1950's sign for an African-American owned pharmacy in Columbus, Ohio. The name was almost certainly influenced by a black fraternal order to which the owner belonged.

drivers had forced her to reenter the bus through the rear door, sometimes driving away before she could reboard. After many years of enduring such treatment, she finally reached breaking point. When white passengers came aboard the full bus, the bus driver asked her to stand in order that a white man might sit. Parks, who was seated behind the last row of 'white' seats, refused to move. The bus driver threatened to have her arrested; Parks still refused to move. Police arrived, took her to the police station, and charged her with violating Alabama segregation laws.

Black residents of Montgomery mobilized quickly. Members of the Women's Political Council proposed that black people refuse to ride the buses for one day as a protest against discriminatory treatment. The boycott, which began on 5 December, was an overwhelming success, with almost no blacks riding the buses, and black residents decided it should continue. They formed the Montgomery Improvement Association and selected the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. as president.

King, only 26 years old, had served little more than a year as the pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. 'I did not start this boycott,' he later told protest participants. 'I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman.'³ King's oratorical abilities and dedication were apparent to those who knew him. The son and grandson of ministers who were also civil rights advocates, King's

Left: Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee acting in a 1959 production of Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun. Both were pioneers of black theater in the post-World War II period.

Right: James Baldwin took the literary explosion which had begun during the Harlem Renaissance to new heights. He infused his many works, such as Notes of A Native Son and Another Country, with political metaphor and social commentary.

strong commitment to social justice was evident even before he enrolled at Morehouse College at age 15. He and other students listened to inspirational lectures by Morehouse President, Benjamin E. Mays, a social-gospel proponent. While at Morehouse, King responded to his 'inescapable urge to serve society' by deciding to study for the ministry. Attending Crozer Theological Seminary, he traced his 'anticapitalistic feelings' to memories of Depression-era poverty.⁴ After receiving his doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University, King felt a responsibility to return to his native South, and became pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

King's address to the first mass meeting of the boycott movement combined militancy with moderation. He aroused the overflow audience at Holt Street Baptist Church by proclaiming the larger meaning of the boycott.



BAYARD RUSTIN AND THE 'MIRACLE IN MONTGOMERY'



The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-6, an unexpected mass protest in the deep South, eventually brought nonviolent direct action to the foreground of the civil rights struggle and forced civil rights leaders to reconsider their assumptions. The successful year-long boycott made their reliance on northern-directed legal challenges to segregation seem unnecessarily restrictive by demonstrating that southern blacks could be enlisted in their own liberation. What civil rights leaders observed in Montgomery – the economic and moral vulnerability of segregation, the inability of even moderate white segregationists to compromise, the resolute courage of many southern blacks, the emotional power of African-American religious belief, and the viability of nonviolent direct action in the deep South – helped reshape the philosophical and

organizational contours of the movement.

Initially, the only national leader who seemed to grasp the boycott's significance was Bayard Rustin, the executive director of the War Resisters' League, and even he did not comprehend its full meaning until he visited the city in February 1956. Rustin was a free-wheeling black intellectual who put little stock in organizational discipline or orthodoxy – Nat Hentoff once called him 'the Socrates of the Civil Rights movement.'¹ A native of West Chester, Pennsylvania, where his family, enthusiastic Quakers, eked out a living cooking and catering for local Quaker gentry, Bayard early on encountered the pacifist doctrines that anchored his lifelong commitment to nonviolence. A brilliant student, he studied at Cheyney State Teachers College and Wilberforce University before the Great



Above: These sorority and fraternity items from chapters at Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio, include two paddles: (top) an Omega Psi Phi Fraternity one made by Phillip Wright in 1952, and (middle) a Delta Sigma Theta Sorority one owned by co-ed Jane Lee.

'And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression,' he told listeners. Urging Montgomery blacks to remain nonviolent and true to their Christian values, he identified their cause with the traditional values of the nation. 'If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong! If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!'⁵

Black residents of Montgomery understood that their movement symbolized more than simply a desire for desegregation; it represented a new direction in African-American politics. Boycott leaders refused to back down even in the face of violent white retaliation. King's home was bombed, and Montgomery officials indicted him and other leaders on charges of violating a state law against boycotts.

Despite such intimidation, the protest movement continued for one year, until December 1956 when the Supreme Court ruled against the bus segregation policy. African Americans had shown that nonviolence could succeed if blacks remained united and their leaders refused to be intimidated. King and other politically active black ministers formed the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) to build upon the success in Montgomery. As president of the new organization, King strengthened his commitment to the use of Gandhian tactics, believing 'that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom.'⁶ He was

Depression forced him to drop out. In 1931, at age 21, he moved to Harlem, embarking on an odyssey of survival and discovery that took him down the backroads of radical politics and bohemian culture. For a time, he recruited for the Young Communist League, but in 1941, disillusioned with the Communist Party, he shifted his allegiance to A. Philip Randolph, the black labor leader and socialist. Randolph appointed Rustin youth organizer for his planned mass march on Washington and later helped him secure a field secretary position with the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), where he became acquainted with the writings and teachings of Gandhi. In 1942, after helping found the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), he became a friend and disciple of Krishnaiah Shridharani, author of *War Without Violence*. Rustin's commitment to nonviolent resistance and noncooperation with evil deepened, and in 1943 he rejected the traditional Quaker compromise of alternative service in an army hospital. Convicted of draft evasion, he spent the remainder of the war in a federal penitentiary.

Following his release, as race relations secretary of FOR, he organized a Free India Committee, directed Randolph's Committee Against Discrimination in the Armed Forces, and masterminded CORE's 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, precursor to the 1960s Freedom Rides. Rustin's integrated bus ride earned him a savage beating by North Carolina police and 22 days on a chain gang, but this only reinforced his belief in Gandhian activism. Virtually unknown to the general public, by the mid-1950s he was revered in the international subculture of Gandhian intellectuals.

Left: Bayard Rustin was one of the central organizational figures of the civil rights period and an architect of nonviolent protest.

Below: Black religious and community leaders in Montgomery, pictured following their release after having been arrested in February 1956.



Rustin had never been to Alabama, but early news reports about the bus boycott convinced him to seek a sponsor; 'fly to Montgomery with the idea of getting the bus boycott temporarily called off'; then organize 'a workshop or school for non-violence with a goal of 100 young Negro men who will then promote it not only in Montgomery but elsewhere in the South.'² Eventually his friend and mentor Randolph agreed to fund the trip.

Rustin arrived in Montgomery on 21 February – the day local white authorities indicted the leaders of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) for violating a state antiboycott statute. The MIA office was in chaos, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was away preaching at Fisk University in Nashville, but Rustin gained an audience with the Reverend Ralph Abernathy who warned him Montgomery was a dangerous place for an unarmed black activist. Later, he talked with local black labor leader and former NAACP official E. D. Nixon, legendary in black Montgomery for his courage, who became an instant ally when Rustin produced Randolph's letter of introduction. 'They can bomb us out and they can kill us,' Nixon vowed, 'but we are not going to give in.'³ When Nixon confessed he was not sure how the boycotters should respond to the mass indictments, Rustin promptly suggested the Gandhian option of voluntarily filling the jails. As Rustin laid out the rationale for nonviolent martyrdom, Nixon became intrigued, and the next morning he became the first boycott leader to turn himself in. As news of Nixon's arrest spread, there was a virtual stampede at the county courthouse, as scores of black leaders joined in the ritual of self-sacrifice.

When King returned from Nashville two days later, he wholeheartedly embraced the new strategy and, at Nixon's urging, invited Rustin to attend an MIA executive committee meeting. King's forthright leadership impressed Rustin, and when the committee voted to organize future mass meetings around five

prayers, including 'a prayer for those who oppose us,' he knew they had begun to master the art of moral warfare.⁴ Realizing he had underestimated his southern hosts, he quietly abandoned his plan for a suspension of the boycott.

What he saw that evening at the First Baptist Church confirmed his growing optimism and deepened his appreciation for black evangelicalism's capacity to blend emotional fervor with a spirit of forgiveness. When the 90 indicted leaders gathered around the pulpit to open this first mass meeting since the indictments, the sanctuary exploded with emotion. As Rustin related:

Overnight these leaders had become symbols of courage. Women held their babies to touch them, the people stood in ovation . . . [King] began: 'We are not struggling merely for the rights of Negroes, but for all the people of Montgomery black and white. We are determined to make America a better place for all people. Ours is a non-violent protest. We pray God that no man shall use arms.'⁵

Rustin spent the following Sunday with King, beginning with morning services at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where the young minister preached a moving sermon on the philosophy of nonviolence. 'We are concerned not merely to win justice in the buses,' King insisted, 'but rather to behave in a new and different way – to be non-violent so that we may remove injustice itself, both from society and from ourselves.'⁶ Later, the two men spent several hours discussing nonviolence, the struggle for civil rights, and other moral imperatives, and by the end of the evening their personal and philosophical bond was sealed. In the following years, they became close friends and collaborators, merging Gandhianism and African-American evangelism, and the protest traditions of North and South, into a coherent vision of the 'beloved community.' In August 1963, when King delivered his eloquent and influential speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial – informing the world of his dream of simple justice and true equality – the primary architect of this remarkable event was Bayard Rustin, the strange visitor to Montgomery on a fateful day in 1956.

Raymond Arsenault

Notes

¹Charles Moritz (ed.), *Current Biography Yearbook 1967*, New York: H.W. Wilson Company, p. 360.

²John M. Swomley, Jr., to Wilson Riles, 21 February 1956, FOR Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

³Bayard Rustin, 'Montgomery Diary,' *Liberation* 1 (April 1956): 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.



still reluctant to publicly challenge the more cautious litigation strategy of the NAACP, but in 1960 students at predominantly black colleges initiated their own militant challenges to the southern Jim Crow system.

Rise of the Student Movement in the 1960s

When the Supreme Court announced in 1955 that its earlier *Brown* decision would be enforced 'with all deliberate speed,' instead of immediately, southern white officials sought to postpone school integration. Southern blacks soon realized that they would have to prod the federal government into action, and black students were more willing to assume this role than were the established civil rights leaders. Even before the 1960s, black students had played crucial roles in the school desegregation efforts. The NAACP had succeeded in the courtroom, but implementing the *Brown* decision required courageous youngsters willing to endure hostility when they entered previously white schools. The nine black students who in 1958 had braved white mobs to attend Little Rock's Central High School became heroes to other young blacks. The students' determination forced a reluctant President Dwight D. Eisenhower to respond to Arkansas Governor Orvil Faubus's public challenge to federal authority by nationalizing the Arkansas National Guard and sending soldiers to protect the black students. The 'Little Rock Nine' joined Parks and King as heroic figures for future black activists. 'When they spoke, they said what I was thinking,' recalled Cleveland Sellers, then a teenager in Denmark, South Carolina. 'When they suffered, I suffered with them. And on those rare occasions when they managed to eke out a meager victory, I rejoiced too.'

Above: A group of African-American professionals at a family dinner in 1957. The Washingtons are evidence of a comfortable, black middle-class, but economic success, which still eluded most, did not compensate for political exclusion.

Sellers was still in high school on 1 February 1960 when he learned that four first-year students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College had initiated a new wave of protests. After debating what could be done about segregation at the lunch counter of Greensboro's Woolworth variety store, David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and Ezell Blair, Jr., decided to 'sit-in,' that is, remain seated at the lunch counter until they were served or arrested. When the surprised store manager decided not to arrest them, they returned to their campus to recruit more students. After several days of increasingly large protests, students at nearby colleges decided to try the sit-in tactic.

During the following weeks, thousands of black college and high-school students in many southern communities launched sit-ins. Many went to jail singing 'freedom songs,' adding their own words to church songs and popular rock-and-roll tunes. SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the NAACP attempted to provide guidance for student protesters after the initial sit-in in Greensboro, but student activists insisted on forming their own local groups under student leadership.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
Although sit-in protesters admired and respected leaders of the established civil rights groups, most wanted to maintain their independence from the existing civil rights organi-

HOME COMFORTS

This period room from the late-1940s or early-1950s recreates the living room of a home owned by a middle-class black family in the South; actually it is not dissimilar to a home in almost any part of the country which might also have contained furniture like this.

In this period racial restrictions limited the residential and social choices of African Americans, further complicating lives already circumscribed by poverty. But black people also





Above: Three African-American lawyers celebrate their success on 17 May 1954 in having public school segregation declared unconstitutional. From left to right, they are George E.C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James M. Nabrit.



Above: NAACP official Daisy Bates (center) poses with eight of the nine students who had become the first black students to be admitted to Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. All 10 were awarded the Spingarn Medal.

zations. James Lawson, expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School because of his involvement in the sit-ins, expressed the militant student mood when he questioned the cautious tactics of older leaders. He called upon Christians to overcome 'social evil' and warned against too much patience - 'All of Africa will be free before the American Negro attains first class citizenship.' Lawson had lived in India for several years, and for him Gandhian nonviolence was a philosophy of life. He wrote the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) idealistic statement of purpose:

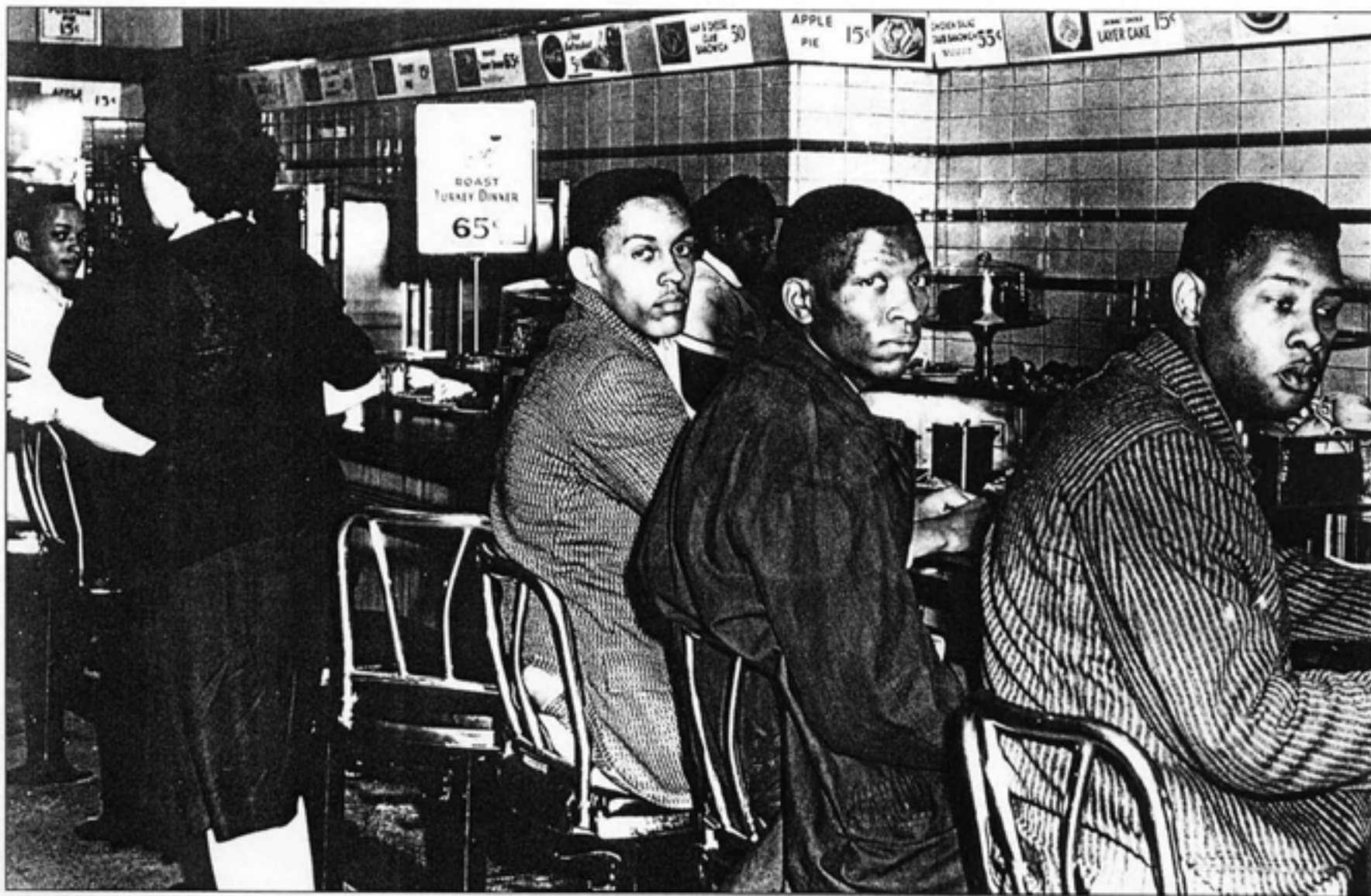
Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love . . . [Love] matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.⁸

Not all the student activists accepted Lawson's Gandhian precepts, but most agreed with his view that the sit-ins were the start of a 'nonviolent revolution.' Ella Baker was one of the few older civil rights leaders who sym-

Below: The Supreme Court's destruction of the legal foundations of segregation caused a white backlash in the South. White Citizens Councils were formed and Klan-inspired violence was once again an actuality rather than a possibility.



pathized with the students' militancy and desire for independence. Baker had a long career in the NAACP and was administrator of SCLC's Atlanta headquarters, but she questioned whether southern blacks could depend on a few charismatic leaders like King. As a woman working within male-dominated civil rights organizations, she met 'the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leaders turn out to have heavy feet of clay.' Baker invited activists in the sit-ins to attend an Easter-weekend gathering at Shaw University in North Carolina and encouraged them to form their own independent organization. She also urged students to practice 'group-centered' leadership.⁹ What the movement needed, she said, were 'people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people.' After the students voted to establish the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, she left SCLC and became one of SNCC's adult advisors. 'She was much older in terms of age,' Nashville student John Lewis explained, 'but in terms of ideas and philosophy and commitment she was one of the youngest persons in the movement.'¹⁰



Above: Black students engaged in the lunch counter sit-in demonstration at F.W. Woolworth's segregated facilities in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960. The protest was started by four students on 1 February and soon

spread throughout the South, initiating an era of student protest and activism. Thousands took part, and the success of the sit-ins encouraged the freedom rides which followed. The counter (below) is now preserved at the Smithsonian.

Student Activists and Kennedy

In October 1960, when Atlanta student protesters deftly maneuvered Martin Luther King, Jr. to join their demonstration at a downtown store, young activists unexpectedly became aware of their ability to create a crisis which compelled more powerful forces to respond. John F. Kennedy's sympathy call to King's wife, Coretta Scott King, together with his brother Robert Kennedy's intervention to gain King's release from jail, strengthened the Democratic candidate's black support. A heavy turnout of black voters in key states produced a close victory over Richard Nixon, but, fearing the loss of southern white support, Kennedy, as president, refused to give priority to civil rights. Black student activists, particularly those in SNCC, continued to seek new ways of pushing his administration to act on civil rights. As in the Atlanta sit-in during the presidential campaign, students could not always predict the consequences of their actions, but their spontaneous militancy often caught Kennedy and older civil rights leaders off guard.

Thus, during the spring and summer of 1961, student activists unexpectedly gained an



opportunity to force federal action when CORE sent a small group of 'freedom riders' to expose segregated transportation facilities in the southern states. After white mobs in Alabama forced the interracial CORE contingent to end their campaign, Nashville student activist Diane Nash immediately mobilized other students to continue the ride. Nash and other student freedom riders took buses into Jackson, Mississippi, where they were quickly arrested and charged with violating the state's segregation laws. After the first group went to jail, dozens of others followed, spending their summer vacations in Mississippi prisons. In prison they kept their spirits high, singing freedom songs and discussing how to continue their movement. Many decided to leave college to become full-time participants. Such activists took pride in their identity as militant freedom riders. Diane Nash saw herself as part of 'a group of people suddenly proud to be called "black".'¹¹

Demanding federal protection, the brash freedom riders forced Kennedy to balance his desire to support civil rights against his fear of upsetting southern whites. He and Attorney General Robert Kennedy made behind-the-scenes efforts to stop the rides. Kennedy administration representatives tried to convince the students to engage in voter-registration efforts instead of desegregation protests. Although some student activists recognized the need for such efforts, they were disap-



blacks to create a crisis rather than wait forever for change.

When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will . . . when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in the airtight cage of poverty . . . when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

He also warned that whites who refused to negotiate with nonviolent black leaders would soon have to deal with more militant leaders. Frustrated blacks, he argued, might turn to nationalism, 'a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.'¹⁴

The Birmingham protests grew during the spring of 1963. By early May, more than 3,000 blacks had been jailed. On 7 May, after thousands of school children marched into Birmingham's business district, Governor

Above: Civil rights protestors being hosed from the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, during the violent confrontations of 1963. The city, with its segregationist police commissioner, was widely seen as a stronghold of bigotry.

Below: President Kennedy opened the doors of the White House for a meeting with the leaders of the March on Washington. In a message to Congress on the Emancipation Centennial Kennedy had noted blacks' continuing disadvantage.



George Wallace sent state patrolmen to reinforce Conner's police forces, who used water hoses to disperse the children. A few days later, when bombs exploded at the home of King's brother and at SCLC's local office, angry demonstrators threw rocks at police. Finally, white officials indicated their readiness to make concessions, and the Birmingham protests subsided.

By this time, the Birmingham protests had sparked many other local protest movements. An estimated 930 public protest demonstrations in more than 100 cities would take place during the year. Unlike the lunch-counter protests, some of the larger protests during the spring and summer of 1963 involved poor blacks who had little sympathy for nonviolence. Each of the national civil rights organizations tried to offer guidance for the mass marches and demonstrations, culminating in the Birmingham protests of 1963, but none of them could completely control these protests. King and other nonviolent leaders feared that they might lose control of the black struggle to black nationalist leaders, such as Malcolm X.

March on Washington

That summer, veteran civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph proposed a march on Washington to give blacks an opportunity to express their discontent in a nonviolent way. When President Kennedy initially objected to the idea of a march, Randolph told the President that 'Negroes were already in the streets. It is very likely impossible to get them off.' He asked Kennedy:

If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them

to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about nonviolence?¹⁵

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, held on 28 August 1963, was the largest single demonstration of the Civil Rights Movement. Over 200,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear singers, such as Mahalia Jackson, and leaders of the major civil rights groups. In his speech, SNCC Chairperson John Lewis charged that American politics was 'dominated by politicians who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation.'¹⁶ Lewis's speech was the most controversial delivered, but King's address was the one most remembered. Calling upon America to live up to its ideals, King recounted the difficulties the black freedom struggle had faced. But he added, 'I still have a dream . . . that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'¹⁷

The black-white coalition that supported

Below: The artifacts here symbolize the confrontational but non-violent direct action campaign undertaken by the Freedom Movement against the forces of segregation, a campaign which reached its symbolic peak with the March on Washington on 28 August 1963. The items range from pins, posters and pamphlets, placards and leaflets, magazines and segregation signs, to the official album with speeches by the 10 civil rights leaders heard at the Lincoln Memorial, a commemorative publication called The Day They Marched, and most poignant of all, the 28 June 1963 Life magazine cover showing Medgar Evers' widow consoling her son at Evers' funeral.

civil rights reform came apart during the years after the March on Washington. Civil rights leaders recognized that they were caught in the middle between increasingly angry blacks, frustrated by the slow pace of change, and white political leaders resisting rapid social change. SNCC workers bitterly criticized the Kennedy administration for failing to protect southern blacks from racist violence. Even moderate leaders reacted angrily a few weeks after the march when a bomb planted in a Birmingham church killed four black children. An angry group of black spokespersons confronted President Kennedy at the White House, and King warned that 'the Negro community is about to reach a breaking point.' He cautioned, 'If something isn't done to give the Negro a new sense of hope and a sense of protection, there is a danger we will face the worst race riot we have ever seen in this country.' Taken aback, Kennedy urged the delegation to forestall violence while he sought passage of a major new civil rights bill. 'Tell the Negro communities that this is a very hard price which they have to pay to get this job done.'¹⁸

Kennedy's assassination a few months later reflected the nation's violent mood. Timid federal responses to racist violence had created a climate in which political violence could flourish. King noted that, 'in the life of Negro civil-rights leaders, the whine of the bullet from ambush, the roar of the bomb have all too often broken the night's silence.'¹⁹ Malcolm X called the assassination a case of the 'chickens coming home to roost.'

To the surprise of some activists, the new president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, not known as a strong advocate of civil rights, pushed through Congress one of the most important reforms of the period, the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964. The most dramatic result of the





Above: Pins from the demonstrations and marches of the 1963-66 period. "We Share the Dream" refers to the races and religions - Christians, Jews, and Moslems - which united for the cause.

Below: Tens of thousands of demonstrators, black and white, assemble behind the multiracial leadership for the march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial.

Act was the elimination of 'whites only' public facilities, but it also brought about major changes in American life, both in the South and the North. Title VII of the Act was originally designed to deal with discrimination against African Americans, but women and nonblack minorities were affected by provisions outlawing racial bias in employment and education.

Mississippi Voting Rights Movement

Despite passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, substantial racial barriers remained in the South, particularly in the rural areas of Mississippi and Alabama where blacks made up most of the population. In such areas, widespread poverty among blacks made desegregation of public facilities less important as a racial goal than political and economic gains. Because racial control was at stake, white resistance to civil rights reforms was particularly intense in these states. The black belt region of the South had a notorious history of lynchings and other acts of racial violence, and Mississippi was known as the stronghold of southern segregation. In 1963 the United States Commission on Civil Rights reported there was 'danger of a complete breakdown of law and order' in the state. 'Citizens of the United States have been shot, set upon by vicious dogs, beaten and otherwise terrorized because they sought to vote,' the Commission observed.²⁰



Robert Moses, a SNCC worker who directed the voting rights effort of Mississippi's Council of Federal Organizations (COFO), implemented Ella Baker's strategy of developing leadership at the 'grassroots' level. Convincing black Mississippians to become active in voting rights efforts was often difficult, given the imminent threat of violence. In September 1961, a white state representative had killed Herbert Lee, a black resident who supported voter registration, and an all-white jury quickly absolved the assailant. The following fall, federal troops had to be sent to the University of Mississippi when a large mob of whites rioted in violent protest against the admission of a black student, James Meredith. In June 1963 a white supremacist murdered NAACP leader Medgar Evers at his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

Civil rights workers responded by showing black residents that it was possible to resist white domination. When the sheriff of Greenwood, Mississippi, asked SNCC worker Sam Block to pack his clothes and leave town, Block replied, 'Well, sheriff, if you don't want to see me here, I think the best thing for you to do is pack your clothes and leave, get out of town, cause I'm here to stay, I came here to do a job and this is my intention, I'm going to do this job.'²¹ Block and other civil rights organizers sought to reverse the effects of generations of racial oppression. For blacks who had become accustomed to their status as second-



Above: World War II veteran and NAACP campaigner Medgar Evers was shot dead in 1963 by Byron DeLa Beckwith, who was eventually convicted of the murder in 1994. Evers' widow, Myrlie, was elected to the NAACP's chair in 1995.

class citizens, joining the freedom struggle involved a dramatic transformation in their lives.

Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, had spent her life on a cotton plantation before she heard about the voting rights movement. Her parents, like many blacks in the state, had been sharecroppers. 'All of us worked in the fields, of course, but we never did get anything out of sharecropping,' she remembered. Having dropped out of elementary school to work, Hamer was 44 years old when she attended a voting rights meeting and listened to Moses and other SNCC workers. When the civil rights workers asked who would go to the voter-registration office, Hamer raised her hand. 'I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared,' she explained. 'The only thing they could do to me was kill me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.'²²

Soon afterwards, Hamer and 17 other blacks were arrested for trying to register. When she was released on bail, the plantation owner told her to withdraw her registration application. She left the plantation instead,

Below: This poster of a Mississippi policeman was issued by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The governor's attempt to prevent James H. Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi led to two deaths in campus riots.



and, during the next year, she could not find employment. In June 1963 she was beaten in the Winona, Mississippi, jail. Rather than turning back, however, she joined SNCC and became one of its oldest organizers.

Mississippi Summer Project of 1964

By the end of 1963, Moses, Hamer, and other Mississippi civil rights workers had concluded that blacks in the state were unlikely to make gains without federal protection. Hoping that the presence of whites would bring national attention to restrain racist violence, they developed a plan to recruit a large number of white volunteers to work in Mississippi. Although some black COFO organizers believed this would hamper their long-term effort to develop self-reliant local black leadership, most recognized the need for outside support.

The 1964 Mississippi Summer Project attracted the attention of the nation. In June, even as the volunteers were preparing to go to the state, they learned that three civil rights workers had not returned from a trip to investigate the burning of a black church near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The disappearance of the two white and one black civil rights workers led to a massive investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which had been reluctant to offer protection to civil rights workers. In August, following a massive search involving military personnel, the bodies of James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman were found buried in an earthen dam. The killers were never tried on state murder charges, but several were later convicted on federal charges of interfering with the civil rights of the victims.

Despite the killings, the Summer Project continued. It had a profound impact on the lives of many participants who worked closely with local black residents. For many white volunteers, the summer provided their first opportunity to work on an equal basis with blacks. Among the most successful aspects of the project were 'freedom schools,' which developed new techniques to improve the academic and political skills of black children and some adults. For the first time, many students learned African-American history.

The Summer Project ended with an attempt to challenge the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention held that August in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Civil rights workers organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), open to all races and generally conforming to the national Party's regulations. 'We decided to form our own party because the whites wouldn't even let us register,' explained Fannie Lou Hamer. The MFDP delegates made clear their support for President Lyndon Johnson, while many in the regular delegation hinted that they would support Republican Barry Goldwater because of Johnson's civil rights policies. The MFDP presented evidence that black voters suffered discrimination and racist violence. Speaking on

MOTOWN



Music based in the African-American musical tradition has often captured an interracial audience in American history. In fact, African music provided part of the foundation of many identifiable American music forms: planters had gathered to listen to their slaves make music in the yard between the slave quarters and plantation house, Harlem 'slumming' was popular with whites during the 1920s and 1930s, and black musicians informed American musical tastes in the jazz era of the World War II years. Yet, the emergence of rock and roll signaled the dawn of a new musical era. A black male rhythm and blues group called the Chords recorded 'Sh-Boom' in 1954, and within a few weeks of its release the song moved into the Top 10 on the pop chart, the first rhythm and blues song to do so. Its success among whites as well as blacks inspired a recording phenomenon characteristic of the period - the 'white cover.' A white group from Canada named the Crew-Cuts brought out the cover, and their version of 'Sh-Boom' quickly

Above: This picture was taken in 1966 after the name change of Motown's dominant all-female group to Diana Ross and the Supremes. Florence Ballard left and Cindy Birdsong (right) joined Mary Wilson (center) and Diana Ross.

outsold the original and rose to number five on the Top 10 chart. Record companies reaped large financial rewards for cover records, and many white singers made their reputations approximating the music of black artists. The hit 'Shake Rattle and Roll' by Bill Haley and the Comets had been recorded earlier by Joe Turner; Gale Storm covered Smiley Lewis's 'I Hear You Knocking'; Elvis Presley, a young country music singer strongly influenced by black gospel music, covered Big Mama Thornton's 'Hound Dog'; and Pat Boone's singing, television, and motion picture career began with covers of such popular hits as Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' and Fats Domino's 'Ain't That a Shame.' The financial returns for most of these white singers far outstripped the

profits of the arguably more talented original black artists. Even successful black singers found most of their profits controlled by white agents and white-owned record companies.

'My mama told me, you better shop around': in 1960 these words and the falsetto voice of William (Smokey) Robinson backed by the Miracles were familiar to young people all over America. 'Shop Around' was the first major hit produced by Motown Records, a company created the previous year by Detroit record-shop owner Berry Gordy. The distinctive sound of Motown's recordings captured the American market and changed much of the world's musical tastes. Part rhythm and blues, part gospel, part big band jazz and part pop, the combination was all Detroit, and its driving beat made it difficult for listeners to remain passive. It was crossover music, bridging the gap between the pop music of the white middle class in the 1950s and the rhythm and blues which animated black Americans. It was just the right music for a nation in the midst of the modern civil rights movement which aimed to integrate American society. In the early 1960s converging musical tastes brought blacks and whites together in common, or at least similar, dance movements, and Motown provided the background music for the emerging youth culture.

In 1961 the Marvelettes, one of the earliest of the 1960s girl groups, marked the increasing popularity of female vocalists with their recording of 'Please Mr. Postman.' As soloists and in groups, female song-stylists topped the pop charts. The next year, Mary Wells reflected the assertive female social style with 'You Beat Me to the Punch.' Martha Reeves and the Vandellas warmed the crowd with 'Heat Wave,' and in 1964 Diana Ross and the Supremes, the most popular female group of the era, brought on the main event with 'Where Did Our Love Go' and 'Baby Love.'

Smokey Robinson and the Miracles continued to excite their fans with hit after hit. They were quickly joined by the Contours who, in 1962, musically screamed out the age's burning teenage question, 'Do You Love Me, Now That I Can Dance?' Little Stevie Wonder sang and played his harmonica on his recording of 'Fingertips,' and by mid-decade the Four Tops, the Temptations, and a talented group of young brothers called the Jackson Five, featuring their remarkable youngest member Michael, filled the upper ranks of Motown.

The advent of Motown Records marked a significant change in this aspect of the American music business. For the first time in history, blacks controlled the profits of some of the world's most famous, highest-grossing black music stars. Motown carried the American listening public from the cover imitations and 'Crew-Cut' sounds of the 1950s to commercialized black music and symbolized a new age in race relations. African Americans demanded more freedom, autonomy, and



Above: Marvin Gaye was one of the triumvirate of Motown's great male solo artists, with Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder. The Temptations' lilting balladry was a contrast in style and made them one of the label's headline groups.

Below: Diana Ross with the precocious teenage talents, the Jackson Five, whom she brought to Motown after seeing them in a show in their hometown of Gary, Indiana.

control. Motown helped give voice to growing racial tensions in American society and bespoke a new confidence among African Americans. Singer James Brown, the 'Godfather of Soul' and 'Soul Brother Number One,' shouted the message in 1968, 'Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud.' Aretha Franklin, 'The Queen of Soul,' made the signification plain - black people in America were demanding a long-denied 'Respect.'

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton





Above: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Bunche join crowds of marchers in Selma, Alabama, en route to the state capital of Montgomery in 1965. The violence of local police shocked the nation and spurred President Johnson into action.

Below: President Lyndon B. Johnson, the first southern-based president since Andrew Johnson, presents one of the pens used to sign the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to James Farmer, Director of the Congress of Racial Equality.



behalf of the MFDP before the Democratic Party's Credentials Committee, Hamer attracted national television coverage when she gave an emotional account of being fired from her job and later being beaten in jail. 'All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America,' she testified.²³

President Johnson feared losing southern white support and refused to support the MFDP. The new party's support weakened as liberal leaders such as Hubert Humphrey, many black politicians, and even Martin Luther King himself, felt pressures from Johnson. Many former supporters urged MFDP delegates to accept a compromise that would give them two 'at-large' seats along with a promise to ban discrimination at the next convention in 1968. Most of the MFDP delegates opposed such a compromise, insisting that they had risked their lives, and that politicians should therefore be willing to take political risks. Hamer scoffed, 'We didn't come all this way for no two seats.'²⁴ The delegation voted to reject the compromise.

The MFDP challenge in 1964 marked the beginning of a major transformation of African-American politics. Disappointment with the failure of Democratic leaders to back the MFDP challenge created a sense of disillusionment among civil rights activists. Many agreed with Fannie Lou Hamer's conclusion that 'we learned the hard way that even though we had all the law and all the righteousness on our side - that white man is not going to give up his power to us.'²⁵ Black organizers involved in the Summer Project were disturbed that the presence of college-educated white volunteers had sometimes undermined the confidence of less-educated black leaders. After the tumultuous summer, some civil rights workers even began to question whether the ideal of racial integration was achievable.

Alabama Voting Rights Movement in 1965

While SNCC workers were moving in new directions, Martin Luther King's SCLC also began a new voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama. As in other places, King hoped that mass rallies would focus national attention on the issue. Early in March, SNCC and SCLC organizers planned a march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. Because of a previous commitment, however, King was not present when several protesters left Selma on the afternoon of Sunday 7 March. At Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma, police on horseback, using tear gas and clubs, attacked the marchers when they refused to turn back. Television and newspaper pictures of policemen attacking nonviolent protesters shocked the nation and angered black activists. SNCC chairperson, John Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull during the melee, afterwards remarked, 'I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam . . . and can't send

troops to Selma, Alabama.²⁶

News of the attack at Pettus Bridge – activists referred to it as ‘Bloody Sunday’ – brought hundreds of civil rights sympathizers to Selma. White officials obtained a court order against further marches and young SNCC activists challenged King to defy the court order, but SCLC leaders were reluctant to do anything that would lessen public support for the voting rights cause. On 10 March, King turned back a second march to Pettus Bridge when marchers reached a police barricade. That evening a group of Selma whites killed James Reeb, a northern white minister who had joined the demonstrations. In contrast to the killing a few weeks before of a black demonstrator, Jimmy Lee Jackson, Reeb’s death led to a national outcry against racial violence in Selma. President Johnson sent flowers to his widow.

After several postponements, civil rights advocates finally gained court permission to proceed with the march. The Selma to Montgomery march was the culmination of the stage of the African-American freedom struggle that led to the passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, but it was also the last major racial protest movement to receive substantial white support. When the marchers arrived at the capital in

Montgomery, King delivered one of his most memorable speeches. ‘Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding.’

We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That will be the day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

Despite setbacks, King insisted that the struggle would succeed, because ‘however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.’²⁷

‘We shall overcome,’ President Johnson announced in a televised address presenting new voting rights proposals that subsequently became law; but change was still piecemeal. Antiracial violence continued in the South, and the material conditions of life for most blacks throughout the nation remained unchanged. Blacks could enter restaurants, but many lacked the money to pay for a meal. Blacks could vote, but they still had not gained the power to improve their lives through the political system.

Rise of Militant Group Consciousness

As civil rights activists began to question their own long-term goals, many began to respond to influences from outside their own movement. As a member of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X had been a harsh critic of King’s nonviolent approach and integrationist goals,

but by 1964 he began to question Elijah Muhammad’s racial-separatist doctrine and lack of involvement in the protest movement. Although remaining critical of King’s approach, he sought ties with ‘grassroots’ leaders, such as Fannie Lou Hamer. Malcolm decided to leave the Nation of Islam to form his own group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

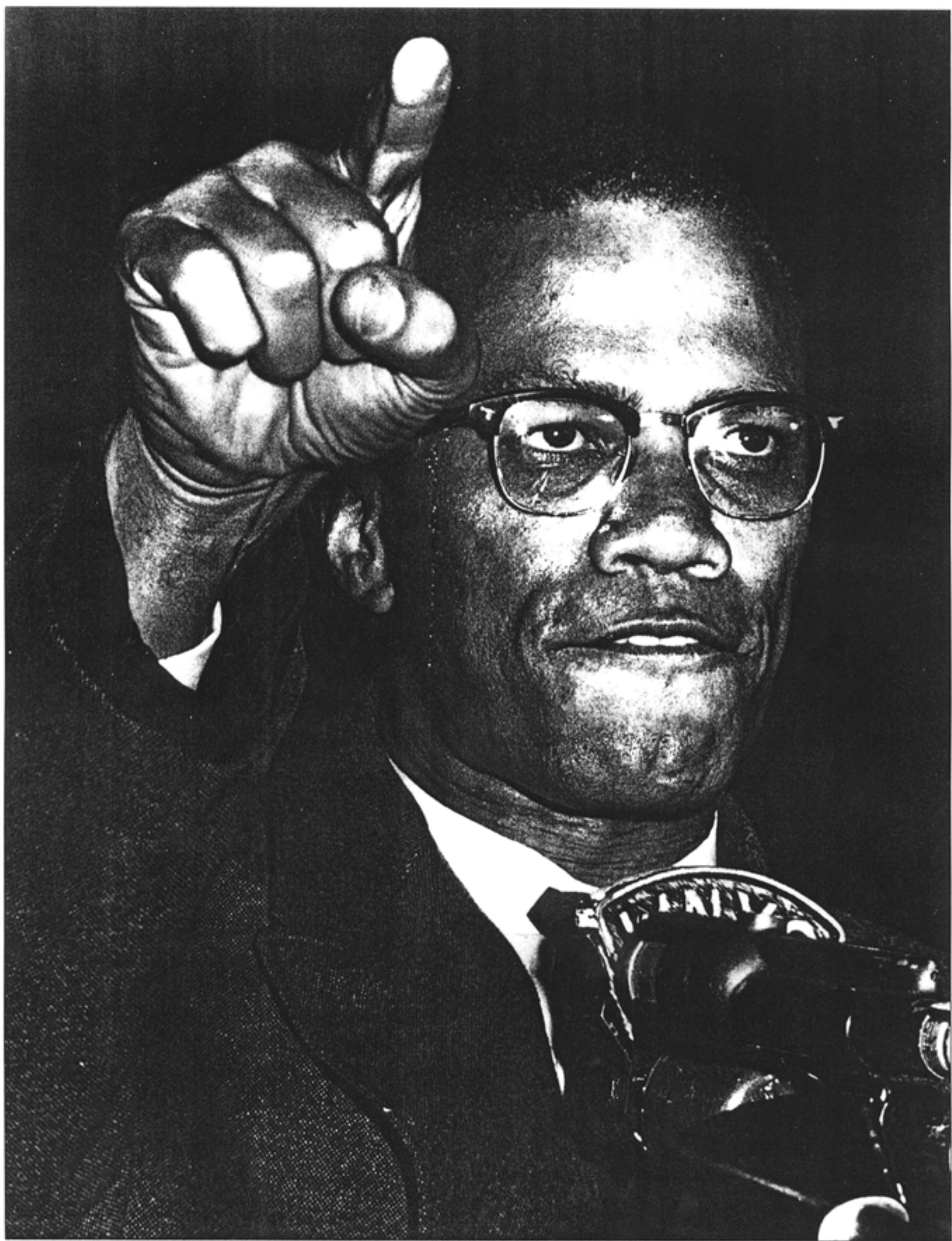
During the last year of his life, Malcolm’s ideas converged with those of many civil rights veterans. Despite their differences over tactics, Malcolm increasingly recognized that he and King were part of the same struggle. Malcolm’s assassination in February 1965 cut short his efforts to reach out to militant activists in the civil rights movement.

Malcolm’s ideas expressed the anger of northern blacks who had not benefited from civil rights reforms. This anger burst into public awareness in August 1965, when the arrest of a black man in Los Angeles led to several days of violence. More than 30 blacks were killed by police as they suppressed the black rebellion. Many other large cities later experienced similar outbreaks of violence. During the summer of 1967, for example, 23 people were killed in a rebellion in Newark, New Jersey, and 43 were killed in Detroit.

SNCC reflected this growing racial militancy when it selected Stokely Carmichael as the new chair to replace John Lewis, a veteran of the sit-ins and freedom rides, and who was now considered insufficiently militant. After helping black residents of Lowndes County, Alabama, establish the all-black Lowndes

Below: *The scene in Peachtree, Alabama, in 1966 as African Americans voted in large numbers for the first time in 100 years. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts became the first black elected to the U.S. Senate since Reconstruction.*





Right: A collection of radical pins from the late 1960s supporting Black Power, the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X.

County Freedom Organization, better known as the Black Panther Party, Carmichael popularized a phrase that symbolized SNCC's disillusionment with white liberal allies. First used during a voting rights march through Mississippi, 'Black Power' quickly became popular in black communities. The 'Black Power' slogan symbolized a broader cultural transformation. African Americans began to express their enhanced sense of pride through art and literature as well as through political action. Playwright Leroy Jones, who changed his name to Amiri Baraka, became a leader of the Black Arts movement which sought to create positive images for blacks. Popular black singers such as James Brown and Aretha Franklin expressed the spirit of 'Soul.' Sports figures such as Muhammad Ali also identified with Black Power sentiments. During the playing of the national anthem at the 1968 Olympics, two African-American athletes raised clenched fists in a 'Black Power salute' on the victory stand after their event. At numerous colleges and universities, black students demanded Black Studies programs emphasizing the contributions of African and African-American people.

Although Martin Luther King believed the Black Power movement would decrease white support for the black struggle, he acknowledged that black people needed a positive sense of identity in order to advance. 'Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery,' he said. 'No Lincolnian emancipation proclamation or Johnsonian civil rights bill can totally bring this kind of freedom.' King urged blacks to say to themselves and the world, 'I am somebody. I am a person. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history.'²⁸

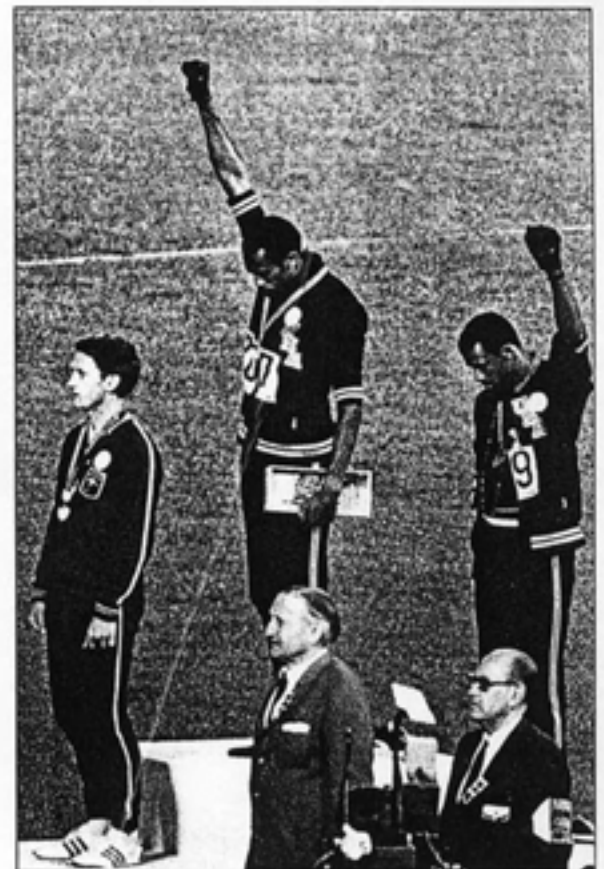
To encourage northern urban blacks to recognize the potential effectiveness of militant nonviolent tactics, King launched a campaign in Chicago. Like many other veterans of the civil rights movement, however, King discovered that the problems of northern blacks were even more difficult to solve than the problem of southern segregation. Eliminating segregation did not require the large expenditures that were required to eliminate poverty. Northern liberals who supported the southern civil rights movement often were less willing to support black advancement efforts in their own cities.

By the end of 1967, King had decided that a Poor People's Campaign was needed to prod the nation into action. His plan was to bring to

Left: Malcolm X was a seminal figure in the 1960s, who came to represent the voice of the underclass. A militant separatist in the Nation of Islam, by 1965 he had moved away from them, although remaining a symbol of black anger.



Above: Boxer Cassius Clay was a role model for many blacks and his actions had significance. He converted to Islam in 1964, changing his name to Muhammad Ali, and was stripped of his title in 1967 for refusing to be drafted for Vietnam.



Above: American medal-winning athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos made this defiant black-gloved, Black Power salute on the podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in order to protest against racism in the United States.

Washington thousands of poor people — blacks, poor whites, Native Americans, Mexican Americans and other Hispanics — to engage in protests designed to pressure President Johnson into increasing funding for his 'War on Poverty.' After King criticized Johnson for diverting funds from antipoverty efforts to the war in Vietnam, he was caught between Black Power advocates who thought

he was too cautious and Johnson supporters who saw him as too militant. King lost much of his popularity as he pushed ahead with plans for the Poor People's Campaign.

In early April 1968, King came to Memphis, Tennessee, to offer his support for garbage workers who were striking for higher wages and better working conditions. He was depressed about the opposition he faced from



Left: Feelings ran high in the black urban areas during the late 1960s. Moderates were accused of being Uncle Toms and the militant Black Panther movement came under attack from the FBI. Panther leader Bobby Seale was imprisoned for inciting riots at the 1968 Democratic convention.

former allies and disturbed that some young blacks in Memphis had turned to violence to express their grievances. Although many newspapers urged an end to the campaign, King met with young gang leaders in order to convince them to return to nonviolent tactics. On 3 April, he addressed a mass meeting in Memphis and confessed that he was uncertain about what lay ahead. 'We've got some difficult days ahead,' he told the audience. 'But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.' King hinted that he might not be there, but that black people would 'get to the promised land.'²⁹

The following evening, an assassin shot King as he stood on the balcony of his Memphis hotel room. King's death led to a new wave of urban racial violence. Thousands of blacks took to the streets to protest the loss of the most well-known advocate of non-violence. Even after King's death, the Poor People's Campaign continued for several months under the leadership of Ralph Abernathy, but the campaign had little success in changing national policies. Eliminating poverty would remain one of the unachieved goals of the black freedom struggle.

The late 1960s were a period of black militancy and white repression. White politicians, such as Alabama Governor George Wallace, encouraged a 'white backlash' against black protests and civil rights gains. The African-American freedom struggle had become a national rather than a southern movement, and white opposition was as strong in some northern cities as it had been in the South. Many northern whites strongly opposed efforts to end de facto segregation in northern cities.

Black frustrations continued to grow because civil rights reforms had increased the expectations of many blacks that their lives would change for the better. Indeed, anti-discrimination legislation made new economic and educational opportunities available to some segments of the black community. For the first time, a few large cities elected black mayors. But for poor blacks conditions remained the same, or even got worse.

The Black Panther Party

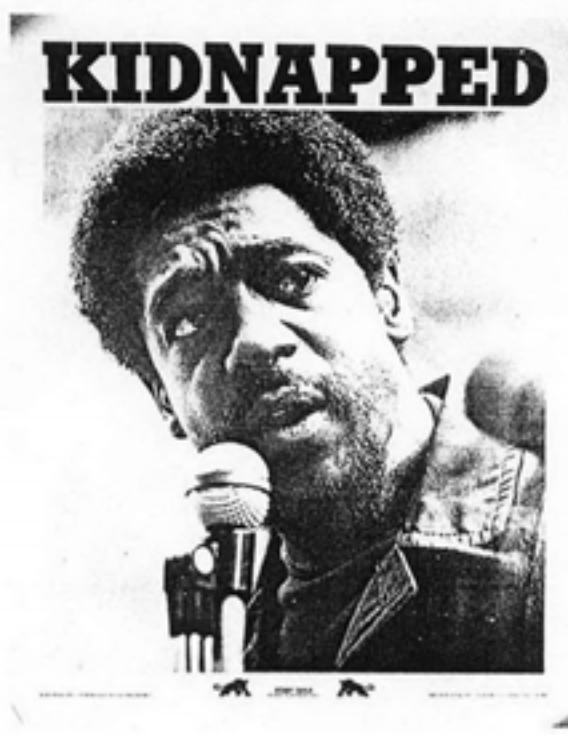
The Black Panther Party was one of the new organizations that reflected the increased militancy and frustration of urban blacks. Inspired by the example of SNCC in the South, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Oakland-based party in 1966. Attracting mainly young people, the Panthers quickly became the most widely known black militant political organization of the late 1960s. The Panthers urged blacks to 'pick up the gun' to

defend themselves. Wearing the group's distinctive black leather jackets, Panthers openly carried weapons and stood their ground when police questioned their right to bear arms. The party's ideas were drawn from a variety of sources, including Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and the examples of revolutionary movements in Asia and Africa. The political goals of the Panthers were summarized in the last item of their 10-point Platform and Program: 'We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.'³⁰

The Black Panther Party attracted considerable support from young blacks, but police repression severely weakened the group. In August 1967, the FBI identified the Panthers as a major target of its counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO). COINTELPRO was designed to prevent 'a coalition of militant Black nationalist groups' and the emergence of a 'Black messiah' 'who might unify and electrify these violence-prone elements.'³¹ When Black Panther leaders recruited Carmichael to join their ranks, the FBI used anonymous letters and phone calls to disrupt plans for an alliance between the Panthers and SNCC.

Assaults by local police also contributed to the decline of black militancy. On 28 October 1967, Oakland police arrested Huey Newton on murder charges, after a clash with Oakland police that resulted in the death of one policeman and the wounding of another. In September 1968, Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to 2-15 years in prison. The following

Below: Declared a national day of mourning, the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. was attended by more than 200,000 people. His coffin was drawn through the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, on a farm wagon pulled by two mules.





Above: News of King's assassination led to outbreaks of sporadic violence in black urban areas. Here, passersby in Harlem stroll through the debris left after looting had subsided.

December, two Chicago leaders of the party, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were killed in a police raid. By the end of the decade, more than 20 Panthers had been killed and many other Panthers were facing long prison terms. By the early 1970s, the Black Panther Party was no longer an effective organization at the national level.

The Legacy of the Modern Black Struggle
The repression of the Panthers signaled the

end of an era of mass protest and militancy. Many of the institutions created during the era remained in existence after the 1970s, but they functioned mainly to consolidate and protect earlier gains rather than to bring about a major social transformation such as that which King envisioned at the end of his life. The number of blacks elected to political office increased dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s, but, without the leverage of a mass

Below: Boatswain's Mate Bobby J. McGrath from St. Louis, Missouri, was serving his country in Vietnam while trouble of a different nature raged at home in 1969. McGrath is manning a machine gun during a U.S. Navy river patrol.



BLACK VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

Although evenly represented overall during the Vietnam War, African Americans were present in higher proportions in front line units, and their rate of reenlistment was higher too. For black soldiers, the civil rights struggle at home and movements for independence in Africa complicated the racial aspects of the war in Vietnam.

**STAFF SERGEANT
DON F. BROWNE,
WASHINGTON, DC:**

'When I heard that Martin Luther King was assassinated, my first inclination was to run out and punch the first white guy I saw. I was very hurt. All I wanted to do was go home. I even wrote Lyndon Johnson a letter. I said that I didn't understand how I could be trying to protect foreigners in their country with the possibility of losing my life where in my own country people who are my hero, like Martin Luther King, can't even walk the streets in a safe manner. I didn't get an answer from the President, but I got an answer from the White House. It was a wonderful letter, wonderful in terms of the way it looked. It wanted to assure me that the President was doing everything in his power to bring about racial equality, especially in the armed forces. A typical bureaucratic answer.'¹

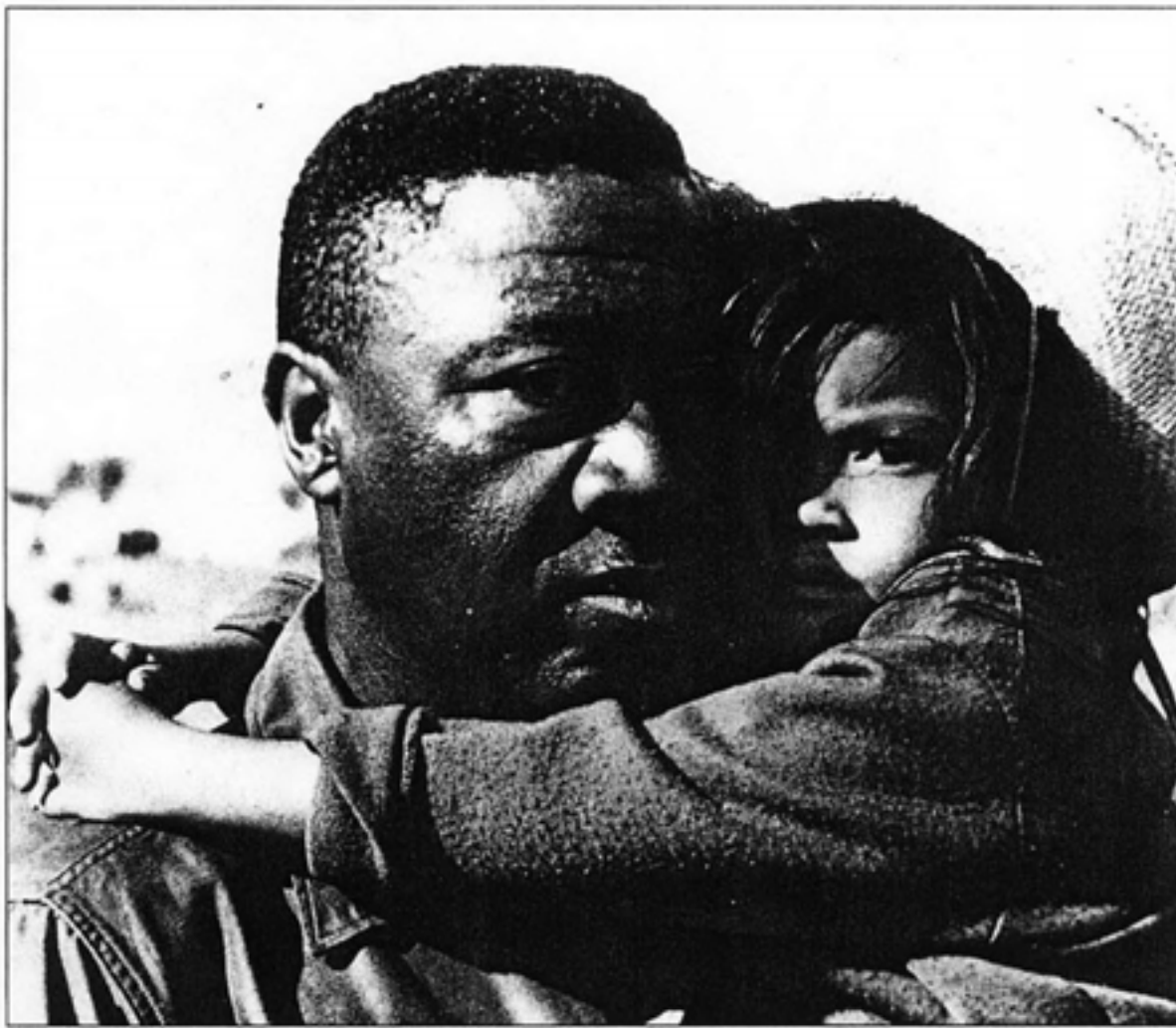
**PRIVATE FIRST CLASS
REGINALD 'MALIK' EDWARDS,
PHOENIX, LOUISIANA:**

'There was only two black guys in my platoon in boot camp. So I hung with the Mexicans, too, because in them days we never hang with white people. You didn't have white friends. White people was the aliens to me. This is '63. You don't have integration in the South. You expected them to treat you bad. But somehow in the Marine Corps you hoping all that's gonna change. Of course, I found out this was not true, because the Marine Corps was the last service to integrate . . . I remember a survey they did in the mess hall where we had to say how we felt about the war. The thing was, get out of Vietnam or fight. What we were hearing was Vietnamese was killing Americans. I felt that if people were killing Americans, we should fight them. As a black person, there wasn't no problem fightin' the enemy. I knew Americans were prejudiced, were racist and all that, but, basically, I believed in America 'cause I was an American.'²

Notes

¹Quoted in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, New York: Random House, 1984, p. 172.

²Quoted in Terry, *Bloods*, pp. 6-8.



Above: An African-American sergeant in Vietnam in 1967 can see only a small, refugee child needing help; back home in the United States there were still many of his fellow citizens prepared to treat with contempt anybody with a skin color different to their own.

Below: A perfect symbol of token integration: African-American student Vivian Malone graduating from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1965, a black face in a sea of white faces. Black graduates of the 1960s owed much to the student activists of the late 1950s, although much remained to be done.



protest movement, they could not resist the overall trend toward conservatism. The black middle class also increased considerably in size, as black college students took advantage of new employment opportunities, but conditions of life for many urban blacks deteriorated as a result of declining public school systems and urban infrastructures.

The militant racial consciousness of the 1960s did not thrive in the conservative political climate that followed, but significant aspects of the black power consciousness endured. The vigorous political debates about African-American identity and destiny led to an explosion of cultural activity during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the struggle between self-described revolutionary nationalists and cultural nationalists, the latter were generally less vulnerable to repression. Cultural transformation of black communities was difficult given the influence of American mass culture but was far more feasible than transforming the nation as a whole. The cultural flowering was evident in newly organized or revived drama and dance companies, informal poetry workshops, Black Studies departments at colleges and universities, increased awareness of African culture, and in a generalized pride among blacks in their racial heritage. Los-Angeles-based cultural nationalist, Maulana Karenga, initiated an annual black celebration called Kwanzaa that grew in popularity after the 1960s.

The racial consciousness movement left a complex and ambiguous legacy, however, because concern with racial identity divided blacks as well as unified them. Leadership competition often led to inense unresolvable arguments about the nature of blackness and about the ultimate destiny of African Americans. At a birthday celebration for Ella Baker held in 1978, Bob Moses remarked that SNCC and the black struggle as a whole became stymied by the question King had addressed in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* 'The problem with that question is "We," who we are,' he explained. 'Because, if you really stop to think about it, that's where we left off.'³² Debates over racial identity and destiny were important, but they also reflected the growing divisions within black communities, between those seeking better treatment as American citizens and those attempting to build black-controlled cultural, social, political, and economic institutions. These two directions in African-American politics were each outgrowths of the modern black freedom struggle and were not necessarily in conflict with one another. Nevertheless, many advocates of narrowly conceived integrationist or separationist strategies acted as if the two positions represented total rather than partial insights.

The modern African-American freedom struggle had revived dormant leftist and black nationalist traditions, and their revival during the late 1960s initially seemed to presage a more radical thrust. But the sectarianism that

Right: In 1968, Lou Smith and Robert Hall founded *Sbindana Toys* ('sbindana' being *Sarabili* for competitor) in order to create realistic dolls for the black community. From left to right, the dolls are: 'Tamu' ('sweet'), a talking doll with 18 sayings; 'Kim Jeans 'n Things' (center) who came with three assorted tie-dye denim outfits; and 'Malaika' ('angel'), a doll with an 'Afro' hairstyle.

Right, below: Black Power salutes being given by a classroom of children at a Black Panther-run 'Liberation School'.

characterized these traditions had a destructive impact on black movements that had been ideologically eclectic. Some constructive elements of the black nationalist tradition – particularly its emphasis on building black-controlled institutions and maintaining African-American culture – were reflected in the emergent ideas of the modern struggle, but so too were a predominance of authoritarian male leaders and a pessimistic outlook for racial advancement within the United States. The machismo, apocalyptic rhetoric, and ideological competition of the Black Power campaign blinded many subsequent black activists to the importance of nonviolent tactics in any sustained mass struggle, to the reality of worldwide interracial interdependence, and to the necessity of deriving political ideas from shared experience.

The modern African-American freedom struggle resulted in major changes in American life. Many groups gained new opportunities as a result of civil rights reforms. The United States also became more democratic as previously excluded groups were included in the mainstream of society. Although, at the end of the 1960s, the United States remained divided by various kinds of social conflicts, the struggles forced Americans to confront the fundamental question of whether it was possible to create a multicultural democratic nation.



Notes

¹Roy Wilkins, with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1982, 1994, p. 216.

²Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1965, p. 217.

³Quoted in *Montgomery Advertiser*, 31 January 1956.

⁴King quotations from Clayborne Carson et al. (eds), *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. I, *Called to Serve, January, 1929–June, 1951*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 144, 363.

⁵Clayborne Carson et al. (eds), *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, New York: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 49–50.

⁶Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958, p. 85.

⁷Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973, p. 17.

⁸Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 23–4.

⁹Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, p. 121.

¹⁰Carson, *In Struggle*, pp. 20, 24.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, pp. 292–3, 297.

¹⁵Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965, pp. 884–5.

¹⁶Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, pp. 163–4.

¹⁷Washington, *Testament of Hope*, p. 219.

¹⁸Transcript of tape of 19 September 1963, meeting from The John F. Kennedy Library, Item No: 111.7, Title: 'Civil Rights Birmingham.'

¹⁹Statement re. Assassination of John F. Kennedy, 22 November 1963.

²⁰Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, p. 179.

²¹Quoted in James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, New York: Macmillan, 1972, p. 283.

²²Fannie Lou Hamer, 'To Praise Our Bridges,' reprinted in Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, p. 177.

²³Quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 125.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁵Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, p. 179.

²⁶Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 159.

²⁷Washington, *Testament of Hope*, p. 230.

²⁸King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, pp. 43–4.

²⁹Washington, *Testament of Hope*, p. 286.

³⁰The full document is in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Black Panthers Speak*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1995.

³¹See relevant documents in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent*, Boston: South End Press, 1990, pp. 92–3, 108–11.

³²Address at 75th Birthday Celebration for Ella Baker, 9 December 1978, New York City.