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Analyzing the Success of the Civil Rights Movement: The Significance of Nonviolent Protests, International Influences, the Media, and Pre-existing Organizations.

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the success of the mid-20th century civil rights movement in the United States. The civil rights movement was a seminal event in American history and resulted in several legislative victories, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. After a brief overview of segregation and Jim Crow laws in the southern U.S., I will argue that the success of the civil rights movement can be attributed to a combination of factors. One of these factors was the effective strategy of nonviolent protests, in which the American public witnessed the contrasting actions of peaceful protestors and violent local authorities. In addition, political opportunities also played a role in the movement's success, as during the Cold War the U.S. federal government became increasingly concerned about their international image. Other reasons for the movement's success include an increased access to television among the American public, and pre-existing black institutions and organizations. The civil rights movement left an important legacy and ensuing social movements have utilized similar framing techniques and strategies.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” (King 1963). This famous quote from Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech sums up the main goals of the civil rights movement: removing segregation in the United States and establishing equal rights for African Americans. Following a brief historical discussion of segregation and Jim Crow laws in the United States, this essay will explore the success of the 1955-1968 civil rights movement. It will argue that the civil rights movement succeeded because of its ability to use pre-existing organizations as well as new opportunities such as the Cold War and television to gain the attention of the target audience, that being the United States federal government and white Americans. Additionally, the civil rights movement was able to succeed because of its diverse repertoire, and most importantly its use of nonviolent protest. The essay will also explain that the civil rights movement was an initiator movement of the 1960’s protest cycle and has influenced many of the social movements that followed it.

For African Americans living in the Southern United states during the first half of the 20th century, “legal segregation was a fact of life” (Anderson and Halcoussis 1996, 1). Segregation was legal in many US states after the Plessy vs. Ferguson case of 1896 (2). In this case, “the court ruled

that state segregation laws were permissible provided that the state required “separate but equal” facilities, so called Jim Crow laws began to be enacted in substantial numbers” (2). As of 1930, “twenty-nine states prohibited or restricted the practice of interracial marriage.” In addition to this, 22 states enforced segregation laws “in either public schools, private schools, or both.” And finally, “fourteen states carried laws on their books which required segregation by race in transportation serving the public.” These Jim Crow laws were the official policy of these Southern states, and “served as a constant reminder to Blacks that they were, politically, second-class citizens” (Anderson and Halcoussis 1996, 4). Understandably, this created much frustration and hurt among Black people in the United States. This was one of the main reasons that protestors joined the civil rights movement. Their grievance was that in many of the states they were not considered equal.

Life under segregation was very difficult for African Americans, and they often lived in fear for their lives. Many witnessed the outright murder of family members and friends. Bermazohn explains that, “until the mid-1960s, the US government allowed racist terror to exist in the South”. A major part of this terror was the brutality of lynching; the outright murder of Black people by mobs of racist whites. Bermazohn in their work defines lynching as, “mob murder in defiance of law and established judicial procedures” and explains that, “after Reconstruction it became commonplace in the South.” Between 1882 and 1968 there were a reported 3,445 lynch murders of Black Americans. Bermazohn argues that the only way this could have happened was if the local authorities were complicit. Additionally, the justice system seemed to be broken. “All-white-male juries condemned black-on-white crimes while acquitting white-on-black crimes” (Bermazohn 2000, 34). Everyday life for African Americans living in the Southern United States during the Jim Crow period was fraught with danger.

When the local authorities cannot be relied upon to provide protection, the logical thing to do is to take the necessary precautions to protect oneself. Due to the danger that Black people faced every day, they realized that the only way in which they could defend themselves was through self-reliance. James Forman (1997) explains that “there was hardly a Black home in the South without its shotgun or rifle” (424). This tradition of self-defence among African Americans was an important part of the nonviolent protests of the civil rights movement. The protests were primarily to advocate for civil rights through peaceful demonstration, but if necessary, the protestors were more than capable of defending themselves. Often, Black people in the Southern United States grew up learning how to use a rifle and were very skilled marksmen (Bermazohn 2000, 38). They learned these skills out of necessity, because of the multigenerational abuse and racism experienced by their communities.

Violence against African Americans began to escalate following the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case. This case placed the Constitution squarely on the side of desegregation and Black political rights. According to Bermazohn (2000), this led many Southern political leaders to state that they were intent on defying the Supreme Court decision, even going as far as calling on the local authorities to continue to implement segregation. Furthermore, following the Supreme Court’s ruling, Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett stated: “Constitution or no Constitution, we will keep segregation in Mississippi” (38).

This led to white racists in Mississippi undertaking more emboldened actions. One event that served to unite African Americans was the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in August 1955. Nimitz (2016) explains that the murder of Emmet Till “was a seminal event” (4). Till was brutally murdered by two white men in Mississippi, for simply saying “bye, baby” to a white woman. His body was later found submerged in a river. Despite the overwhelming evidence against these men, an all-white Mississippi jury acquitted the murderers. This event, “sent shock, fury, and fear through black communities” and was one of the reasons that the civil rights movement began later that year (Bermazohn 2000, 38).

The widespread frustrations felt by Black people throughout the United States made people ready to take action, and events such as the Emmett Till murder enhanced the anger and desire for justice. To Berhmazohn (2000), one event, in particular, served as a catalyst for kickstarting the civil rights movement. This event took place on October 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama when an African American woman named Rosa Parks refused to give her seat on a bus to a white man. As a result, police jailed her for “violating state segregation laws” (42). This event led to a boycotting of the public transit system by African Americans in Montgomery (Glennon 1991, 94). The Montgomery Bus Protest has been viewed by many as the beginning of the civil rights movement and the beginning of the end of segregation in the United States. Glennon (1991) explains that the boycott, “signaled the start of the modern civil rights movement” (59). For a full year, Black citizens in Montgomery found other ways to get to work and travel around the city. Eventually, with the help of the legal system, the busses in Montgomery were successfully integrated, and thus the first phase of the civil rights movement achieved its goal. This event was a “major shot of adrenaline” (61) to the movement, and civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. learned an enormous amount from this early victory.

One of the most important things that civil rights leaders learned from the Montgomery bus boycott was how important to the success of the movement the strategy of nonviolence could be. As a young man King “assumed violence was needed to win equal rights” (Bermazohn 2000, 41). King’s strategy changed because of the respect and admiration King had for Mahatma Gandhi. In 1959, King took a month-long trip to India to deepen “his understanding of poverty, imperialism, mass leadership, affirmative action, and Cold War non-alignment” (Jackson 2009, 41). Gandhi was a hero to King, who “admired and idealized Gandhi’s charismatic power.” King was inspired by how Gandhi started his protest against British tax on Indian salt with just eighty people, but eventually gathered a “nonviolent army of millions who followed his march north to the sea” (Jackson 2009, 101). King realized that when a group participates in a nonviolent protest, violence against the protestors by the authorities is viewed by the target audience as an illegitimate use of force. He believed that a dedication to nonviolent protest strategies would be “placing the freedom movement on the high moral ground”, which would be “necessary to gain support outside the black community” (Bermazohn 2000, 42). It is important to note the target audience of the civil rights movement, that being white Americans and the United States federal government. In order to gain their support, “King knew that gaining the moral upper hand was a practical necessity” (32). Without a doubt, King’s admiration of Gandhi influenced the civil rights

movement's use of nonviolent protest as a strategy to protest segregation laws in the Southern United States.

Nonviolent protest is most effective when protestors face violence from their opponents (Luders 2005, 129). King and other civil rights leaders chose the locations of the protests based on this notion. They realized that if their movements were to have success, it needed to be highly publicized. To gain this publicity, organizers specifically chose locations where they knew there would be an inevitable strong pro-segregation pushback. Early in the civil rights movement the leaders had attempted to protest in Albany, Georgia. However, Luders (2005) explains that, "Georgia had an exceptionally weak segregationist movement" (115). Because of the lack of a strong countermovement, the protests in Albany were largely unsuccessful. Indeed, "without the provocative clashes between police and demonstrators, supportive federal intervention was simply unnecessary" (114). Due to the lack of a violent counter-protest the federal government chose not to intervene.

The movement eventually developed from this lack of success, and civil rights leaders realized that to have success they would have to choose areas where there would be fierce counter-protests. This led to them choosing to protest in both the Alabaman cities of Birmingham in 1963, and Selma in 1964. In both these cities the likelihood of counter protest was highly probable. Luders (2005) explains that, King chose Selma, Alabama, as a place to protest, "because of the high likelihood of anti-rights violence in defence of egregious inequalities" (119). Sure enough, both Birmingham and Selma were cities where the civil rights movement saw incredible success. This was due to the extent of the racism and strong pro-segregation movement in these areas. The Selma movement is remembered for, "Bloody Sunday" (122). On March 7, 1964, "over 500 civil rights marchers departed the city across the Edmund Pettus Bridge toward the state capital to demonstrate for voting rights." Waiting for them was the racist Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark and a group of pro-segregation movement members who met the protestors "using tear gas and wielding batons", resulting in dozens being injured. On Bloody Sunday, the American public witnessed "the raw brutality of Jim Crow." This event contributed to the success of the movement, and "pushed forward the Voting Rights Act of 1965." Luders (2005) explains that, "only eight days later, in a joint session of Congress, President Johnson condemned the violence in Selma and declared his resolute support for voting rights legislation" (121). The violence in Selma was exactly what King and other Civil Rights leaders had hoped for; the American public had finally witnessed the brutality against non-violent protestors and the federal government reacted by passing civil rights legislation.

When discussing nonviolence as a factor, it is important to note that nonviolence in the civil rights movement was not simply passive nonviolence. Rather, the civil rights movement took aggressive tactics to achieve their goals. Some scholars even argue that while nonviolence was undoubtedly an important component of the movement, equally important was the threat of potential violence. Nimitz (2016) argues that the success of the civil rights movement was "the mass peaceful protests *and* the potential threat of violence inherent in them" (2). As discussed earlier in this essay, many African Americans in the United States were well armed because they couldn't rely on law enforcement to protect them. King himself was not afraid to exert his second

amendment right to self defense. It is well documented that King's home was full of weapons for self-defence purposes (4). Nimitz asserts that "African American violence and/or the threat thereof... go a long way in explaining the government's response" (2). Other Black leaders at the time such as Malcolm X were not afraid to turn to violence, either. Nimitz explains that Malcolm X's ideology revolved around the idea that, "if Blacks could not win freedom through the electoral process, they had the right to resort to armed struggle" (14). When combined with King's strategy of nonviolence, the rhetoric of leaders willing to bear arms to gain civil rights placed increasing pressure on the federal government to end segregation in the United States.

Using political process theory is useful in understanding the success of the civil rights movement. John David Skrentny (1988) explains that the political process theory is particularly powerful because of the "model's emphasis on "political opportunities" in explaining movement development" (238). Skrentny argues that this includes "incorporation of geopolitical variables" (238). At the time, the largest geopolitical event taking place was the Cold War. The Cold War was a major political opportunity that the civil rights movement capitalized on. The eyes of the world were on the two superpowers that emerged in the post-World War II period: The United States and the Soviet Union. The United States portrayed itself as the epitome of a capitalistic nation, and supposedly inherent freedoms came with this capitalism. Yet, in the Southern United States there was an official policy of segregation and acts of violence against African Americans were protected by law enforcement. There is no doubt that systemic racism was a reality in the American south during the Cold War. Douglas McAdam (1999) argues that, "American racism suddenly took on international significance as an effective propaganda weapon of the Communists" (238). This was recognized by the US federal government, and political officials in the White House began to push for civil rights. Bermazohn (2000) explains that, "as the United States emerged as a global power, it became harder for the federal government to maintain its "hands off" policy towards the south" (38). The Cold War was a major factor in the success of the civil rights movement.

During the period of the civil rights movement, "there was concern in the federal government for world opinion" (Skrentny 1988, 241). Skrentny states that "in 1963, the Soviet Union broadcast 1,420 anti-American commentaries about U.S. rights violations in the wake of a racial crisis and rioting in Birmingham" (245). It was not just the Soviet Union that was criticizing the racism of the United States. Fidel Castro, the Prime Minister of Cuba and a well-known ally of the Soviet Union was a leader who was quick to criticize the lack of rights for Black people in America. With respect to authorities in the United States, Castro criticized, "how they use ferocious dogs against Negro citizens as a symbol of what representative democracy stands for" (Nimitz 2016, 11). Criticism from political and ideological enemies of the United States was very worrisome for the American government, and no doubt influenced the success of the civil rights movement.

Another important opportunity seized by the civil rights movement was the role of the media and the importance of television coverage. The number of households that owned a television set was just 3 percent in 1949, but that number rose to an incredible "90 per cent by 1963" (Verney 2003, 51). The increased number of people who were able to witness civil rights protests play out on television had a significant impact. Civil rights leaders were able to broadcast

the goals of the movement to millions of people over television. Verney explains that, “the scale of Black civil rights protests made them impossible for the television networks to ignore in their coverage of real events” (53). In addition to the large scale of the protests, civil rights leaders were able to portray themselves as educated and personable, in contrast with the rude nature of local law enforcement (55). The media coverage often demonstrated the extent to which Southern police chiefs “appeared loutish and uneducated before the television cameras, contrasted unfavorably with the intelligent, reasonable impression created by Martin Luther King and other Civil Rights leaders” (53). The nonviolent nature of the protests was also important, as “the more violence the Blacks endured, the more the press covered the boycott” (Bermazohn 2000, 43). Dewey M. Clayton (2018) explains that at the Birmingham protest, “scenes of police attack dogs biting student marchers and firefighters turning high-pressure water hoses on children galvanized much of white Americans to support the cause of African American Freedom” (452). The combination of modern technology and the Cold War served to provide political opportunities for the advancement of the civil rights cause.

In addition to the Cold War and television being political opportunities capitalized on by the civil rights movement, another opportunity was the willing participation of pre-established Black organizations in the United States, most notably Black churches. Scholars such as Paul Almeida (2019) explain that, “collective action most likely emerges out of preestablished institutions and organizations” (48). To this end, resource mobilization theory offers incredible explanatory power in understanding the success of the civil rights movement, and the ability of the movement to mobilize. Staggenborg (2011) asserts that, “the Black church provided critical support to the emerging civil rights movement, including leadership, meeting places, and numerous cultural resources.” When there are already well-established social groups and organizations, the ability for mobilization becomes much easier and there is more opportunity to spread the word and for the social movement to gain new members. Indeed, “pre-existing organizational and cultural bases, together with large-scale changes, were key factors in the origins of the movement” (Staggenborg 2011, 56). Another organization of central importance during the civil rights movement was the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples (NAACP), which had been formed in 1909 and was firmly established in many communities before the movement began (Bermazohn 2000, 32). As a result, the NAACP was an important part of the mobilization process. Ironically, as a result of segregation, there were already many all-Black institutions and organizations, and because of this the movement quickly mobilized and gained traction.

The civil rights movement has left an important legacy. It was a defining moment in American history, having impacted many other social movements. Staggenborg (2011) explains that, “the civil rights movement left a legacy of organizational structures, tactical models, and collective action frames” (56). One impact was the development of a master frame of “civil rights” which kickstarted a protest cycle that took place during the 1960s (53). The civil rights movement was the initiator movement of the 1960s, and many other social movements were encouraged by the successes brought about by the civil rights movement and used similar strategies. Later social movements such as the women’s movement and the environmental movement utilized the frames, tactics, and organizations developed by the civil rights movement.

It can be difficult to determine whether or not a social movement has achieved its goals. However, regarding the civil rights movement, there is no doubt that it was a successful social movement and has shaped American history. The movement achieved its social goal of making the American public aware of the injustices and danger faced by African Americans on a daily basis. Additionally, because of the civil rights movements two important pieces of legislation were passed by the federal government. In 1964, American president Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act, which “outlawed the systemic, far reaching, and in some cases, legally sanctioned discrimination that had prevailed for decades across a number of areas of American society” (Aiken 2013, 383). President Johnson also passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which, “prohibited jurisdictions from implementing barriers to voting and provided for greater enforcement of the right to vote guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments” (Rogowski and Schuitt 2017, 513). The passing of both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act are indicative of the success of the civil rights movement.

This essay has aimed to contextualize the civil rights movement and has argued that the success of the movement was largely owed to its effective use of nonviolent protest and the ability of its leaders to utilize pre-existing organizations to achieve its aims. The civil rights movement effectively used opportunities such as the Cold War and the rise of mass media to get its message to the federal government and white Americans. Ultimately, the civil rights movement was a success because of the U.S. federal government’s passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which legally ended segregation in the Southern United States. However, the civil rights movement ended only 52 years ago, and the horrific memories of segregation and Jim Crow laws still loom large. Today, there is still much division throughout the world. The message of unity sought for by people like Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement is a message that is still relevant today.

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