

Different Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement

by Anthony J. Badger

Jimmy and Roslyn Carter with Martin Luther King Sr., Andrew Young, Coretta Scott King, and other civil rights leaders at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, 1979. (Jimmy Carter Library and Museum)



In 1984 Jimmy Carter reflected on growing up in the segregated South. He recalled that as a young child, he, like many white children, had had an African American child as his closest friend. The two children spent all their play time together. One day they traveled on the train from Plains to Americus, Georgia. Carter went into one compartment; his young friend went into another. What struck Carter in retrospect was not that the facilities had been segregated, but that, at the time, he had not thought anything about it. He noted how unthinking and pervasive the white southern commitment to segregation had been.

Next Carter recalled the night when the heavyweight boxer Joe Louis attempted to avenge his one defeat at the hands of the German Max Schmeling, who had been feted by the Nazis. The Carters were the leading white family in Plains, but they did not have electricity. However, they could hook up a radio and run it on the battery of one of their tractors. The night of the fight, African Americans in Plains came to the Carters' yard to listen to the fight. As the Brown Bomber destroyed Schmeling, Carter observed the quiet, dignified satisfaction of the black crowd. It was his first intimation that behind the veil of African American deference and apparent satisfaction with segregation lay a racial pride and a determination to privately refrain from acknowledging the legitimacy of white supremacy.

Carter's father was the most powerful white man in Plains. The most important figure in the black community was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Carter's mother, Miss Lillian, maintained a close interest in the education of the bishop's son, who would visit her whenever he returned to Plains from college in the North. The son would go to the front door of the Carter house and Miss Lillian would meet him in the front room. Mr. Carter was appalled that a black man should go to the front, rather than back, door of the Carter house and that a black man should be entertained by his wife. But he knew better than to tangle with Miss Lillian. Whenever the bishop's son called, Mr. Carter would leave.

As the two most prominent figures in their communities, Mr. Carter and the bishop had to do business together. How were they to meet? Mr. Carter could not conceive of the African American bishop coming to the front door of his house, the bishop could not conceive of going to the back door like a servant. A compromise was reached. The bishop would drive

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up to the Carter house and stay in his car, and Mr. Carter would come to the edge of the yard. With Mr. Carter standing and the bishop sitting, honor was satisfied. Such was the elaborate etiquette of race relations that underpinned segregation and which African Americans who were determined could push at the edges but not ignore.

The South that Jimmy Carter grew up in was the poorest region in the country. Here African Americans were rigidly segregated and economically and politically powerless. When Carter was elected president in 1976, he was the representative of a South that was a booming biracial democracy. He failed to win a majority of white votes in the South, but he won the southern states because of overwhelming black support. As Andrew Young observed, the hands that had picked the cotton picked the president. How had the region been transformed? How had the physical restrictions of segregation been eliminated? How had African Americans gained the right to vote? How had a powerless black minority wrested change from a powerful and entrenched white majority?

For Jimmy Carter, the answer was straightforward. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement had changed the South and made Carter's own election possible. This classic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement from Montgomery to Selma, from the bus boycott of 1955–1956 to the voting rights campaign of 1965, along with the subsequent judicial and legislative successes is a familiar one. Yet over the past twenty years, historians have challenged that triumphant narrative.

Some historians argue that the economic modernization of the South made racial change inevitable. Segregation was expensive and anachronistic, and southern businessmen saw the economic damage caused by traditional patterns of race relations and by the ensuing negative national publicity that deterred outside investment. Some have even argued that the white backlash provoked by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 actually slowed the pace of racial change. It halted the "incipient amelioration of race relations" promoted by new metropolitan elites and moderates in the South. It destroyed moderate southern white politicians and unleashed a violent white response that would, however, eventually bring about federal intervention in the 1960s.

For historians of the Civil Rights Movement, it has become a truism that the protest movement did not suddenly start on December 1, 1955, when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. There had been resistance by African Americans at the peak of segregation, and seemingly non-political actions in the workplace and in public spaces expanded black autonomy in ways that whites simply did not see or understand. There were institutional and organizational activities as well, including NAACP local activity and Popular Front labor organizing in the 1930s, and NAACP legal campaigns and voter registration drives in the 1940s. Historians see the Civil Rights Movement in the 1940s as different from the movement in the 1950s and 1960s; it was a class-based

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movement, powered by leftist and biracial trade unions and focused more on economic rights than legalistic civil rights. This era of the movement, however, was brought to a halt by McCarthyism. The Civil Rights Movement that emerged after 1955 was a church-based, cross-class movement that stressed legalistic civil rights. Only belatedly, after 1965, did King and other leaders acknowledge the failure of the movement to address the persistent realities of poverty and economic discrimination.

Historians have also criticized the emphasis on King and other individual civil rights leaders. Too much attention has been given, they argue, to ministers and national leaders at the expense of local people. Case studies of the movement have also focused on the indispensable contribution of women. It was woman professionals at Alabama State College who activated the Montgomery bus boycott and organized its finances. It was the domestic servants who made up the majority of bus passengers and dominated the audiences at the mass meetings during the boycott. It was local women, not men, who were the powerful community leaders in southwest Georgia and Mississippi. It was women who pioneered the grassroots-democracy approach of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the citizenship education and literacy programs of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In addition, historians have noted that it was students—for whom Martin Luther King and the church were only two of many sources of inspiration—who revived a slumbering protest movement in 1960 and provided the radical cutting edge of the movement from the sit-ins to the 1967 and 1968 Black Power demonstrations on southern campuses.

Finally, recent historians have raised questions about the centrality of the nonviolent protest exemplified by King. African Americans in the rural South had always had a tradition of armed self-defense. World War II inspired black soldiers not to turn the other cheek on their return to the South. The threat of black violence accompanied all the classic nonviolent campaigns. It was black violence, or the threat of it, that finally prompted the federal government to propose civil rights legislation. It was the threat of violent black reprisals that successfully faced down the revived Ku Klux Klan in the South between 1964 and 1967, and that enabled the gains of the 1964 and 1965 civil rights acts to be implemented at the local level.

It is important to challenge the rather sanitized and safe image of a Civil Rights Movement that is celebrated in the annual national holiday to mark Dr. King's birthday. The success of the remarkable social movement of the 1950s and 1960s was not simply the story of heroic nonviolent black protest and a responsive white liberal judiciary and federal government. Nevertheless, the necessary revisions by historians should not be allowed to obscure the radical achievement of King and the Civil Rights Movement.

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In fact, revisionist historians overstate their case. The collapse of segregation in the South cannot be explained solely as the inevitable result of economic modernization. Until the 1960s, southern businessmen believed that they could maintain the traditional patterns of race relations in the South and also secure dynamic economic growth. It was only in the early 1960s, with the growth of the Civil Rights Movement, that they finally realized that racial tension was deterring outside investment and that racial change would inevitably be imposed on the region. Then they took the first steps to mediate the transition away from segregation in their communities. Nor did the *Brown* decision halt any significant level of gradual racial change in the South. Before *Brown*, changes had occurred only at the edges of segregation, while year after year, the core had remained intact. Moreover, *Brown* was not the first impetus to violent white backlash. Even before the decision came down in 1954, such backlashes had already broken out in response to black attempts to register to vote and to move into white suburbs.

It is true that McCarthyism helped destroy the left-led unions of the 1940s as well as groups like the Civil Rights Congress and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. But these groups were only part of the Civil Rights Movement of that era. The patient campaign for voter registration in the southern cities and the NAACP's legal challenge to segregation continued. It was when these campaigns failed to bring satisfactory results in the 1950s that African Americans in the South turned to nonviolent direct-action protest in Montgomery in 1955 and in Greensboro in 1960.

It is also true that grassroots activism was crucial in activating civil rights campaigns, in sustaining momentum for the movement at critical periods, and, during the late 1960s, in translating legal gains into visible jobs, real school desegregation, police protection, improved public services, and local political power. But grassroots activism was not enough. African Americans needed the access to national political influence and media attention that Martin Luther King Jr. brought. It was King's campaigns at Birmingham and Selma that led to the legislative victories of 1964 and 1965 that destroyed segregation. Despite the heroism of black and white activists during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, by the end of that summer, fewer than 1,000 African American voters and less than 6 percent of voting-age blacks in the state had been registered. However, within three years of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, over 60 percent of Mississippi's blacks were registered to vote.

Armed self-defense was a resilient and powerful tradition among black southerners. In both the segregated South and the South of the civil rights era, it could make violent white extremists pause. But black violence was also counterproductive: It aroused paranoid white fears and more often than not led to white repression rather than to concessions. It also played into persistent white stereotypes of black criminality and lawlessness,

stereotypes that would be ruthlessly and successfully employed by southern conservatives in the years to come. Nonviolence, on the other hand, was sometimes effective precisely because it promised to hold violent reactions in check. For example, the need to give King victories in order to lessen the appeal of more radical black leaders was an important impulse for both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Given the benefits of nonviolence, it is a measure of King's achievements that the civil rights protests in the South maintained a nonviolent posture—for nonviolence was not a natural or inevitable African American response to white violence.

The segregated South was defeated by a social protest movement from below—the African American Civil Rights Movement—and by judicial and legislative intervention from outside—the federal government. To secure that decisive federal intervention, which forced change on a defiant white South, southern African Americans, during the years between 1955 and 1965, won the culture wars with southern whites. Civil rights protesters were nonviolent; they were peaceful and studious; and they affirmed American constitutional, democratic, and religious goals. In the battle for the hearts and minds of northern public and political opinion, white racist thugs and lawless police forces were no match. The Civil Rights Movement not only out-sang and out-prayed its opponents, it out-thought them.

But 1955–1965 turned out to be a uniquely successful time for civil rights activists. After 1965, white southerners increasingly won the culture wars in the nation at large. They targeted the enemy not crudely and overtly as black, but as violent, criminal, and immoral, and as leeches on the welfare state at the expense of taxpaying, responsible citizens. Before 1965, crucial northern white support for civil rights was cost-free. But after 1965, civil rights progress would involve costs to northern whites in terms of job competition, the invasion of their private spheres of housing and schools, and increased taxes to pay for government poverty and welfare programs that seemed to reward violent rioters.

The victories of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s created the South that elected Jimmy Carter to the White House. The movement created a new black middle class, it secured physical safety and the protection of the law for ordinary black southerners, it dismantled segregation, it eliminated overt racism in southern politics, it empowered black officeholders across the region, and it changed forever the day-to-day interactions between the races. But the limitations of those victories are also evident in the lily-white Republican Party of the contemporary South, the white flight from the southern cities, and the grinding poverty of a rural and urban black underclass.

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Anthony J. Badger is the Paul Mellon Professor of American History at Cambridge University. He is the author of a number of books, including *FDR: The First Hundred Days* (2008) and *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (1990).