Civil Rights Movement Essay, Research Paper

Imagine that you are in Alabama, it is a hot afternoon and you are sweating profusely. You go to board a train to go visit some relatives. You can imagine yourself feeling the cool air rush around you as you sit in the luxurious train car: But wait, because certain laws call for separate cars for passengers of different races you must board the rear train cars that are cramped, filled with sounds of crying babies, and the temperature in the train car seems to be higher than the temperature is outside. It does not sound so ‘cozy’ does it? That scenario happened many times a day for blacks during the fifties and sixties. Blacks everywhere got fed up with being treated as if they were inferior and slaves, and banded together to form a movement. Not just any kind of movement, but a movement that would see victories as well as violence and death. That movement was the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement had a major goal, and that goal was to end discrimination based on race, creed, color, and gender, and to put an end to segregation. Its’ supporters aimed for equality of all people and for the integration of society. The previously mentioned goals were achieved by many different means. The movement had its share of leaders, events, and strategies that helped to reach its’ goals. There was a fair share of success and failures that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the rest of this paper all will be discussed thoroughly.

The Civil Rights Movement had its’ fair share of leaders, however Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were the two most prominent figures during the era. “Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.’s childhood’s had a powerful influence on the men and their speeches” (Clark 15). Malcolm X was raised in poverty and received little schooling. He was educated up until the eighth grade. Malcolm X was the victim of domestic violence as a child. His father beat him along with his mother and the rest of his siblings. His house was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan, and later his father was killed in a trolley accident. People believe that the trolley incident was just a cover up for the Klan’s lynching of Mr. Little. (Malcolm’s last name was originally Little, but he changed it because he thought that it was a slave name. He then chose the letter X instead.) His mother later suffered a mental breakdown and Malcolm, along with the other children, were sent to foster homes. Later on in life Malcolm began to commit burglaries, and even turned to using drugs. In 1946 he was sentenced to ten years in prison. In prison he converted to the Lost-Found Nation of Islam. Malcolm was paroled in 1952 and began preaching as an Islamic minister. He preached about black nationalism, and separatism between whites and blacks. Malcolm X’s speeches were delivered in an angry tone and the audience then began to feel hatred of white Americans. Later, he broke away from the black Muslim party because he realized that they were misleading him by saying that segregation was the only way to go. In 1964 Malcolm X took a pilgrimage to Mecca, as every Muslim does in their life time. When he returned his racist beliefs towards whites had changed considerably. No longer was he against black and white integration, he now wanted the two races to be able to live together in ‘harmony’(Hampton 131).

Martin Luther King Jr. was raised in a middle-class family in Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up with strong values and received a good education. At age 15, Martin Luther King Jr. attended Morehouse College in Atlanta. He was named class valedictorian. At age 18 he was ordained as a Baptist minister. In 1955 he was named president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the MIA was in charge of the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1957 King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was an organization to challenge racial segregation. King organized peaceful demonstrations and was thrown in jail. In 1964 he received the Nobel Prize for peace. (Hampton 107).

The two men differed in their beliefs. King wanted gradual, peaceful change, integration of blacks into everyday society, and equality of all people. He was similar to Mohandas Gandhi in his quest for freedom, both urged followers to seek non-violent methods to achieve equal rights. Malcolm X was more of a radical. He wanted immediate action and immediate change. Malcolm X believed that conditions would change only through violent acts. He told followers to use any means necessary to stand up for their rights and what they believed in (Clark 39).

Both of the men had their differences, but they also shared some similarities. Both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were powerful speakers and motivated listeners all over the world. Both men fought for justice and wanted to achieve the same goal, that goal was equality amongst all races.

Many different strategies were used to achieve the goals and aims during the Civil Rights Movement. In 1960 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized sit-ins, rallies, and freedom marches. These were meant to be peaceful events, however they often turned violent and the authorities often broke them up. “Patterning its techniques on the nonviolent methods of Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi, the movement spread across the nation, forcing the desegregation of department stores, supermarkets, libraries and movie theaters” (Hampton 620). Boycotts, as well as large rallies in which speeches were given to motivate the crowds, were strategies that proved to be effective.

Supreme Court decisions, as in the case of Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education of 1954, also helped in bringing the blacks one step closer to achieving their goals. “The separate-but-equal doctrine was first established in 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy vs. Ferguson that the separation of races is constitutional as long as equal accommodations are made for each race” (Wexler 29). The ruling in the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education overturned the Plessy ruling. It stated that separate educational facilities were unequal and unconstitutional. “Even though the buildings might be of similar quality, Warren asserted, racially segregated schools had a harmful effect on black children by creating ‘a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may effect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (LaFeber 378). Schools all over the country then began to integrate their student body.

Before desegregation, blacks were not allowed to drink out of the same water fountains, eat in the same restaurants, learn in the same schools, or sit in the same row on the bus with whites. On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks challenged the city’s segregation laws by refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Rosa Parks was a 43 year old seamstress and a former NAACP secretary for the Montgomery chapter. After the work bell rang Rosa ran out the door and caught the Cleveland Avenue bus. When she boarded, the bus was half empty. Rosa took a seat in row 11 behind the ‘white’ section. As the bus continued its route, the white seats filled up and there was a white man left standing. The bus driver, James Blake, ordered all the blacks in row 11 to move. Everyone moved except for Rosa Parks. She refused to give up her seat, so the bus driver was forced to call the police. This was Rosa Parks’ second offense in regards to segregation laws. In 1943 the same bus driver escorted her off of his bus because she refused to use the back door of the bus. This time she was arrested for violating the segregation laws. Her arrest grabbed the attention of the local leaders of the NAACP, especially Edgar D. Nixon. Nixon realized this event could bring the local blacks together to protest. Nixon sought out Martin Luther King Jr. to help with the protest. Since King had good public speaking abilities, he was chosen to be the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. The MIA was the organization that directed the boycott. “In February of 1956 an attorney for the MIA filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking an injunction against Montgomery’s segregated seating rules” (Wexler 69). The court ruled in favor of the MIA and the city buses were ordered to desegregate the seating arrangements. On December 21, 1956, after 381 days, the boycott was called off.

The Civil Rights Movement effected the United States in a few ways. One of those ways was by means of affirmative action. Affirmative action states that companies must actively pursue the hiring of blacks, females, and other minorities. Companies are then put in the position to hire more blacks and women, and then quotas began to exist. Incompetent people get promoted and some argue that it is reverse discrimination. Affirmative action is actually reverse discrimination against white males. Today, civil rights groups argue that affirmative action cures discrimination, but does it really?

Two more successes of the Civil Rights Movement were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights act of 1965. The Civil Rights Act stated that discrimination on the basis of race in all public places is illegal. It also “?included an equal opportunity clause making it unlawful for firms with more than 25 employees to discriminate in hiring on the grounds of race, religion, sex or national origin” (LaFeber 433). After the Civil Rights Act was passed, more blacks were seen entering the work force.

Prior to President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act in 1965, blacks had to pass a literacy test, pay poll taxes, and fit in with the grandfather clause, just to vote. Very few blacks registered to vote in those days because they could not read, answer absurd questions, or pay the tax. However, after the passing of the act, more blacks were registering to vote. “Blacks were elected to such public offices as mayors and state and congressional representatives” (Morris 239). Voter eligibility was now based on age, residency, and citizenship.

Clark, Kenneth B. King, Malcolm, Baldwin. Weslyan

University Press, 1985.

Hampton, Henry, and Steve Fayer. Voices of Freedom: An

Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the

1950’s through the 1980’s. New York: Bantam Books

1990.

LaFeber, Walter. The American Century: A History of the

United States since the 1890’s. New York: McGraw-

Hill, Inc. 1992.

Morris, Aldon D. The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement.

New York: The Free Press, 1984.

Wexler, Sanford. The Civil Rights Movement. New York:

Facts on File, Inc. !993.

Bibliography

Clark, Kenneth B. King, Malcolm, Baldwin. Weslyan

University Press, 1985.

Hampton, Henry, and Steve Fayer. Voices of Freedom: An

Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the

1950’s through the 1980’s. New York: Bantam Books

1990.

LaFeber, Walter. The American Century: A History of the

United States since the 1890’s. New York: McGraw-

Hill, Inc. 1992.

Morris, Aldon D. The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement.

New York: The Free Press, 1984.

Wexler, Sanford. The Civil Rights Movement. New York:

Facts on File, Inc. !993.