Civil Rights Movement

Muhanad Alhayali

2 December 2019

***Introduction***

The Civil Rights Movement is without a doubt one of the most important chapters of US history. It took place in the mid-20th century (the 1950s-1960s) and its main purpose was to gain equal rights and privileges for African-Americans, crudely referred to as “Blacks”. Although President Abraham Lincoln had abolished slavery after the Civil War, the misery of the Blacks was nowhere near its end. They continued to be treated as Second-Class citizens, especially in the Southern States. After suffering long enough, they rose up for their rights, with the help of a significant section of the “White Population”. The terms such as “Black Power” and “Black is Beautiful” were coined by the participants of this movement to elevate the position and morale of the Blacks for adding momentum to the Civil Right Movement.

***Discussion***

# *The Start (Jim Crow Laws)*

After the start of Reconstruction, the Blacks helped the US stand on its feet to overcome the devastations of the Civil War (1863- 1877). They held many keys positions as Slavery was abolished by President Abraham Lincoln. The tide seemed to be turning for the Blacks when the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) was passed, officially giving the Blacks equal protection under the US Laws. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) cemented their position even further after Blacks were granted the right to vote, something that was only reserved for the property-owning Whites. These privileges were making the “Whites of the South” edgy, as they had once “owned” commanded these slaves. They hated to see them becoming their equal.

In order to curtail the progress of liberties of the Blacks and roll back the progress made in the social status of the Blacks, a series of laws were passed by the Whites called the Jim Crow Laws (1896). These laws prohibited Blacks to use the same public services as Whites[[1]](#footnote-1). The blacks could not go to the same schools, they had to go to the designated "Black Section" of the public buses, even if they were overcrowded. Interracial marriage was declared illegal to "maintain purity" of the white race. To add insult to injury, a voter literacy test was introduced so that most Blacks would not vote in the Elections[[2]](#footnote-2). Thankfully, the Jim Crow Laws were limited to the Southern States, as the Northern states were generally against slavery. But the Blacks still experienced discriminatory behavior when they tried to buy any property or get an educational degree. Moreover, the Supreme Court ruling of Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) completely isolated the Whites from Blacks. To simply put it, the Blacks were thrown into the pit that they had been working hard to climb out of and better their lives and futures.

## *World War II and Civil Rights*

Lack of educational opportunities combined with discriminatory behavior with the Blacks, made sure that they got only low wage jobs like as factory laborers, farmers, or domestic servants. As 1939 saw the start of World War II, the war-related jobs became abundant. But, as expected, the blacks were left out of the race. Whites discriminated them and did not give them any better-paying jobs. Furthermore, they were disheartened to join the US army, as well. This forced the Blacks to march to the capital for their rights and demands. This forced President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) to issue a declaration called Executive Order 8802 that was signed on June 25th, 1941. The declaration granted equal opportunities to all US citizens to participate in the National Defense jobs, regardless of their racial or national origin, as long as they were declared US Citizens. Despite unequal treatment by their peers, the Black men and women made a great impact during the course of World War II. The Tuskegee Airmen made history as the first Black Aviation Unit to more than 150 Flying Crosses, cementing their place in the history of American aviation. Sadly, the jargon of American Democracy proved to be a hoax as Black veterans and martyrs gained no respect in the eyes of their “uncolored” countrymen.

## *The Rosa Parks Incident*

As mentioned above, the Blacks could only sit at their designated spaces on a public transport. Also, the Blacks were supposed to give their seats to any white citizen if he/she could not find any seat in their section. Little did anyone know; a bus seat would create the biggest civil rights movement in the US. On December 1st, 1955, a forty-two-year-old woman called Rosa Parks was arrested as she did not leave her spot on the bus for a White[[3]](#footnote-3). As the news of her arrest spread throughout Montgomery (Alabama), she transformed into the leading character of the Civil Rights Movement. Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was established by Black people. Martin Luther King Jr. led this movement up to a position that his name would be remembered forever in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Montgomery Bus System was boycotted by the MIA after the incident of Rosa Parks[[4]](#footnote-4). That boycott lasted for 381 days. This forced the US Supreme Court to remove the separate seating laws, declaring them unconstitutional.

### *Civil Rights Act (1957)*

The voter literacy test implemented in the Southern States made difficult circumstances for African Americans to exercise their right to vote. The test was designed in such a way that it made it near impossible for the Blacks to pass. President Eisenhower pressured Congress to consider a new civil rights legislation, in order to show his seriousness and support towards the Civil Rights Movement[[5]](#footnote-5). Finally, on September 9th, 1957, President Eisenhower enforced The Civil Rights Act (1957), guaranteeing the Black community, the right to vote, in Southern States[[6]](#footnote-6). This was a major victory for the Blacks since the Reconstruction Era. Voter frauds against the Blacks were also thoroughly investigated under this Act.

## *Freedom Riders*

On May 4th, 1961, a group of thirteen people christening themselves as the “Freedom Riders” started their journey on a bus in Washington, D.C. in order to eliminate separate bus sections for the Blacks and Whites. They consisted of seven Blacks and six Whites. After facing problems from the Whites and Police, they became the center of international attention. When the bus reached Anniston (Alabama), a mob threw a bomb on the bus, injuring the Freedom Riders. The bus driver bailed and the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy had to find a replacement with the help of the Alabama Governor John Patterson. The Kennedy Administration applied steady pressure on the Interstate Commerce Commission, which resulted in the abolishment of segregation of sections on all bus terminals.

## *Civil Rights Act (1964) and Assassinations*

The Civil Rights Movement, however, took an unexpected and violent turn after the above-mentioned advances and successes. On February 21st, 1965, former leader of an organization called the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X was assassinated at a rally[[7]](#footnote-7). The further tragic incident occurred in the form of the assassination of Nobel laureate, Martin Luther King Jr. on his hotel’s balcony[[8]](#footnote-8). It had an opposite effect to what was intended by the assassins. Instead of striking fear in the hearts of Blacks, the Civil Rights Movement further strengthened, making President Johnson obliged to enact further legislation in favor of the Blacks.

***Conclusion***

The Civil Rights Movement was a turning point for African-Americans. Their struggles, efforts and sacrifices brought an end to inhumane laws enacted against the African- American Community, especially in southern States. The Blacks, who were denied their right to vote, witnessed the rise of the First Black President Barack H. Obama, which was hailed by the world as the glorious achievement of the American Democracy. The “Blacks” finally won their rights in society, ending discriminatory practices against them.

# **Bibliography**

Carson, C. (2001). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Paperback).* Warner Books; Reprint edition (January 1, 2001).

Hall, J. D. (2005). The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past. *The Journal of American History*, 1233-1263.

Henderson, E. A. (2018). Missing the Revolution Beneath Their Feet: The Significance of the Slave Revolution of the Civil War to the Black Power Movement in the USA. *Journal of African American Studies*, 174-190.

Malcolm X, A. H. (2015). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X .* Ishi Press.

McMillen, N. R. (1989). *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow.* University of Illinois Press.

Parks, J. H. (1997). *I Am Rosa Parks.*

1. McMillen, N. R. (1989). *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow.* University of Illinois Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henderson, E. A. (2018). Missing the Revolution Beneath Their Feet: The Significance of the Slave Revolution of the Civil War to the Black Power Movement in the USA. *Journal of African American Studies*, 174-190 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Parks, J. H. (1997). *I Am Rosa Parks* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Parks, J. H. (1997). *I Am Rosa Parks* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hall, J. D. (2005). The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past. *The Journal of American History*, 1233-1263 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hall, J. D. (2005). The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past. *The Journal of American History*, 1233-1263 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Malcolm X, A. H. (2015). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X .* Ishi Press [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Carson, C. (2001). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Paperback).* Warner Books; Reprint edition (January 1, 2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)