

Black America, the Constitution, and Civil Rights

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ROOTS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The exciting innovations in high culture in the postwar years influenced black intellectuals as well as white. Many black writers grew up in the staid, provincial South before moving to New York City, where they became caught up in the exotic jazz world and Harlem night life. Despite their disparate roots, black writers had several things in common with New York intellectuals.

Novelists Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, for example, had also flirted with American communism in the thirties and they would later break with the party and expose its deceptions and allegiance to Moscow. Wright and Ellison were similarly influenced by literary modernism and the daring prose techniques of the Lost Generation, and like their predecessors they too were fleeing small-town life. Their cosmopolitan sensibility toward the bold and new also affected their political outlook. As black writers they had difficulty identifying with either Africa or Russia. Although sympathetic with the struggle against colonial imperialism, their modernist temperaments alienated them from both the ancient cultures and religions of the underdeveloped world, and from Marxist determinism and its denial of freedom. Their stance contrasted strikingly to that of the great black Marxist historian, W. E. B. Du Bois, who had been raised in cosmopolitan Boston and educated at

Harvard University. After being tried and acquitted as an unregistered agent of a foreign government, Du Bois left America during the McCarthy era and traveled through Russia and China before settling in Ghana, where he identified with tribal culture and his long-sought dream of Pan-Africanism. Wright and Ellison, however, were closer to the New York intellectuals in rejecting both communism and ancestor worship and identifying freedom as the intellectual's capacity to question and to choose.

When Wright and Ellison began to publish, they were welcomed by the intellectual world, as was the younger James Baldwin, whose *Go Tell It on the Mountain* registered the religious tensions felt by a southern Baptist adolescent smoldering with fear and guilt. Wright broke into the literary scene with his first novel *Native Son*, and his autobiographical *Black Boy* became a best-seller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Ellison regarded *Native Son* as "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro," and he compared *Black Boy* with works by Dostoevski and James Joyce. Both authors had been influenced by the American philosopher William James and his celebration of "the unguaranteed existence" and by French existential philosophy, which appealed to the rootless condition of black intellectuals and challenged them to approach life not as victims but as creators. Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which won the prestigious National Book Award, was a complex, ironic novel whose protagonist accepts the challenge of finding out the truth about himself in a white society that refuses to recognize his worth as a black.

The issue of blackness was uppermost even if the artistic self wanted to deny it. In battling for their humanity, black writers looked to the novel as the vehicle of protest and the birth of consciousness. "He knew he was black but he did not know he was beautiful," Baldwin wrote of his father, who had died several years earlier in 1955. Other writers, like the poets Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, used verse to articulate the emotions of the inarticulate. The challenge was to fight false shame with racial pride. In "Children's Rhymes" in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes drew upon be-bop jazz rhythms to capture the thoughts of Harlem youths:

By what sends
the white kids
I ain't sent:
I know I can't
be President.

The World War II years gave black writers and artists an opportunity to challenge government and society on several fronts. They worked with the Office of War Information in efforts to persuade Hollywood producers to improve the image of blacks in films. But while Nazism and its denial of racial equality led OWI writers to propagandize the virtues of democracy, Hollywood continued to depict black as Sambo-type entertainers who existed solely to humor white audiences. The singer Lena Horne refused to perform at segregated military bases—at one camp black soldiers had to sit behind German prisoners of war. Some blacks protested the draft. The novelist Ellison joined the merchant marine because he "wanted to contribute to the war, but didn't want to be in a Jim Crow army." A few months after Pearl Harbor a black gardener in Long Island came home from work, opened his mail, and sat down and calmly wrote:

Gentlemen: I am in receipt of my draft-reclassification notice. Please be informed that I am ready to serve in any unit of the armed forces of my country which is not segregated by race. Unless I am assured that I can serve in a mixed regiment and that I will not be compelled to serve in a unit undemocratically selected as a Negro group, I will refuse to report for induction.

Yours respectfully,
Winfred W. Lynn.

Blacks like Lynn were willing to risk going to jail; many others simply failed to show up when summoned for induction, and the government was reluctant to prosecute for fear of publicizing the problem. But later during the war an event took place that left the government no choice.

On the evening of July 17, 1944, at the Port Chicago Naval base in California, two munitions cargo vessels suddenly blew up in a terrifying blast. The explosion shook the surrounding community like an earthquake and its glare shone twenty-five miles away in San Francisco. Annihilating the ships and the pier, it was the most powerful man-made explosion prior to the bomb that would fall upon Hiroshima. Some 320 sailors were killed instantly and numerous others maimed or blinded. Of the dead, all ammunition loaders, two hundred were black. Three weeks following the blast, after investigators failed to detect its cause, the 328 surviving black sailors were ordered to return to work loading ammunition. But 258 of them, some still virtually in a state of shock, refused until they could be assured of safety. They were incarcerated and cajoled and threatened by naval officers. Then fifty

men were singled out and charged with mutiny. The ensuing naval court-martial became the first mutiny trial of World War II and the greatest mass mutiny trial in American military history.

The court took only eighty minutes of deliberation to find all fifty guilty for conspiring to stop work on the docks. The trial received wide publicity in the black press and Thurgood Marshall, special counsel for the NAACP, gave legal assistance to the accused to the extent allowed in a military court. He sent Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal a letter pointing out that the sailors' grievances had not been presented at the trial. Why were they not given proper training in handling munitions, as longshore officials had advised, and why were only blacks loading ships at Port Chicago? Sensitive to the racial issue, Forrestal replied that at other bases whites loaded munitions and that the order to return to work at Port Chicago was meant to prevent the men from building "an emotional barrier" of fear the longer they stayed off the job. Forrestal said nothing about the severity of the punishment: ten men were sentenced to fifteen years in prison, twenty-four to twelve years, eleven to ten years, and five sentenced to eight years. All would be dishonorably discharged from the navy.

The black community and many liberal white groups reacted angrily to the Port Chicago trial. Campaigns were organized to build popular pressure for the release of the men, and the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund had its officers file an appeal. Eleanor Roosevelt worked with the National Urban League in sponsoring protest meetings and collecting petitions. The public had now been made more aware than ever of segregation in the military services, and newspapers reported other protest work stoppages on the island of Guam and within the Seabees. In June 1945 the navy announced that segregation in training camps and other programs would be discontinued; six months afterwards Forrestal's office ordered the release of the Port Chicago fifty, who were given clemency now that the war was over.

The Port Chicago trial provoked one of the largest mass campaigns in behalf of racial justice. It brought together black, liberal, and labor organizations in a common cause. The outcome also proved a victory for the NAACP and its budding legal scholar, Thurgood Marshall, appropriately christened Thoroughgood. His next victory, involving school desegregation, would be a turning point in American history.

THE WARREN COURT AND THE *BROWN* DECISION

One morning in September 1950, Oliver Brown walked his eight-year-old daughter Linda four blocks to their neighborhood school in Topeka, Kansas, expecting to enroll her after finding a registration notice on his doorstep. The principal refused Linda permission, and, citing a law in force in Kansas and in sixteen other states requiring black children to attend segregated educational facilities, he suggested that she ride a bus a half-hour across town to an all-black primary school. Oliver Brown and other black parents protested and joined the NAACP in filing a suit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The suit claimed that refusal to admit Linda Brown violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The case quietly worked its way up the appeal system and reached the Supreme Court in 1954.

The previous year President Eisenhower had appointed as Chief Justice of the United States California's Governor Earl Warren. Neither Eisenhower nor anyone else expected significant changes in the Court's decisions under Warren, who at the time was assumed to have a "middle-of-the-road" philosophy. His earlier approval of the Japanese-American relocation during World War II as California's attorney general and his silence during the Port Chicago mutiny trials also boded ill for civil rights. Although he had criticized McCarthyism and California's loyalty oath, he had uttered no comments on racial segregation in public facilities. Then on May 17, 1954, Warren handed down the Court's unanimous ruling in the now-famous *Brown v. the Board of Education* declaring school segregation unconstitutional. Eisenhower was upset by the boldness of the decision, the liberal press and the NAACP were jubilant, the South first mute then infuriated, and the rest of the nation confused and apprehensive.

Although the *Brown* decision came down like a bombshell, the struggle for racial equality had been fought for years through legal channels. Thurgood Marshall, barred from staying at downtown hotels when he went to Washington to argue a case in the Supreme Court, had been using the resources of the NAACP to orchestrate litigation campaigns. The Court had already struck down southern state laws prohibiting blacks from attending law school, and in South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware cases had been filed challenging separate schools for races maintained through constitutional or statutory provisions. The black sociologist Kenneth Clark had also been gathering evidence to prove that racial segregation harmed black children's self image and stamped

them with "the badge of inferiority." In the last months of the Truman administration, Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson declared that segregation fell within the jurisdiction of the Constitution and that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling could be challenged. That ruling held that if blacks were furnished public accommodations equal to those of whites (in that legal case, railway coaches), there was no violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's provision, "nor to deny to any person . . . equal protection of the laws." The principle of "separate but equal" came to imply that segregation did not entail discrimination.

By the time of *Brown*, the real question facing the Warren Court was not whether the Fourteenth Amendment was designed to give equal protection to black Americans—a point acknowledged by every legal theorist—but whether segregation under conditions of equal facilities amounted to a denial of equal protection. Chief Justice Warren, together with the NAACP's resourceful legal scholar Marshall and activist Roy Wilkins, convinced the court to depart from precedent and employ a new mode of thinking. They and others recognized the difficulty of judging the validity of the Fourteenth Amendment's provisions by trying to establish the original intent of the authors who wrote them. Instead, the Warren Court held that it was not possible to determine whether those who drafted the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 meant to ban



NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall preparing a civil rights brief.

school segregation as well as to assure equal political rights for black Americans as an outcome of the Civil War. The Court then reasoned that all racially segregated school systems, even those with similar facilities, were "inherently unequal" because they breed "a feeling of inferiority" in the "hearts and minds" of young black children, an argument that rested on problematic evidence provided by sociologists. At issue was not the equality of facilities but the emotional effects of being identified with separate facilities. Along with the psychological damage done by segregation, separate schools also deprived black pupils of equal educational opportunities and thus denied them the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

The unanimity of the Court's decision made it appear that the Constitution had declared its authority in a single voice. In truth, the Court was deeply divided. While all members agreed that *Plessy* had to be overturned and that segregation in trains and law schools was unconstitutional, they were reluctant to pass judgment on public schools. Justice Hugo L. Black, a Roosevelt appointee from Alabama, feared that the KKK would take to the streets in violent demonstrations. When Philip Elman, a civil rights expert in the Solicitor General's office, became aware of such apprehensions, he submitted a revised brief proposing that the district courts be given a reasonable period to work out the details and timing for implementing the decree. Justice Felix Frankfurter, another Roosevelt appointee who had, with some impropriety, been keeping Elman informed, could now bring other members of the Court to see the imperative of issuing a unanimous decision. Thus the most important Supreme Court decision of the twentieth century, one that had the potential for affecting twelve million school children, deliberately avoided an implementation decree and left it up to local school authorities to assume responsibility for carrying out the law.

The executive also had the responsibility to enforce the law. But President Eisenhower, piqued by a ruling that made his political life more difficult than he thought it should be, and later angered by the Court's civil liberties decisions, would call his appointment of Warren "the biggest damn-fool mistake I ever made." Nevertheless, he moved swiftly to integrate the District of Columbia's schools after the Court ruled that segregation violated the Fifth Amendment's due process clause. Blacks were also hired to White House positions for the first time on a significant scale. Beyond that, Eisenhower showed little interest in the drive toward equality and civil rights. Meanwhile, various southern state governors convened meetings with political and school offi-

cials to decide how they would respond to the Court's decision. When it became clear that many states were delaying or making excuses to ignore the ruling, the Court issued another judgment, the so-called "Brown II," stating that all segregated school systems must make "a prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance" and to do so "with all deliberate speed."

The second *Brown* decision proved to be even more controversial than the first, dividing the country, the Eisenhower Administration, and the Supreme Court itself. Two justices began to worry that the Court would be put in the awkward position of issuing judgments it had no means of enforcing. Warren himself never made it clear whether school segregation "solely on the basis of race" was unconstitutional or whether separate educational facilities were unconstitutional because they were "inherently unequal." Such ambiguities could be exploited by the claim that custom and tradition, and not race, was the issue. Thus southerners and some conservative scholars insisted that segregation was part of the South's way of life and could not be altered by judicial fiat. That view was challenged by Professor C. Vann Woodward in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955). By showing that the legally defined exclusion of blacks from public accommodations occurred in the South only after the Civil War and as late as the 1880s, Woodward tried to demonstrate that there was no direct continuity between slavery and segregation and that southern race relations, rather than being permanently rooted in historic conventions, were amenable to change and adaptation.

Since several school desegregation cases were being decided concurrently, the practice of segregation throughout the nation as a whole came under scrutiny. Yet constituency was almost as important as geography in determining results. Where black populations were relatively small, below one-fourth of the student body, some educators would comply with the Court's order; where blacks exceeded one-fourth, various strategies of resistance developed. Thus in Topeka, Kansas, where the *Brown* decision originated, desegregation proceeded smoothly in a city with a black population of only 8.3 percent. In the District of Columbia, where blacks were in the majority, white students and parents boycotted local court orders. In Delaware, the integration of rural school districts went well but not in the highly black populated city of Wilmington. White South Carolinians succeeded for a decade in resisting court orders involving various "black-belt" regions, and in Prince Edward County, Virginia, which had been cited in the *Brown*

case, a white school board chose to close its public schools rather than to desegregate them.

The historic *Brown* decision raised arguments and stirred controversies for years. Constitutional critics charged that it marked the beginning of government by an unelected judiciary. In many parts of the South it met massive resistance as state governors prepared to "interpose" themselves before the authority of the federal government. In the North, several years after the decision, many large cities witnessed a "white flight" of middle-class Americans to the suburbs. And when the policy of busing children into different neighborhoods was adopted, an irony became embarrassingly evident: a judicial decision that had earlier been made to prohibit racial discrimination would now have to recognize it as a means of bringing about "racial balance" in various school districts. Liberals and blacks, however, would defend the Warren Court's decision as part of a broader civil rights movement which was beginning to move against racism in public facilities, restaurants, the workplace, and voting booths. Warren himself came to believe that the *Brown* decision may have been a little too precipitous. But he never had second thoughts about the Court's ruling, which meant that the rights of black Americans could no longer be violated under the United States Constitution.

SHOWDOWN AT LITTLE ROCK

But the Supreme Court can only pronounce the law; it is up to the president to enforce it. Eisenhower refused to endorse the *Brown* decision; he claimed it was his responsibility to execute the law, not to comment upon it. In truth, he was reluctant to put the federal government squarely behind the civil rights movement and school desegregation. Indeed, he showed even less interest in taking risks in domestic race relations than in the field of foreign affairs. His idea of the presidency, which reflected the nation's mood of moderation, was to maintain an equilibrium rather than lead the country into new social experiments. "I personally believe," he stated in addressing racial integration at a press conference in 1957, "if you try to go too far too fast in laws in this delicate field that has involved the emotions of so many Americans, you are making a mistake." Ultimately he believed that race relations remained a private and not a public responsibility. In respect to changing peoples' values, he informed Booker T. Washing-

ton's daughter, Portia, "we cannot do it by cold lawmaking, but must make these changes by appealing to reason, by prayer, and by constantly working at it through our own efforts."

Not all Americans agreed. In the Senate civil rights had the strong support of liberals like Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Lyndon Johnson of Texas. Within the administration the attorney general's office, headed first by Herbert Brownell, Jr., and then William P. Rogers, articulated the case for a strong civil rights bill to Congress. But Eisenhower would support only the mildest of its provisions and he accepted a revised Senate amendment that eliminated the attorney general's authority to bring civil action against violation of not only voting rights but civil rights in general. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 did little to address such problems as job discrimination, access to public accommodations, and school desegregation, which several states were either quietly evading with the consent of the white community or engaging in defiant massive resistance. Despite the appeals of such black leaders as Ralph Bunche, Jackie Robinson, and A. Philip Randolph, Eisenhower refused to lend the prestige of his office to the cause of racial equality.

The most that can be said of the president is that he was consistent. For he remained similarly indisposed toward sexual inequality. At the time the civil rights bill was being debated, the journalist May Craig, after praising the president for doing something about racial discrimination, asked: "Why have you not been active in trying to wipe out discrimination based on sex, namely the equal rights amendment?" Surprised by the question, Eisenhower replied: "Well, it is hard for a mere man to believe that woman doesn't have equal rights." The nearly all-male press corps roared at the innocence of the response. Eisenhower promised he would "take a look" at the problem, one that would take another decade to agitate the nation's political consciousness.

But the question of equal rights in respect to race would not wait. The Supreme Court had declared what the law of the land was and should be in *Brown*. Liberals began to look upon the courts as instruments of social change, and the NAACP expanded its Legal Defense and Education Fund to work with government agencies to expedite racial integration. Yet in 1957, three years after *Brown*, only four southern states were complying with the ruling. Several had also passed laws against barratry, the "stirring up of quarrels and lawsuits," in an effort to drive the NAACP out of legal practice in the South, a move that the Supreme Court would strike down as a violation of equal protection in racial litigation. Senators like Harry F. Byrd of Virginia and



The John Birch Society, a right-wing extremist organization founded in the late fifties, saw communism everywhere, including the Supreme Court.

Herman Talmadge of Georgia invoked the South's antebellum argument of states' rights to oppose the power of the federal government. In the deep South, "Citizens' Councils" organized to take a last stand on segregation and racial supremacy. Even outside Old Dixie, right-wing organizations like the John Birch Society saw the government as the enemy. The Birchers convinced their followers that racial integration was a communist plot. In California and the Southwest billboards alongside freeways told drivers what they must do as their patriotic duty: "IMPEACH EARL WARREN."

Meanwhile in the South, federal district judges did their best to uphold the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation, often in the face of angry threats from white citizens. Yet court orders to comply could be circumvented by a variety of strategies. One was to admit a few blacks to all-white schools, a tactic which observed the Constitution's ban against desegregation but fell short of integration by achieving a racial mix of students proportionate to the community's population. Another was to organize classrooms according to "ability groups" with each race attending different times of the day, or to require so many application forms, lengthy personal interviews, and even longer lines that black parents would be dissuaded from trying to enroll their children.

Some school districts, such as the Little Rock Board of Education in Arkansas, sincerely wanted to carry out the *Brown* decision but to do it slowly, starting the integration process at the upper levels of high school and year-by-year working down to the lower grades, a schedule that was to be started in 1959 and completed by 1963. But the Arkansas NAACP wanted immediate integration at all levels, and when the school board refused, it filed suit in the federal court. The court found in favor of the school board, holding that Little Rock was in compliance with the "all deliberate speed" principle in respect to local conditions.

But the court decision did little to cool tempers in Little Rock as the fall semester approached in 1957. Racists and demagogues organized citizen's councils to run candidates for the school board on a white supremacy platform. Despite defeat at the polls, the bigots continued their campaign and threatened massive resistance—even violence if necessary—when the schools opened. Little Rock city officials called upon Governor Orval Faubus to take responsibility to enforce the law. Although no staunch segregationist, Faubus first hesitated, knowing it would be politically damaging to intervene on behalf of desegregation. Yet he had taken no stand when Arkansas had amended its state constitution to oppose *Brown* and he failed to consult with President Eisenhower when he eventually directed the Arkansas National Guard to oppose the federal court-ordered enrollment of nine black students at Little Rock's Central High School.

For three weeks the armed troops stood shoulder to shoulder to prevent blacks from entering the building, in defiance of the city's school board, which wanted to carry out the court order. As tension mounted the NAACP judged it unsafe to send black children from their homes until the students' safety could be guaranteed. But the parents of one girl, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, had not heard of the NAACP's decision. When Elizabeth arrived at Central High School, white mobs shouted, "A nigger! . . . Here they come!" She continued against the taunting crowd, holding back her tears, trying not to show any fear. Then a national guardsman barred her from entering the school door and she turned around, confused, alone, afraid. The white crowd continued to harass her when she reached a bus-stop bench and began to sob with her head in her arms. A white woman who sat down to comfort the trembling Elizabeth and escort her home on the bus was jeered as "You nigger lover." "Don't you see she's scared?" the woman pleaded. "She's just a little girl." The next day photographs of Elizabeth Eckford walking past a gauntlet of hate-mongers appeared on the front

pages of the nation's newspapers. The country was outraged at such meanness and cruelty. Turning with disgust from Little Rock, Americans now looked to the White House for leadership in the school desegregation crisis.

All along Eisenhower had been reluctant to intervene. Not only did he doubt that racial attitudes could be changed by legal means, but he also had great sympathy for the white South and he had to consider the possibility that southern states would simply abolish the public school system. But Faubus's defiance of federal court orders and his decision to withdraw the state National Guard, instead of asking the president to put the state troops under federal authority, made Little Rock vulnerable to mob violence and left Eisenhower no choice but to resort to force to uphold the law. He dispatched one thousand paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to surround Central High School. Protected by the fully armed paratroopers, black students entered the school and went quietly to their desks. The president tried to conciliate southern politicians by reminding them that he was not trying to enforce integration but simply carrying out his oath of office. For once his charm and gentle persuasion failed him. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia likened the federal intervention to Hitler's storm troops and a Louisiana politician called for secession from the Union.

Except for some northern liberals, the Democrats approached the



Elizabeth Eckford, attempting to enter Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957.

desegregation controversy with caution and tact. On the television program "Face the Nation," Adlai Stevenson told reporters he would not advocate resorting to force in Little Rock. After Eisenhower had done so, Stevenson agreed with the president that there was no alternative. But Eisenhower's action would do little to solve the "national disaster" unless he would "now mobilize the nation's conscience as he had mobilized its arms," advised Stevenson. Easier said than done, especially for a Democratic party that could not afford to lose its southern wing. Even Stevenson, the symbol of the statesman who would not stoop to politics, had to court the segregationist Senator Russell if he were to remain the leading contender for the party's nomination in the 1960 election. With Eisenhower, however, politics mattered less since the Constitution prohibited his running for a third term. His failure to take a strong stand on desegregation was more a matter of conviction about the limits of government intervention in racial affairs. Perhaps his most enlightened act was appointing to the Civil Rights Commission Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, the president of Notre Dame University, who proved to be a strong supporter of equal opportunity for blacks. But at the highest level of leadership, the president failed to address the greatest social problem facing America.

"I HAVE A DREAM": MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.,
AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Most revolutions begin in mass protest and passion; the civil rights movement of the fifties began with a single gesture of exhaustion. On the evening of December 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks, a neatly dressed, middle-aged black woman, was riding home on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, seated behind the section for "Whites Only." She held a shopping-bag full of groceries on her lap. When two white passengers got on and saw all the seats in the white section occupied, the driver announced, "Niggers move back," ordering the blacks to give up their seats as prescribed by law. Three black passengers got up and stood at the back of the crowded bus. Rosa Parks stayed in her seat. The driver, grumbling under his breath, pulled over to the curb, set the brakes, rose from his seat, and with a few steps stood above her. "I said to move back, you hear?" Everyone on the packed bus fell into complete silence; no one moved, especially Mrs. Parks, who continued to look out the window, refusing to even acknowledge the driver's presence. He waited; the passengers listened and watched for even a gesture of



Rosa Parks being booked for disobeying public transportation segregation laws, Montgomery, Alabama.

a reply. He repeated his order; she continued to stare into the darkness of the night. No one in the bus that evening realized they were witnessing a historic moment that would change the course of modern American history. Not even Mrs. Parks, who later stated that she was simply too tired and "bone weary" to move to the back.

But Mrs. Parks had been working with E. D. Nixon, president of the Alabama NAACP and who had earlier worked with A. Philip Randolph planning the March-on-Washington during the war. When she called him from jail that evening, he phoned Clifford Durr about bail and legal advice. Clifford and Virginia Durr were members of a small group of southern white liberals who worked with black leaders on the Alabama Council on Human Relations to find ways to improve the South's racial situation. Durr was a distinguished lawyer who had once worked in New Deal agencies and left government in protest of Truman's loyalty program. He suggested challenging the constitutionality of Alabama's segregated public transportation services. Nixon realized such an effort would require the full backing of Montgomery's black

community. He then approached the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a young, militant Baptist minister, and together they planned a bus boycott on the day that Mrs. Parks had to appear in court. It was a risky tactic, for almost all black workers in the city had to use public transportation to get to their jobs. To reach as many neighborhoods as possible and assure the full cooperation of all blacks, Abernathy called Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the young new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. On the day of the boycott King and his wife Coretta were up before dawn to check bus stops to see how many blacks were aboard. They felt they could expect no more than 60 percent to honor the boycott, but that would be a sufficient threat to Montgomery's transportation revenue. On a regular day the early buses would be jammed with black domestic workers on their way to wealthy white residential districts. The day of the boycott, the first bus arrived empty; so, too, the second; the third had two passengers, both white. As the morning wore on, those on the boycott planning commission saw a sight that surpassed all expectations: young black students thumbing rides, cars overloaded with hitchhikers, older black workers cheerfully walking, a few using horse-drawn buggies, and at least one seen riding a mule. Even those who had to trek six miles to work sang as they walked along. "A miracle had taken place," King later wrote in *Stride Toward Freedom*. "The once dormant and quiescent Negro community was now fully awake."

That evening a mass meeting took place at the Holt Street Baptist Church. It was here that King, then only twenty-seven and unknown to the community and America at large, entered the pages of history. Montgomery's black leaders had sensed King's genius for pulpit oratory and late in the day they asked him to deliver the evening's sermon. Although unprepared, King rose to the occasion. He aroused the audience by shouting: "We are tired! Tired of being segregated and humiliated!" Then he led them back to reflection by calmly reminding them: "Once again we must hear the words of Jesus: 'Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you.' If we fail to do this, our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history." The conclusion was a perforation of duty and destiny:

If you protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, future historians will say, 'There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.

The audience rose, applauding, cheering, with hosannas of "Amen, Brother, Amen." Everyone understood why the boycott must be continued; no one present could forget the impact King had made upon their lives. One elderly woman later recalled that she "saw angels standing all around him when he finished, and they were lifting him up on their wings."

The young man who would go on to become the spiritual catalyst of the civil rights movement, a Nobel Prize winner, a symbol of courage to the sixties generation, and ultimately, the victim of an assassin's bullet, was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was the respected pastor of the prestigious and well-endowed Ebenezer Baptist Church. Although raised in a comfortable middle-class neighborhood, young Martin knew the meaning of racism. A friend on the block was told not to play with him because he was black and once a woman in the department store suddenly slapped his face. "The little nigger stepped on my foot," she complained. He was a precocious, gifted student, always reading and distracting his parents with a battery of questions. The sight of black unemployed workers standing in line in tattered clothes during the depression saddened him. Assured of his own meals, he wondered if there were children who would have enough to eat. The sight of racial cruelty was worse. When he saw police brutalizing black children or witnessed night-riding Klansmen clubbing his people in the streets, he struggled to control his rage and obey the commandments. "How can I love a race of people who hate me?" he asked. Even as a youth King took it upon himself to bear the crushing weight of guilt for both the white man's deeds and the black man's thoughts.

When he was fifteen, King attended Morehouse College, a segregated liberal arts school affiliated with Atlanta University. Upon graduation he chose not to follow his father's advice and go directly into the ministry. Instead he went to Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and received a Bachelor of Divinity degree, graduating first in his class. In 1955 he earned a Ph.D. at Boston University, where he also met his future wife Coretta Scott, a beautiful, talented singer who had been training at the New England Conservatory of Music. Coretta originally wanted to remain in Boston, but she did not hesitate to support her husband's sense of moral duty at the expense of her own career so he could return to the racially tense South.

School for King was not simply an accumulation of degrees and credentials but a voyage of discovery into two fields that became his daily passion: religion and philosophy. He undertook an omnivorous, sys-

tematic inquiry into Plato, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. He attended seminars on personalism and existential philosophy and took survey courses on Hinduism and Islam. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the contrasting theisms of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. Tillich was a monist who claimed God remained transcendent and beyond the things of the world; Wieman, a pluralist who believed in God's immanence and direct involvement in all worldly things. King thoughtfully sought to synthesize both. He wanted to preserve the need for unity from the relativistic threat of pluralism and the value of individuality from the all-absorbing oneness of monism. His professors were impressed with his probing, restless mind and looked forward to his career as a prominent scholar.

As much as King valued the life of the mind, the Christian gospel of social justice was a higher imperative. In developing his own intellectual vision of politics, he drew on three distinct sources and managed to assimilate them into a coherent theory of action. The first was a book that had also influenced Progressive intellectuals after the turn of the century, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* by Walter Rauschenbusch. It called upon Christians to build a new social order by replacing capitalism and the laws of Darwin with the example of Christ and the laws of love, cooperation, and solidarity. But King's anticapitalism never drove him to be tempted by the ideas of Marx, although the FBI suspected he was a communist and kept close surveillance of his personal life. His reading of Tillich's existential theology led him to conclude that communism was a "grand illusion," a false doctrine that denied man's spiritual nature, substituted for God the self-propelled movement of matter, and endowed history with its own redemptive power. King was equally skeptical of pacifism. Rauschenbusch had rejected the notion that man was the source of evil, and Christian pacifists like A. J. Muste carried the conviction of human innocence to the point of renouncing all uses of power to resolve problems. More and more King doubted that Christian love itself could effect social change or prevent human suffering. Slavery and the Holocaust were tragic reminders of the impotence of brotherly love. To overcome the dilemmas of Protestant liberalism King turned to a second source, Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *The Irony of American History*, and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Niebuhr reminded King that Christian pacifists themselves were responsible for Nazism for refusing to take up arms against it. King also came to understand how man's sinful nature caused him to rationalize his own sinful deeds, the most conspicuous example being the American Founders' validation of slavery.

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., before a photo of the Indian pacifist and leader, Mahatma Gandhi.



Above all, King obtained from Niebuhr a vision of "the glaring reality of collective evil," the tendency of otherwise decent individuals to join groups and remain unaware of how their own egoistic and aggressive nature becomes magnified in group behavior. Through Niebuhr's writings King transformed himself from a Protestant moralist to a Christian "realist."

While making King aware of the reality of evil and the duty of using force to oppose it, Niebuhr's writings nevertheless were insufficient to meet the needs of black America. King knew from reading about Nat Turner's insurrection in 1831 that force and violence would be suicidal for blacks. He was far more impressed with Henry David Thoreau's dictum that small minorities, even "one honest man," could regenerate an entire society. But Thoreau's tactic of trying to change society by denouncing it and "washing" his hands of it did not make a difference, at least not politically. What was needed was not the pose of the alienated poet but an effective theory of civil disobedience. For this third source of inspiration King went outside America to learn from the life and writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

In the postwar years the dramatic Indian independence movement was led by a saintly person who challenged the moral imagination in

an age of power politics. Trained as a lawyer, Gandhi chose to wear native loincloth, shawl, and sandals, fitting symbols of his belief in gentleness, persuasion, and the utmost simplicity of needs. Gandhi had learned from Thoreau the tactic of individual passive resistance to change the wrongs of society, but he transformed the lesson into an epic mass movement to purge British colonial power from India. When King first heard a lecturer explain Gandhi's idea of *satyagraha*—the “truth force” that reconciles love and power—he was spellbound. Through nonviolent strikes, boycotts, and protest marches Gandhi and his followers succeeded in winning their freedom from their oppressors. What moved King was not so much that Gandhi had won but how he had won. For Gandhi represented the first example in modern history of realizing political ends through spiritual means. King absorbed Gandhi's conviction that nonviolence implies the willingness to endure suffering without retaliation. He also shared Gandhi's conviction that the aim of nonviolence should not simply be to win victory or humiliate the opponent; instead, every effort must be made to reach the opponent's conscience and ultimately to try to achieve a reconciliation based on a new level of moral understanding. Thus Gandhi's Hindu idea of *satyagraha* reinforced King's interpretation of the Christian idea of *agape*—the love of all humanity as a single chain of brothers and sisters, the only chain that could withstand the ever-recurring forces of hatred.

During the bus boycott King preached his Gandhian inspired theory of civil disobedience to the Montgomery Improvement Association, which then set up workshops throughout the city on non-violence and direct action. Out of such efforts evolved the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized in 1957 to work for black voting rights and school desegregation. Three other organizations promoted the civil rights movement in the fifties. The National Urban League, started decades earlier during the Progressive era, concentrated mainly on northern industrial cities and was of little help to southern blacks. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which grew out of the prewar Fellowship of Reconciliation, combined Christian pacifism with Gandhian tactics but it, too, failed to penetrate into the deep South after the war. Meanwhile the NAACP had been fighting the cause through the courts, but when it won a legal victory, as in the *Brown* case, black America could not count on the president to implement it. Moral confrontation would have to supplant litigation. King and SCLC officials realized this when they finally obtained a meeting with President Eisenhower in June 1958. He was “surprised” to hear that respected

black leaders had become impatient with the federal government. As the meeting broke up, Eisenhower passed by King and with the shrug of his shoulders sighed, “Reverend, there are so many problems . . . Lebanon, Algeria . . .”

Although King would become disgusted with the Eisenhower administration, his own movement had been picking up support since the Montgomery bus boycott, when he was indicted the following year for having hindered business without “just cause or legal excuse.” King's arrest and trial had made the boycott front-page news and brought journalists from Europe and as far away as Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. Reporters were delighted when King responded to the charge that he was a communist by giving an erudite lecture on Marx, Engels, Hegel, and Feuerbach and then explained why he preferred theological existentialism to dialectical materialism. Busily taking notes, reporters were impressed listening to an activist who could be as profound as he was persuasive. An intellectual's intellectual, he knew more about communism than most members of the Communist party.

The Montgomery boycott succeeded in integrating the bus service, but all other public institutions, including schools, remained segregated. The same resistance prevailed throughout the deep South. Autherine Lucy, a black coed, tried to enter the University of Alabama and was almost murdered by white students. In Birmingham, Alabama, Nat King Cole, the famous black singer, was attacked and beaten while singing from the stage of the city auditorium. Afterwards, the same gang of whites jumped a black youth on the street and mutilated his genitals. The mob lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmet Till in Mississippi in 1955, shocked the nation. King himself received threatening phone calls, hate mail from the KKK, was stabbed in the chest by a deranged woman, and had his house bombed. Yet like Gandhi King never lost faith in nonviolence, and like Abraham Lincoln he sensed that his political mission might result in his own fatality. “Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom here in Montgomery,” he said. “But if anyone has to die, let it be me.” After his house was bombed, he assured his followers on the street outside that his wife and children were safe. He then stated: “If I had to die tomorrow morning, I would die happy—because I've been to the mountaintop, and I've seen the Promised Land.”

The civil rights movement that Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired in the fifties would realize many of its goals the following decade and after his assassination, on April 4, 1968, America would celebrate his

birthday along with Washington's and Lincoln's. King always felt uncomfortable when some of his followers referred to him as a savior or the Messiah. Yet he was a spiritual force who changed the hearts and minds of black and white Americans alike, if only by making the latter feel guilty and the former proud. "We got our heads up now," said a black janitor in Montgomery, "and we won't ever bow down again—no, sir—except before God."

9

Neither War nor Peace

CRISIS DIPLOMACY AND THE BLUFF OF BRAINKMANSHIP

Eisenhower had learned from observing the Truman administration the difficult political lesson of allowing America to become bogged down in a land war in Asia. But after he had successfully extricated the United States from the Korean War and refused to commit troops to the French cause in Indochina, Eisenhower still had to confront the reality of China, numerically the largest communist power in the world. Although Britain and other Western states had extended diplomatic recognition to China, the United States refused to do so, in part because of China's bitter ideological offensive against capitalist America, and in part because Eisenhower's advisors assumed that China was an integral part of a united world communist "bloc" that included North Korea, Eastern Europe, and the USSR. The assumption was more apparent than real. Not only was the communist world on the verge of dissolution in the mid-fifties, but the refusal to explore the possibility of normalizing relations with Mao meant that America would be forced to continue defending the Nationalist regime on the island of Formosa as the legitimate government for all of China. One recalls Tom Paine's warning to the British in 1775: an island cannot rule a continent.

The tense Formosa Strait crisis of 1954–55 (discussed in Chapter 4), had wound down with no improvement in United States-China relations. During the crisis the Eisenhower administration had hinted strongly that nuclear weapons would be used if China undertook invasion operations against the offshore islands. The chief of naval opera-