

Consequences of the Civil Rights Movement

Rise of Black Power

The civil rights movement continued to make progress during the 1960s through the controversial implementation of forced busing and affirmative action measures. Most people viewed Martin Luther King, Jr., as the principle leader of the movement. King maintained a large following who supported his promotion of non-violent protest. King hoped to integrate all neglected and oppressed peoples into American society and to ensure the same equality for everyone.

King's methods and ideas were not without opposition. Some in the black community questioned the merits of a racially integrated society. Others started to think that King's ideas were becoming outdated and obsolete, an opinion especially popular with the younger generation. Inspired by the actions of Marcus Garvey during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, black separatist groups began to form out of frustration with the slow moving progress toward civil rights. The goals of each separatist organization varied, with objectives ranging from a return to Africa campaign to the occupation of an exclusive land area in the United States set aside by the government.

The change in attitude in favor of direct action against inequality was demonstrated during the August 1965 Watts riots. Just five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, a massive riot broke out in Watts, a black neighborhood in Los Angeles. Outraged by police brutality against African Americans, black citizens violently lashed out in protest—burning and looting hundreds of buildings. The riot lasted nearly a week, and by the end 34 people, mostly African Americans, were dead and over 1,000 were injured. The Watts incident foreshadowed a long string of riots the following summer in 1966. Cleveland and Chicago suffered from an outbreak of racial riots, along with 40 other cities across the nation. In the summer of 1967, the city of Detroit had to use federal troops and national guardsmen to control the violence, which even included the use of tanks in the cities' urban streets.

Concerned about the riots, President Johnson ordered the formation of an exploratory commission to help identify the reasons for the riots and any possible solutions that could help resolve the violence. Johnson appointed Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois to lead the commission. The Kerner Commission concluded that the fundamental cause behind the riots was the profound frustration of inner-city blacks due to white racism, which was preventing access to quality jobs, forcing blacks into urban slums, and depriving them of hope for a better future.

City leaders and white investors were doing too little to address the concerns of the African American community in urban environments, specifically the downward spiral of economic hardship and violence inherent in ghetto and slum areas. Kerner realized that the living conditions in these neighborhoods were in most cases unbearable and the dissatisfaction within these communities had reached its boiling point. The commission's recommendations to prevent further rioting included the need for a stronger public response to the issues concerning the black community and an increase in the quality of communication among all races.

These findings did little to resolve the issues that led to the riots, and in some instances only added to the rhetoric of black separatist groups. For some, the riots further polarized American communities across racial lines. The attitudes that led to the disturbances during the summers between 1965 and 1967 had been long in the making. Prominent black separatists like Malcolm X had been advocating a drastic departure from King's methods for a number of years.

Born Malcolm Little, Malcolm X changed his surname to protest his "lost African identity in white America." Malcolm X was greatly influenced by the militant black separatist Elijah Muhammad, the Black Muslim leader and founder of the Nation of Islam. Like King, Malcolm X was a charismatic speaker and an inspiring leader. For most of his turbulent career, his message was that of "black power," black separatism, and the need to fight against the "blue-eyed white devils." To achieve his goals and to further African American rights, Malcolm X did not shy away from the use of violence, stating that the objectives must be attained by "any means necessary." He felt that nonviolent tactics would only encourage violence from white authorities.

Near the end of his life, Malcolm X began to change his perspective on race relations toward a more tempered attitude. In 1964 he broke off relations with the Nation of Islam and started his own organization devoted to seeking to unite all nonwhite people in the world and to seek methods for achieving racial harmony. His desertion from the Nation of Islam greatly upset the organization, and on February 21, 1965, he was assassinated by three members of the Nation of Islam in Harlem, while he was giving a speech on racial harmony.

Other organizations were also following a separatist agenda. By the mid-1960s the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had been affiliated with King for a long time, became a militant organization focused on opposing integration and interracial cooperation. Led by Stokely Carmichael, a West Indian who had grown up in Harlem, the organization called for black power and hoped to end nonviolent tactics toward race relations. Before joining the SNCC, Carmichael had worked tirelessly in the south for black rights. Carmichael, who drew much negative attention from Southerners because of his cause, spent time in several southern jails, often because of trumped-up charges by southern officials.

In 1967, Carmichael left the SNCC to join the Black Panthers, an organization of revolutionaries founded in Oakland, California. Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver led the group, which often resorted to extreme measures to promote their cause in northern and western U.S. cities. The Black Panthers, who openly carried weapons on city streets, were responsible for numerous bombings and killings of policemen and of African Americans who opposed the militant leaders' agenda.

Martin Luther King, Jr., abhorred the militant tactics of the SNCC and Black Panthers, believing that violence would not lead to equality. In April of 1968, the 39-year-old King visited Memphis, Tennessee to fight for increased wages for local trash collectors. On April 4, while King stood on a hotel balcony with friends, James Earl Ray assassinated the inspirational leader. King's assassination sparked massive riots in neighborhoods across America resulting in 40 deaths. As a devastated nation watched, Americans expressed palpable grief at the loss of the great leader whose work was far from complete.