

Raymond Arsenault

Civil Rights

The modern American civil rights movement is arguably one of the most important developments of the twentieth century. Rooted in the abolitionist movement and the post-emancipation efforts of the Reconstruction Era (1865-77), and nurtured by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) legal campaign against racial segregation and discrimination, the movement evolved into a sweeping struggle for social justice and human dignity. By prodding the nation to live up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, civil rights activists redefined the nature of American citizenship, bringing a measure of redemption to a society plagued by racial inequality and injustice. Partially inspired by the ongoing decolonization of the Third World, including the triumph of Gandhian nonviolence in India and the creation of independent nations in Africa, the battle for civil rights in the United States in turn provided inspiration for liberation movement across the globe. During the 1960s, figures such as Thurgood Marshall (the leader of the NAACP's effort to strike down legalized segregation and the first black to serve on the Supreme Court) and Martin Luther King Jr. (the founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC] and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize) became international symbols of that came to be known as the "freedom struggle." With the murder of King in 1968, the classic phase of the struggle ended, but the ennobling ideas and innovative tactics of the civil rights movement left an enduring legacy that continues to influence everything from public policy to individual views about race, culture, and citizenship.

The periodization and parameters of the civil rights movement are subjects of continuing debate among scholars, but it is no longer fashionable to limit the movement to the activities following the Brown school desegregation decisions of the mid-1950s. Although the national civil rights movement did not reach maturity until the 1960s, the contributions of early activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, William Hastie, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, and Mary McLeod Bethune – all of whom were actively working for civil rights in the 1930s and 1940s – are now considered to be an essential part of the civil rights story. However, beyond this recognition of the movement's pioneers there is little consensus about the evolution of the struggle. Among civil rights scholars, there are sharp differences of opinion about King's leadership, the significance of Malcolm X and other black nationalists, and the relative importance of various aspects of the movement: local versus national civil rights organizations; federal initiatives versus movement activities; legal versus direct action; and the contributions of the NAACP versus

those of SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Several important recent studies – most notably those of Taylor Branch, John Dittmer, and Adam Fairclough – have acknowledged tensions within the movement and have attempted to demythologize national leaders such as King, Malcolm X, and Marshall. Other works, such as Joanne Grant's biography of Ella Baker, have stressed the critical role of women in the movement.

Bibliography

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