

The Black Freedom Movement

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Overview

The Black Freedom Movement, like other historical moments, events and eras, is continually undergoing a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. As historians discover new primary sources, uncover new angles of African American organizing traditions, and reexamine old evidence, they have rethought the timeline, the trajectory, and the nature of the Black Freedom Movement. Their views about when and why the movement began, the role of women, the issues that preoccupied activists, as well as what gave the movement its strength, are increasingly being seen in a new light. Much of this new scholarship is built upon a traditional understanding of the Civil Rights Movements which follows:



Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

The Civil Rights Movement emerged in the mid-1950s with a series of boycotts against racially segregated facilities in the South, sparked by the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in the public schools. The most well known boycott was the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott (http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_bus_boycott_1955_1956/index.html) in Alabama, led by figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks (http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_parks_rosa_1913_2005/index.html). The boycott lasted over a year and successfully desegregated city buses in Montgomery. Demonstrations for equal access to public facilities and to the ballot multiplied rapidly throughout the South and included public marches, sit-ins, and other displays of nonviolent direct action. The protests reached a peak in the early 1960s, resulting in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=97>) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=100>). While the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were watershed moments in postwar US history, for participants in the movement, they also raised troubling questions about the nature of racial oppression. The most frequently asked question was how fundamentally would the lives of African Americans be transformed by the passage of these acts? Other activists became skeptical of government intentions and the strategy of nonviolence, particularly in light of the relentless violence directed at black activists and the lack of federal intervention. They turned to armed self-defense and, in some cases, violence. Some advocates of Black Power (http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_black_power/index.html) became wary of white support and involvement in the movement and called for black solidarity and nationalism. Others began to draw attention to the presence of rampant racism in northern communities, addressing in particular residential segregation, the lack of employment opportunities, and patterns of police harassment. The transformation the black freedom movement underwent in the mid-1960s redirected and reshaped its political direction. As activists began to address racism in northern communities, adopt more militant strategies, target poverty, and increasingly articulate a strident nationalism, the movement fractured and lost momentum. With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the movement essentially collapsed.

This standard narrative presents a linear view of the civil rights movement, using King and other national, male leaders as the defining figures. It focuses primarily on the South, the strategy of nonviolence and goal of integration. It minimizes local, grass roots efforts and activists organizing in other parts of the country. It truncates the timeline of the movement by not taking into account those who organized prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott as well as those who continued to be active after King's assassination. It glosses over competing views among activists, writing out of the history those who advocated self-defense and those who pushed for economic change. And it downplays the role of women in the struggle for social change. Examining the following primary sources documents will help you shed light on new interpretations of the black freedom movement.

Activity

You will be curating a museum exhibit on the story of the Civil Rights Movement based on your reading and analysis of several visual and textual documents from the period. Your exhibit can take the form of a Power Point presentation, a web page or a poster board.

Preliminary

Students should familiarize themselves with a standard account of the civil rights movement by reading their textbook chapter, reading the overview above, or viewing a website such as the timeline on <https://www.sitinemovement.org/history/america-civil-rights-timeline.asp> – go to the site and scroll down the page to Timeline.

Step One

Divide into groups of 4 or 5. Please examine the following documents.

- Photo: Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1967 (http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Photo_Exhibits/images/Pictorial_Past/11_bobbyhuey_11.html)
- Document : SNCC statement of purpose (1960, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SNCC_founding.html)
- Document: Black panther party platform and program (1966, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Panther_platform.html)
- Document: Johnnie Tillmon “Welfare is a Woman's Issue” Ms. Magazine, 1972 (<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/tillmon.asp>)
- Document: Ella Baker, Bigger than a Hamburger, Southern Patriot, June 1960 <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/bakerbigger.html>)
- Gloria Richardson facing off National Guardsmen, Cambridge, Maryland, May 1964 (<http://www.abbeville.com/civilrights/images/130.jpg>).
Full caption here: <http://www.abbeville.com/bookpage.asp?isbn=0789201232>
- March on Washington, August 28, 1963, shows civil rights and union leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., Joseph L. Rauh Jr., Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Walter Reuther (<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/winter/images/march-on-washington.jpg>)
- Document: “The First Freedom Ride:” Bayard Rustin on his Work with CORE (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6909>)

- Photo: Martin Luther King in 1963



Photographs by Flip Schulke/Corbis

- Photo: Civil Rights Protest in Seattle, 1963

During the summer of 1963, civil rights protestors in Seattle took their fight for racial equality to the streets. Rev. Mance Jackson, center next to Police Sgt. C.R. Connery, and a group of demonstrators that also included whites, march at 13th and Pine on June 15. (February 26, 2002)



Photo Credit: Seattle Post-Intelligencer

- Photo: Black Panthers in Oakland, 1969



- Document: Martin Luther King Jr., Speech: "The Casualties of War in Vietnam" 25 February 1967

Martin Luther King Jr. Speech: "The Casualties of War in Vietnam" 25 February 1967.

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/casualties-war-vietnam>

25 February 1967

Los Angeles, Calif.

I would like to speak to you candidly and forthrightly this afternoon about our present involvement in Viet Nam. I have chosen as a subject, "The Casualties of the War In Viet Nam." We are all aware of the nightmarish physical casualties. We see them in our living rooms in all of their tragic dimensions on television screens, and we read about them on our subway and bus rides in daily newspaper accounts. We see the rice fields of a small Asian country being trampled at will and burned at whim: we see grief-stricken mothers with crying babies clutched in their arms as they watch their little huts burst forth into flames; we see the fields and valleys of battle being painted with humankind's blood; we see the broken bodies left prostrate in countless fields; we see young men being sent home half-men--physically handicapped and mentally deranged. Most tragic of all is the casualty list among children. Some one million Vietnamese children have been casualties of this brutal war. A war in which children are incinerated by napalm, in which American soldiers die in mounting numbers while other American soldiers, according to press accounts, in unrestrained hatred shoot the wounded enemy as they lie on the ground, is a war that mutilates the conscience. These casualties are enough to cause all men to rise up with righteous indignation and oppose the very nature of this war.

But the physical casualties of the war in Viet Nam are not alone the catastrophies. The casualties of principles and values are equally disastrous and injurious...

One of the first casualties of the war in Viet Nam was the Charter of the United Nations...

It is very obvious that our government blatantly violated its obligation under the charter of the United Nations to submit to the Security Council its charge of aggression against North Viet Nam. Instead we unilaterally launched an all-out war on Asian soil. In the process we have undermined the purpose of the United Nations and caused its effectiveness to atrophy. We have also placed our nation in the position of being morally and politically isolated. Even the long standing allies of our nation have adamantly refused to join our government in this ugly war. As Americans and lovers of Democracy we should carefully ponder the consequences of our nation's declining moral status in the world.

The second casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the principle of self-determination. By entering a war that is little more than a domestic civil war, America has ended up supporting a new form of colonialism covered up by certain niceties of complexity. Whether we realize it or not our participation in the war in Viet Nam is an ominous expression of our lack of sympathy for the oppressed, our paranoid anti-Communism, our failure to feel the ache and anguish of the have nots. It reveals our willingness to continue participating in neo-colonialist adventures...

For nine years following 1945 [when the Vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence] we denied the people of Viet Nam the right to independence. For nine years we vigorously supported the French in their abortive effort to re-colonize Viet Nam...

Today we are fighting an all-out war--undeclared by Congress. We have well over 300,000 American servicemen fighting in that benighted and unhappy country. American planes are bombing the territory of another country, and we are committing atrocities equal to any perpetrated by the Vietcong...

A third casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the Great Society...

Despite feeble protestations to the contrary, the promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Viet Nam. The pursuit of this widened war has narrowed domestic welfare programs, making the poor, white and Negro, bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home...

It is estimated that we spend \$322,000 for each enemy we kill, while we spend in the so-called war on poverty in America only about \$53.00 for each person classified as "poor... We have escalated the war in Viet Nam and de-escalated the skirmish against poverty. It challenges the imagination to contemplate what lives we could transform if we were to cease killing...

A fourth casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the humility of our nation. Through rugged determination, scientific and technological progress and dazzling achievements, America has become the richest and most powerful nation in the world... This year our national gross product will reach the astounding figure of 780 billion dollars. All of this is a staggering picture of our great power.

But honesty impells me to admit that our power has often made us arrogant. We feel that our money can do anything. We arrogantly feel that we have everything to teach other nations and nothing to learn from them. We often arrogantly feel that we have some divine, messianic mission to police the whole world. We are arrogant in not allowing young nations to go through the same growing pains, turbulence and revolution that characterized our history. We are arrogant in our contention that we have some sacred mission to protect people from totalitarian rule, while we make little use of our power to end the evils of South Africa and Rhodesia, and while we are in fact supporting dictatorships with guns and money under the guise of fighting Communism. We are arrogant in professing to be concerned about the freedom of foreign nations while not setting our own house in order. Many of our Senators and Congressmen vote joyously to appropriate billions of dollars for war in Viet Nam, and these same Senators and Congressmen vote loudly against a Fair Housing Bill to make it possible for a Negro veteran of Viet Nam to purchase a decent home. We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields, but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own south. We are willing to make the Negro 100% of a citizen in warfare, but reduce him to 50% of a citizen on American soil. Of all the good things in life the Negro has approximately one half those of whites; of the bad he has twice that of whites.

Thus, half of all Negroes live in substandard housing and Negroes have half the income of whites. When we turn to the negative experiences of life, the Negro has a double share. There are twice as many unemployed. The infant mortality rate is double that of white. There are twice as many Negroes in combat in Viet Nam at the beginning of 1967 and twice as many died in action (20.6%) in proportion to their numbers in the population as whites.

All of this reveals that our nation has not yet used its vast resources of power to end the long night of poverty, racism and man's inhumanity to man...

A fifth casualty of the war in Viet Nam is the principle of dissent. An ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace-seekers depicts advocates of immediate negotiation under terms of the Geneva agreement and persons who call for a cessation of bombings in the north as quasi-traitors, fools or venal enemies of our soldiers and institutions. Free speech and the privilege of dissent and discussion are rights being shot down by Bombers in Viet Nam. When those who stand for peace are so villified it is time to consider where we are going and whether free speech has not become one of the major casualties of the war...

Let me say finally that I oppose the war in Viet Nam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as the moral example of the world. I speak out against this war because I am disappointed with America. There can be no great disappointment where there is no great love. I am disappointed with our failure to deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, Extreme materialism and militarism. We are presently moving down a dead-end road that can lead to national disaster...

It is time for all people of conscience to call upon America to return to her true home of brotherhood and peaceful pursuits. We cannot remain silent as our nation engages in one of history's most cruel and senseless wars. America must continue to have, during these days of human travail, a company of creative dissenters. We need them because the thunder of their fearless voices will be the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and the clamour of war hysteria.

Those of us who love peace must organize as effectively as the war hawks. As they spread the propaganda of war we must spread the propaganda of peace. We must combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement. We must demonstrate, teach and preach, until the very foundations of our nation are shaken. We must work unceasingly to lift this nation that we love to a higher destiny, to a new platens of compassion, to a more noble expression of humane-ness...

- Document: Article about Robert Franklin Williams, 1925-96

Source: http://www.ibiblio.org/Southern_Exposure/RFW.html

Robert Franklin Williams: A Warrior For Freedom, 1925-1996

By Timothy B. Tyson

When Rosa Parks spoke at Robert Williams' funeral in Monroe, North Carolina on October 22, 1996, she said those who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama admired Williams "for his courage and his commitment to freedom. The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten." But the words of this champion of nonviolent protest may surprise those who know Williams believed in "armed self-reliance" and was "a very good friend" of Malcolm X.

Born in the small town of Monroe in 1925, Robert Williams was raised on stories from his former-slave grandmother Ellen and tales of his grandfather Sikes, who stumped North Carolina for the Republican Party during Reconstruction and published a newspaper called The People's Voice . Before she died, Ellen Williams gave young Robert the rifle which his grandfather had wielded against white terrorists at the turn of the century.

Williams came face-to-face with racism early on. As an 11-year-old in 1936, he saw a white policeman, Jesse Helms, Sr. beat an African-American woman to the ground. Williams watched in terror as North Carolina

Senator Jesse Helms' father hit the woman and "dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey."

During World War II, Williams went North to find work. He fought in the Detroit Riot of 1943, when white mobs killed dozens of black citizens. Drafted in 1944, Robert served for 18 months, fighting for freedom in a segregated Army. He returned to Monroe and in 1947 married Mabel Robinson, who shared his commitment to social justice and African-American freedom.

As president of the Monroe NAACP in the late 1950s, Williams watched as members of his community were denied basic rights, tormented by the KKK, and ignored in the courts. Seeing no other recourse, he began to advocate "armed self-reliance" in the face of the white terrorism. Members of his NAACP chapter protected their homes against the Klan with rifles and sandbag fortifications.

Williams' advocacy of violence made him into an example at the 1959 NAACP convention. He had been removed from his post as Monroe NAACP president, and he listened at the convention as 40 speakers denounced him. He responded that he had called for self-defense, not acts of war: "We as men should stand up as men and protect our women and children. I am a man, and I will walk upright as a man should. I WILL NOT CRAWL." His logic compelled Martin Luther King, Jr. to acknowledge that, "when the Negro uses force in self-defense he does not forfeit support -- he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects."

As the debate over violence and nonviolence raged in 1961, King dispatched "Freedom Riders" to organize a nonviolent campaign in Williams' hometown. But white mobs caused the nonviolent crusade in Monroe to disintegrate into violence, and Robert and Mabel were forced to flee to Cuba to escape the hundreds of FBI agents who combed the countryside for them. One of the agents reported his frustrations to J. Edgar Hoover: "Subject has become something of a 'John Brown' to Negroes around Monroe, and they will do anything for him."

In Cuba, Williams wrote *Negroes With Guns*, which was a pivotal influence on Huey P. Newton, founder of the Black Panther Party. He and Mabel aired a radio show and continued to publish their newspaper, *The Crusader*, for thousands of subscribers. In 1965, Williams moved his family to the People's Republic of China, where they lived among the upper circles of the Chinese government during the Cultural Revolution.

When President Richard Nixon's administration launched secret contacts with China in the late 1960s, Williams bartered his knowledge of the Chinese government for safe passage home and a Ford Foundation grant to work at the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. He played a significant role in the historic opening of diplomatic relations between the United States and China.

In his battle against Hodgkin's disease, Williams was as brave as he had ever been. His memoirs, *While God Lay Sleeping: The Autobiography of Robert F. Williams*, tell the compelling story of a man who risked his life for democracy and a humanitarian vision that was rooted in the finest traditions of African-American striving. Above the desk where he wrote hangs the ancient rifle that was a gift from his grandmother.

"1957: Swimming Pool Showdown" by Robert F. Williams appeared in *Southern Exposure*, summer 1980 in an issue on the Ku Klux Klan.

Timothy B. Tyson is a North Carolina native and an assistant professor of Afro-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. His forthcoming book, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, will be published by University of North Carolina Press.

Some of the questions to take into consideration as you look at the photographs:

- What are the postures, dress, and expressions of the individuals in the photographs?
- Who are the participants?
- What symbols provide the backdrop?
- What feelings do the photographs convey?
- What do the camera angles tell us?

Some of the questions to think about as you read the text documents:

- What reforms and methods of social change do the documents suggest? What kind of language do the authors use?
- What do the documents tell us about the writer's analysis of what was wrong with American society?

Step Two

Write a short label for each of your documents (one paragraph). Take into account the dates, locations, as well as content of the photographs and documents.

As a group, select a title for your overall exhibit. Organize your documents in a meaningful order. Compose a general wall label (2-3 paragraphs) that explains the complexity of the black freedom movement in the post-war period.

Some issues you might want to consider are: patriotism, internationalism, feminism, gender, poverty/economics, civil rights, self-defense, leadership, nationalism, and integrationism. Remember the point here is to present a more complex view of the struggle for black freedom, rather than a simple linear model. How do these primary sources fit with the standard account of the civil rights movement that you read about? Can a single narrative explain the movement's evolution?

You may have to do additional research in order to gather enough information to contextualize each document.

Final Essay (optional)

Take into account the primary sources you have examined and rewrite the section of your textbook that describes the civil rights movement. Give a title to the section and, where appropriate, reference primary source documents. 4-5 pages.

Resources

- <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/> - This site is an overview of the Black Panther Party, their mission, history, and political vision.
- <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificpanthers.html> - This site has a fairly extensive collection of audio, video and photographic materials on the Black Panther Party, as well as a detailed timeline of Panther history.
- <https://archive.org/search.php?query=The%20Black%20Panther>
- <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/15273> - This site has a transcript of an interview with Fannie Lou Hamer
- <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/index.html> - Articles, documents and resources related to MLK and the CRM
- <http://www.usm.edu/crdp/index.html> - This Civil Rights Documentation project from the University of Mississippi includes an excellent oral history bibliography and Civil Rights timeline. Transcripts and some audio files of the oral histories are provided. The interviews are indexed by subject, interviewee, and collection/archive.
- <http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/> - The National Civil Rights Museum offers online exhibits and a gallery of photographs of the struggle for civil rights.

- <http://www.bcri.org/index.html> - The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has a searchable database of manuscripts and oral histories. Educators' resources are provided, as well as multimedia exhibits.
- <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/> - The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project provides complete citation information for all of King's published works, audio clips, and famous quotes, plus his biography, chronology, and historical background.
- <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/> - The Malcolm X Project at Columbia University project aims to provide a comprehensive biography of Malcolm X and multimedia research aids to accompany study of The Autobiography of Malcolm X.
- <http://digilib.usm.edu/crmda.php> - Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive contains oral histories, photographs, and other documents detailing race relations in Mississippi.
- <http://crmvet.org> - stories and testimonials by veterans of the civil rights movement as well as documents, a bibliography and other resources
- <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/remembering/> - interviews and photographs about life under Jim Crow

Instructor's Annotations

This assignment is designed to introduce students to the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement—that begins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and ends with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968—and then present to them primary sources that complicate that narrative. Depending on the amount of time available, instructors can familiarize students with the more conventional view of the civil rights movement by having students read a textbook chapter or sending them to a website as homework, or by leading a discussion in class. The overview at the beginning of the lesson briefly sums up the standard narrative. Students should be made aware that scholarly revision of the standard interpretation is well underway. Over the past decade, historians have published many books and articles that convey a more complex and nuanced description of how and why the post-war struggle for black freedom unfolded. Indicative of the shifting views is the title “black freedom movement” which is increasingly used instead of “civil rights movement.” Many historians of the period believe that the term civil rights is not broad enough to encompass the multiple goals and varying strategies of black activists. This renaming of the post-war African American struggle might be an interesting point for class discussion and a good introduction to this assignment.

If instructors cannot allocate class time to have students break down into small groups and work together to curate and present a museum exhibit, then students could work on this portion of the assignment individually, as homework. An alternative to the presentation model is to have students rewrite their textbook section on the civil rights movement (4 to 5 pages), taking into account and referencing the primary source documents they have examined.

The goal of this assignment is to have students develop a more multidimensional and layered, rather than linear, view of the post war struggle for black freedom. Students will come away with a sense of the varying actors engaged in the struggle for black freedom, including urban and rural folks, youth, women, people North and South, radicals, nationalists, militants, feminists, integrationists, and socialists. They will hear the different voices and the competing strategies that sometimes worked in concert with one another, sometimes in opposition. In addition to familiarizing students with the post-war African American struggle for freedom, this exercise will engage them with changing historical interpretation, as well as encourage them to develop their own analysis using primary source material.

Selected New Scholarship on the Black Freedom Movement:

- Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for African American Rights in Postwar New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003)
- Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

- John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights In Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994)
- Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999)
- Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005)
- Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995)
- Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003)
- Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004)
- Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Duke University Press, 2005)
- Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
- Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999)