



1960s United States Presidential Advisors

Topic B: The Civil Rights Movement

Christopher DeNotto

8 April 2010



Introduction

Compared to the relatively serene 1950s, the 1960s were an especially traumatic time for the United States. The Vietnam War and the counter-cultural movement spawned a generation gap within the nation as students began to question American culture and protest the actions of their parents. The deep divides in domestic America throughout the decade led many historians to look back and characterize the '60s as the most tumultuous time in American politics since the Civil War a hundred years earlier.

After the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement could easily be considered the most important part of the decade. The reason why the civil rights movement of the 1960s is so significant is that it was the climactic battle for African-Americans fighting against the racist elements of the White Establishment. Being considered second-class citizens in many Southern states, African-Americans had much more at stake in their fight than the student protestors or Women's Libbers. Black activists were confronted with violence on a daily basis from whites determined to prevent them from gaining rights. Women's Libbers may have been ridiculed by opponents and student protestors might have been beaten by police when they got out of control, but civil rights workers could have their homes bombed or families killed simply for trying to register to vote.

Additionally, unlike the anti-war movement, African-Americans had a long history of being abused by American society. The student protests were a phenomenon of the circumstances surrounding the Vietnam War. Outside of that context, organizations like Students for a Democratic Society or the Weathermen probably would not have existed or would have at least



been less influential. The civil rights movement, on the other hand, had black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, WEB Dubois, and Booker T. Washington to draw on for inspiration and setbacks like *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Reconstruction, and the Dred Scott decision to emphasize the gravity of what they were fighting for. Activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael developed a sense of urgency throughout the 1960s that quickly radicalized the movement when it appeared that change was not coming fast enough. Peaceful demonstrations quickly gave way to race riots as younger blacks believing in the Black Power doctrine took over the movement. This evolution (or perhaps devolution) of the civil rights movement from a peaceful movement to a radical and often violent one makes the movement significant. Had the civil rights movement gone in a different directions, the 1960s could have been either more calm or America could have simply torn itself further apart.



Background

Even after the abolition of slavery, African-Americans learned early on that they could not rely on the individual Southern states to protect their rights as free men. When former slaves were given the right to vote with the 15th Amendment, they were only really able to exercise this right under the protection of the Union troops that occupied the South immediately after the Civil War. So long as government soldiers oversaw elections, blacks were able to vote in large numbers, many of them holding Congressional seats. However, after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise in 1876 ended Reconstruction, the Southern states, free from interference from the federal government, began to limit the freedom of African-Americans. A series of laws prohibiting them from voting reversed the electoral gains that blacks made in the immediate postwar years. At the end of the century, the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine of segregation in 1896, which condemned black Americans in the South to be second-class citizens.

Even when African-American activists organized themselves into such groups as the NAACP at the turn of the century, they met too much resistance from the white establishment in the South or too little enthusiasm from officials in the federal government. By the beginning of the 20th century, black activists had split into two distinct camps. One faction, led by W.E.B. Dubois, advanced the notion that blacks must take a hard line of opposition to racism and actively question the white establishment. On the other side of the spectrum, Booker T. Washington supported working within the current system in order for blacks to slowly gain more rights and status; through education and self-help, blacks would gain better employment and more wealth and could integrate themselves into “white” society. According to Washington, if blacks directly challenged white



society, white resolve would simply stiffen in the face of opposition, making it much harder for African-Americans to achieve anything. Throughout the early 20th century, blacks tried both these approaches to overcoming racism and segregation, to little avail.

World War Two could be seen as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. Around this time Southern blacks continued to move into the Northern cities in great numbers as wartime production demanded more and more laborers. Through pressure from civil rights groups and labor unions, the share of black workers in defense industries increased from 3 to 8 percent over the course of the war. Throughout the conflict, the new black migrants and the lower-class whites with whom they competed for jobs clashed. Race riots in such cities as Philadelphia, Detroit and New York, and the creation of the cramped, unhealthy ghettos in which most low-income black workers found themselves living, proved to many African-Americans that racism abounded in all of the US, not just the Deep South.

Additionally, many black servicemen fighting abroad in Europe or the Pacific, almost a million in total, believed that, since they were making the same sacrifices for their country as whites, they would be treated better when they returned. However, especially in the Deep South, African-Americans returned home to find that white attitudes had not changed at all. Outraged at that injustice, black veterans led the attack against the traditional patterns of racism. In many cases, before they even took off their uniforms, black veterans headed to their local voter registration offices, trying to register in spite of white resistance. In Georgia, Governor Eugene Talmadge declared “no Negro will vote in Georgia for the next four years,” and soon afterwards, several registered black voters were murdered. In Tennessee, 70 blacks were arrested when they went to



register and, while they were in jail, a white mob broke in and killed two of them. Such instances were common across much of the South.

In light of such intimidation, blacks came to recognize that no real reforms were going to be enacted unless the federal government did something to bring the racist state governments under control. Initially, African-Americans believed that President Harry Truman could rally federal support for blacks. Truman tried to make the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), a body created by an executive order signed by President Roosevelt in 1941 that forbade racial discrimination in industries with government contracts, permanent. While that attempt ultimately failed when Southern Senators filibustered, Truman did create a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946 in order to recommend actions that the government should take to correct inequality. The committee advised the federal government to, among other things, create a permanent “civil rights” division of the Justice Department, introduce anti-lynching legislation, abolish the poll tax, and desegregate the Armed Forces. Additionally, Truman became the first president to address the NAACP; in that speech, he acknowledged that America was being hypocritical by calling itself a free country while simultaneously denying basic rights to people.

However, African-Americans eventually became extremely disappointed when Truman failed to follow up his words with concrete actions. During election years, Truman, conscious of the fact that his Democratic Party needed votes from both conservative Southerners and African-Americans if they were to win, typically did little more than pay lip service to civil rights causes. While Truman did desegregate the Armed Forces in 1948, it was only after blacks threatened to mount a massive civil disobedience campaign. More importantly, the Justice Department did little to investigate



violence against civil rights workers in the South, with many criminals being acquitted by all-white juries.

Present Eisenhower's two terms yielded similarly little federal support for blacks. While the NAACP won the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Eisenhower administration did little to enforce it. After that decision officially overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal" in 1954, blacks felt that the courts had finally accomplished what the politicians could not; surprisingly, while many Southerners saw the Court's decision as regrettable, many Southern politicians in Kentucky, Alabama, North Carolina, and Arkansas said that they would comply with *Brown*. However, Eisenhower's failure to enforce the statute prevented *Brown v. Board* from making many lasting changes in the short term. Eisenhower repeatedly waffled and refused to directly endorse the Supreme Court's decision. He believed that the federal government should not intervene in controversial social issues and felt that Washington did not have the right to dictate affairs at the state level. Without effective leadership forcing the Southerners to desegregate, radical segregationists found new energy to resist, and the initial compliance with *Brown v. Board* dissipated. Many Southerners began actively looking for ways to circumvent desegregation; in 1956, 101 of the 128 congressmen from the former Confederate states signed what was called the "Southern Manifesto," which declared their resistance to government attempts to desegregate.

When Eisenhower did act in 1957 and federalized the Arkansas National Guard in order to force the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, it was too little, too late. By the end of the 1950s, the number of schools that had desegregated after *Brown* fell from 712 to only 49. The complete and utter failure of the federal government to do anything to help Southern blacks proved to many civil rights workers that blacks would have to take action themselves.



The Montgomery Bus Boycott represented the first salvos of the civil rights movement that came to dominate the 1960s. Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a city bus became a rallying point for blacks across the South. By the time the boycott ended 381 days later and the buses were integrated, blacks had learned that only through their own collective action, and not by depending on the federal government, could reform be secured. Perhaps the most important effect of the boycott was that it propelled Martin Luther King Jr. and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), to the forefront of the civil rights movement. King would take this new confrontational strategy and use it to challenge the racist establishment throughout the 1960s, with or without federal support.



Current Status

The current situation, as of 20 January 1961, for the civil rights movement is roughly the same as it was in the 1950s, with one major exception. A new generation of younger black activists has emerged and begun to work with the SCLC in combating segregation. Many of these black students came of age in the 1950s and have parents who were civil rights workers. They experienced firsthand the failure of the federal government to assist blacks and believe that only a frontal assault against racism will end it. Their first major act was to stage a sit-in at a diner in Greensboro, North Carolina. Four students from A&T College in the city went into a Woolworth's department store, which had refused to allow African-Americans to sit at their lunch counter, and demanded to be served. Over the next five days, the students were joined by 300 members of the black community, mostly young students. As the sit-in dragged on, white resistance became more violent, a bomb scare eventually forcing the evacuation of the Woolworth's. However, the Woolworth's store did desegregate its lunch counter, and the students' success sparked sit-ins throughout the South.

Activists wishing to tap into this newfound energy and capitalize on the successful sit-ins formed the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960. It is important to point out that even though the SCLC supported the creation of SNCC and gave them financial support, SNCC for the most part works independently of the SCLC. However, when SNCC launches a protest in a Southern city, the SCLC often sends its own representatives to coordinate the effort. Additionally, many white Americans consider the SCLC to be the face of the civil rights movement, with SNCC being a subordinate arm.



There are major differences between the organizations. While both of them directly confront segregation, SNCC has more of a radical tinge. The SCLC is more likely to protest a racist act after the fact. For example, their strategy for the Montgomery Bus Boycott occurred only after Rosa Parks had been denied a seat in the front of a bus. SCLC seized upon that opportunity and based their protests around it. SNCC, on the other hand, is much more spontaneous. No one event sparked the Greensboro sit-in; black students simply saw a racist establishment and attacked it. However, it is important to point out that both organizations endorse a strictly nonviolent approach to protesting, even in the face of white brutality.

Politically, not much has changed since the end of the 1950s. Newly elected President Kennedy has made no major plans to confront segregation, and it appears that he intends to continue Eisenhower's timid approach to assisting the civil rights movement, only intervening when federal authority is directly threatened. However, the growing popularity of the civil rights movement among liberal Democrats, mostly from the North, may force Kennedy to eventually act. Senators Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Stuart Symington of Missouri, along with other liberals, will undoubtedly attack the President if he appears too indecisive.

Still, Kennedy must also keep the conservative Southern Democrats in his ranks. Without "the Solid South," Kennedy would not have won the election of 1960. Additionally, a revolt of Southern Congressmen would destroy the Democratic majorities in both the House and the Senate.

For now, Kennedy will have to walk a fine line to appease both parties. He secured much of the black vote when he offered support to Martin Luther King Jr. while Dr. King was imprisoned in Georgia during the past election cycle; Kennedy personally called King's wife to express his sympathy, while his brother Robert worked to secure King's release. However, he is reluctant to



become too mired in the situation for a number of reasons. Kennedy's major prerogative is to combat Communism abroad, and he is intent on hoarding his political assets and maintaining a culture of consensus in order to achieve his goals. From the President's perspective, if the civil rights movement has to fall by the wayside for the time being in order to fight communism, then so be it.



Bloc Positions

Vice-President Lyndon Johnson

Had Kennedy not run for president in 1960, there is a good chance that Johnson could have been elected on the Democratic ticket. Johnson's powerful "Anti-Kennedy" coalition at the Democratic National Convention, led by liberal Democrats like Senator Humphrey and Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, was unable to defeat Kennedy, but its leaders remain influential. There is some speculation as to whether Kennedy actually wanted Johnson on the ticket; Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has claimed that he offered the position to Johnson without expecting him to accept. In any case, Johnson, who hails from Texas, was instrumental in winning Kennedy votes in the South. The Kennedy Administration expected Johnson to cater to his fellow Southerners in order to keep conservative Democrats on board; Johnson, however, while kept in the dark on most issues and not normally allowed to assist with major policy decisions, has been a major ally to the civil rights movement. As head of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities, Johnson worked diligently to help African-Americans. Additionally, historian Taylor Branch claims that Johnson was instrumental in pushing the President to take a more active stance on civil rights than Kennedy originally intended.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

Robert Kennedy made a name for himself in the late '50s when he acted as chief counsel in the Senate investigation of Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters. His showdown with Hoffa during the boss' testimony and his subsequent work on his brother's 1960 campaign has earned him a



reputation of ruthlessness. As Attorney General, Kennedy is one of the President's closest advisors, assisting him in decisions outside the normal role of Attorney General. Kennedy is not only an avid supporter of the civil rights movement but, as Attorney General, in a position to directly help it; it is within the position's power to dispatch US Marshals and other federal officers to protect civil rights workers. Additionally, Mr. Kennedy could use the Justice Department to make it easier to prosecute whites who kill and intimidate blacks. The Attorney General is in the best position to lead the pro-civil rights faction of the Cabinet.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover

Mr. Hoover has always been deeply suspicious of the civil rights movement. He feels that Dr. King and other members of the SCLC are either communist sympathizers or being manipulated by communists. (In the early '60s, Robert Kennedy allowed Hoover to wiretap MLK for a month to see if there was any truth to these allegations; Hoover defied Kennedy's orders to stop after a month and continued to spy on King for much of the '60s.) Additionally, Hoover was often accused of not doing enough to curb white-against-black violence, since many of his FBI agents in the South were white, racist Southerners themselves.

Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield

Congressman Rayburn (D-TX) and Senator Mansfield (D-MT) are both relatively friendly towards the civil rights movement. Mansfield, being from Montana, does not have to appease a white base that feels threatened by black activists and thus does not personally run much of a political risk by supporting King and the SCLC; Rayburn is a close friend of fellow Texan Lyndon



Johnson and was one of the few Southern Congressmen not to sign the Southern Manifesto. However, tying their hands somewhat is the incredible influence of conservative Democrats from the South. Rayburn and Mansfield recognize that a large revolt of Southern Democrats in either house of Congress would destroy the Democratic majority, but they also cannot simply let the situation fester. If the instability in the South became serious, the Democrats' liberal constituents in the North might become disillusioned and desert the party. Both men will have to tread a fine line.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Lyman Lemnitzer

Since the Armed Forces were integrated after the Second World War, military personnel have not had to play a large role in the civil rights movement. They should be prepared, however, to assist Kennedy in case he needs to send regular army troops to restore order in the South.

Commerce Secretary Luther Hodges

Hodges' main goal is only to limit racial tension. He wants to promote industrialization and improve education, especially in the South, and is more concerned with maintaining order in the South and preventing an all-out race war than with addressing the underlying issues. It should be kept in mind that Secretary Hodges is from North Carolina and that conservative Southern Democrats hold considerable influence with him.



Bibliography

Jeffries, Hasan. *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Hill, Lance. *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Lawson, Steven. *Running For Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997.

Lawson, Steven. *Civil Rights Crossroads*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003.

Sargent, Frederic. *The Civil Rights Revolution: Events and Leaders, 1955-1968*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004.

Williams, Hettie. *We Shall Overcome to We Shall Overrun: The Collapse of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Revolt (1962-1968)*. New York: University Press of America, 2009.

