Civil Rights: The Revolution Begins

On December 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, refused to give up her seat in a crowded Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white male and was arrested for violating the racial segregation laws. Her unplanned action ignited the nonviolent civil rights movement that would transform the South. Nowhere in America was the tension between past and future greater than in the field of race relations, and nowhere were race relations more tense than in the old Confederacy, of which Montgomery had been the cradle. Though most Americans were conservative in the sense of paying lip service to, and sometimes abiding by, tradition, Southerners revered the past.

Unhappily the past Southerners clung to was largely fictitious, the creation of romantics like Margaret Mitchell and D. W. Griffith who in books and movies (Gone With the Wind and The Birth of a Nation were two of the most popular films ever made) glamorized the old South. In reality the South’s history was quite different. There had been elegant planters and cavaliers at one time, but not many; and their gracious way of life depended upon human bondage, the enslavement of an entire race at a time when other civilized nations had renounced the ghastly practice. And, after a long and bloody civil war had destroyed slavery, the South replaced it with laws and customs that kept blacks segregated and impoverished as, for the most part, land-

less tenant farmers. Racism was the foundation of Southern life; and in defense of it, whites of every class united behind leaders pledged to resist change at all costs short of another civil war. That entailed cruel hardships for blacks, yet most whites paid a high price too in the distortion of their culture and the impoverishment of their region. Because unwilling to face up to this, Southerners were the poorest and worst governed Americans; and they were determined to stay that way. W. J. Cash, a tormented and brilliant analyst of his region’s psyche, summed it up thusly. The South had virtues which he listed. On the other hand:

Violence, intolerance, avarice and suspicion toward new ideas, and incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentalism and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past. And despite changes for the better, they remain its characteristic vices today.1

So it was in 1940 when Cash wrote his great book The Mind of the South, and so it remained in 1955 when Rosa Parks took her stand in full knowledge of the risks.

Southerners always insisted that blacks were content with their lot and would not have it any other way, all trouble arising from Communists and outside agitators. White violence disproved that, like so much else in the deep South, where Judge Lynch made the law and enforced it with knife and rope and bonfire at the slightest provocation. As late as 1955, a black youth named Emmet Till was killed in Mississippi for admiring a white woman improperly—out of ignorance perhaps, since he was from Chicago. Deadly force was the underpinning of Southern race relations and everyone knew it—though most whites strenuously denied this except when making threats.

While social segregation for blacks was a fact of life everywhere in America it excited little attention outside the South. But the effects of segregation and discrimination were hard to ignore and did not escape notice. Economic opportunity drew
blacks out of the South during World War I, making what had been a regional problem a national one for the first time. It led to race riots, notably in Chicago, also to serious inquiries, the most important effort being a massive study funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Forty-four monographs on the "Negro Problem" were written under its auspices, culminating in Gunnar Myrdal’s epic *The American Dilemma* (1944). That dilemma, as Myrdal explained it, was how to square American ideals of freedom and equality with the actual condition of Negroes. It was going to be resolved, he guessed, by the great forces World War II had unleashed. In this Myrdal was entirely right.

Work in defense plants, not military service, was the first instrument of change. Though a million blacks served in the armed forces, nearly all were segregated, despite riots and incidents such as the one at Freeman Field, Indiana, where a hundred commissioned blacks were arrested for trying to integrate the officers club. In defense industries, however, the color line was broken. At first blacks were not hired by defense contractors at all. Then in January, 1941, A. Philip Randolph, militant leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the only important black trade union, suggested that fifty or a hundred thousand blacks march on Washington to protest their exclusion from industry. It was the wrong time for such action, prominent whites, including Mayor La Guardia of New York and even Eleanor Roosevelt, explained to him. Franklin Roosevelt invited Randolph to the White House for an application of the famous presidential soft soap. Randolph would not budge, so for once it was the white man, not the black, who gave way. To avert embarrassment Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, prohibiting discrimination in war plants on the basis of race, creed, or national origin.

This important step forward did not come about because the tide of democracy was rising strongly in the hearts of white men, but because by moving North blacks were beginning to acquire influence. That did not come about easily. Black workers were physically attacked, the worst outrage taking place in Detroit, where white mobs invaded black neighborhoods, at a cost of twenty-five black and nine white deaths. All the same better jobs enabled Negroes to finance efforts at race improvement, particularly those of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People whose membership rose from 100,000

at the war’s beginning to 500,000 at its end. Besides money, those who went North gained votes as well. Largely disenfranchised in the South, blacks often found it possible to register elsewhere. Thus a body of politicians emerged, mostly white at first, for whom racism was no longer an abstract and distant evil. Now it was an urgent matter to their constituents, hence also to themselves. As blacks had been drawn away from the GOP by Roosevelt’s New Deal, most who voted became Democrats. Thus it transpired that the party of Southern segregation was also the party opposed to it, a confusion that would last as long as the solid South, that is, until 1960.

The economic gains resulting from these changes were real yet insufficient. Black incomes rose sharply during the war, but thereafter they only grew at about the same rate as those of whites. Three million blacks moved North between 1940 and the late 1950s. During these years employment patterns changed significantly. In 1940 about two-thirds of Northern black women who worked were employed as domestics, a decade later the proportion had fallen by half. The gains for black men, though less dramatic, were real too. In 1940 only 8.5 percent of black workers were employed in white collar or skilled manual occupations, whereas by 1960 20.8 percent were so employed. In 1954 it was estimated that Northern black workers earned on the average about $500.00 a year more than their Southern counterparts, a big difference considering that nonwhite families collectively had an average family income of only $2,410. This still left black families far behind white families who on the average earned $4,339. As a rule of thumb individual black incomes were 56 percent of white incomes throughout the postwar period. Consequently, while blacks profited from the move North, they remained near or below the poverty line. In Chicago 85 percent of those on welfare were black; in Detroit the figure was 75 percent; in St. Louis 75 to 80 percent. During the late ’50s national magazines observed that poverty was being segregated in the North as housing had always been. The concentration of so much misery in such small areas created a potential for violence, it was understood even then.

Black migration was the key to what followed. It was owing to Northern pressure that Franklin Roosevelt issued his executive order on equal employment. The same force induced President Truman to appoint a civil rights commission in 1946. Its
report, *To Secure These Rights*, called for a broad attack on segregation in the armed forces and was followed by a presidential committee on segregation in the armed forces. The committee wrote *Freedom to Serve*, which led to the complete desegregation of the military. In 1948 Truman integrated federal employment. That same year the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive housing covenants. In 1950 it integrated the dining cars of interstate passenger trains.

Jim Crow's principal enemy was the NAACP, whose legal arm was at last adequately funded for a campaign against school segregation. Racially segregated schools, mandated by the law in Southern states, had long been a national disgrace. They victimized the young and helpless. They foreclosed the future of black people at an early age. They were an affront to the sensibilities of all democrats. Both as fact and symbol they stood in the way of improving American race relations. For years the Supreme Court had sustained them just the same, holding that segregated schools were constitutionally protected so long as blacks and whites had equal facilities, a stipulation universally disregarded in practice. Supreme Court justices seemed not to mind this as long as the theory was honored.

In 1950 a crucial breakthrough took place when the court ruled that separate legal education was inherently unequal, forcing the University of Texas to admit a black student who refused to attend the state law school for Negroes in Houston. That decision permitted the integration of graduate and professional schools throughout the South. Better still, it destroyed the rationale for Jim Crow in the seventeen states (plus the District of Columbia) where school segregation was required by state law and the four states (Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas, and Wyoming) where it was a local option. An obvious question was if segregated law schools were illegal by definition, how could any school be lawfully segregated? But the court, headed by Chief Justice Vinson, shrank from the implications of its own decision. Then in 1954 Vinson died and was replaced by Governor Earl Warren of California, to whom President Eisenhower owed a favor. Under Warren's leadership the court handed down on May 17, 1954, a unanimous decision that abolished segregation in all publicly funded schools. In *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* the court declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." A year later it instructed federal district courts to require the compliance of local school systems with "all deliberate speed."

*Brown v. Board of Education* launched the greatest decade of change since the abolition of slavery. Separate but equal was gone forever as a prop to school segregation and was bound to be struck down ultimately in every walk of life. All the same Southerners took the decision calmly at first, believing it would never be implemented. There was some compliance over the next few years. But though hundreds of school systems were integrated in Washington D.C. and some border states, the deep South remained solid. Then in 1956 Senator Harry Byrd, the political boss of Virginia, proclaimed his "doctrine of massive resistance." Virginia promptly enacted a law mandating the closure of any integrated school. A Southern Manifesto was drawn up and signed by nearly all Southern members of Congress and every senator except Lyndon Johnson of Texas and Tennessee's Kefauver and Gore. It called *Brown v. Board of Education* "a clear abuse of judicial power" and urged the use of "all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution." The Manifesto sanctioned lawlessness, encouraging other states to follow Virginia's lead. School desegregation came to a halt. As Mark Ethridge, publisher of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* remarked, the Southern states had "ridden off like headless horsemen into the woods of nullification." That, he was certain, would not be allowed. The facts of modern life were inescapable.

One of them is that the South will not be allowed to withdraw from the union; it will not be allowed to establish defiance of the Supreme Court as the law of the land; it will not be allowed to bend the will of the Union to denial of the civil rights or full citizenship of a tenth of our population any more than it was allowed to continue to enslave that minority. Such voices were few and easily disregarded. The headless horsemen rode on, passing numerous bills in defiance of federal law. Two failures of leadership permitted this, one local the other national. It was a certainty that prominent Southern whites would rally to the aid of Jim Crow. Liberalism had been crushed in the South generations earlier never more to be seen. Even moderates were rare and seldom effective. Southern moderation consisted largely of deploring racism quietly, or at a safe distance.
Moderates understood that racism was the curse of the South, the chief reason for its backwardness. Every hope of reform had been destroyed by race-baiting. Even the Populists of the 1890s, who had started out by trying to unite rural whites and blacks against their common enemies ended up as segregationists, worse even than the landed ruling class. Thereafter racist appeals silenced all others, dragging Southerners backward into the dark ages.

Even after World War II the dead still ruled the living. Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi, for one, poured out racist flith upon the floor of the House in time honored fashion. Senator Theodore C. Bilbo, also of Mississippi, was slightly less foul-mouthed but every bit as bad as Rankin. Bilbo ran for reelection in 1946 and told reporters that he would continue working against the fair employment practices commission, the anti-poll tax bill (this tax being a common way to stop Southern blacks from voting) the anti-lynching bill, and Truman’s plan for universal military training. Universal military training was mistaken because “if you draft Negro boys into the army, give them three good meals a day and let them shoot craps and drink liquor around the barracks for a year, they won't be worth a tinkers damn thereafter.” Bilbo urged the integrationists picketing his apartment in Washington to read his new book Separation or Mongrelization, Take Your Choice. Bilbo was among the last of the old-fashioned racist demagogues. They were succeeded by more modern demagogues such as George Wallace of Alabama. Early in his career Wallace was beaten by a worse racist and vowed never to be “out-niggered” again—and he never was until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 changed the rules of Southern politics.

Given such leadership, it was little wonder that few outsiders cared to live in the South. Few even wished to invest in it, despite cheap labor costs and a docile work force kept in line by race-baiting and union-busting tactics. The South had missed out on the twentieth century, denying itself the social and material benefits enjoyed by other regions. Moderates, to repeat, understood this, yet they could or would do nothing. Their helplessness was born out again by the fight against school integration, during which moderates fell silent or appealed for relief from federal tyranny. Governor James (Big Jim) Folsom of Alabama tried to take the high road but was soon reduced to pro-

claiming that “we ain’t going to force our fine colored folks to go to school with white people.” Folsom was not a bad man, on the contrary, by the standards of George Wallace he was exceptionally virtuous. It was just that so long as blacks were unable to vote no elected official could survive except as a segregationist.

The weakness of moderation was personified by William Faulkner, in many ways the first citizen of the South. Though a native of Mississippi, where he still lived, Faulkner was cosmopolitan and, as a Nobel Laureate he had won the prize for literature in 1949) too big to be threatened. He knew better also, having recognized at once that school segregation was doomed. In the leading regional newspaper Faulkner opposed efforts to set up private white schools that would be unaffected by Brown v. Board of Education. The trouble was, he admonished, that Mississippi schools were among the nation’s worst as they stood, and yet it was proposed to “set up two identical school systems, neither of which [will be] good enough for anybody.” As the pressures grew Faulkner wilted. In “A Letter to the North” that appeared in Life magazine he announced that while opposed to compulsory segregation he was against compulsory integration too, on principle and because it wouldn’t work. Once, Faulkner explained patiently to dim-witted Northerners, he had rooted for blacks as the underdogs. Now whites were the underdogs, victims of federal despotism, and presumably entitled to relief.

But if we, the [comparative] handful of [moderate] Southerners are compelled by the simple threat of being trampled if we don’t get out of the way, to create that middle where we could have worked to help the Negro improve his condition—compelled to move for the reason that the middle no longer exists—we will have to make a new choice.3

What that choice would be was unclear. However as Faulkner invoked the Civil War to show how far Southerners would go in defense of their right to be wrong, the implications were sanguinary.

James Baldwin, another novelist, repudiated this warning in a brilliant essay. “After more than two hundred years in slavery and ninety years of quasi-freedom,” Baldwin wrote, “it is
hard to think very highly of William Faulkner’s advice to “go slow.” “They don’t mean go slow,” Thurgood Marshall is reported to have said, “they mean don’t go.” Faulkner was mistaken to think that white Southerners, if left to their own devices, would realize that their social system looks “silly” to the rest of the world and change it. The only changes in the South resulted from great pressure, mostly exerted by Northerners. The NAACP was one of those agents of change, and Faulkner had falsely equated it with the white Citizens Councils inasmuch as it stayed within the law. “Faulkner’s threat to leave the “middle of the road” where he has, presumably all these years, been working for the benefit of Negroes, reduces itself to a more or less up-to-date version of the Southern threat to secede from the Union.” According to Baldwin:

[When Faulkner] speaks, then, of the “middle of the road,” he is simply speaking of the hope—which was always unrealistic and is now all but smashed—that the white Southerner, with no coercion from the rest of the nation, will lift himself above his ancient, crippling bitterness and refuse to add to his already intolerable burden of blood-guiltiness.

Baldwin was certain that “the time Faulkner asks for does not exist—and he is not the only Southerner who knows it. There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.” Faulkner’s warnings were read by millions of subscribers to Life and the Readers Digest and the other magazines in which they appeared. The young black writer reached only the few thousand who read Partisan Review. Baldwin was right even so.

The South would be integrated only after years of sometimes violent confrontation. By the end of 1955 there were already 568 segregationist organizations, including the revived Ku Klux Klan, claiming a membership of over 200,000. Most ardent segregationists enrolled in the Citizens Councils, which attracted a higher class of bigot than the Klan did and were nominally opposed to violence. It followed just the same. In 1956 a mob prevented the first black to enter the University of Alabama from attending classes, and when Atherine Lucy complained that the authorities were not doing enough, she was expelled. Mobs tried to prevent the public schools of Nashville and Clinton, Tennessee from being integrated. In Arkansas the mob and the governor combined to make Little Rock a synonym for racial infamy.

Little Rock became notorious almost by accident. It was a town without any special racial tensions, had a liberal mayor, and an exceedingly gradual plan for school desegregation that would take eight years to implement. The only real objections to it had been raised by the NAACP who considered the plan too deliberate. Then, without warning, Governor Orval Faubus, a seeming moderate with no previous history of race-baiting, went on local television to announce that order could not be maintained at Central High School in Little Rock if forcible desegregation took place. He then called out units of the state National Guard. The next day, September 3, 1957, saw 270 troops arrive at Central High. The nine blacks who were scheduled to attend remained at home as advised by the school board. President Eisenhower was asked at a news conference about Little Rock and said as usual that “you cannot change people’s hearts merely by laws,” which was beside the point. At issue were not feelings but actions, and these could and would be changed by law. To make things worse, the President added gratuitously that Southerners “see a picture of the mongrelization of the race, they call it.”

That remark typified the lack of leadership he had been exhibiting ever since Brown v. Board of Education. Though Eisenhower was not himself a racist, he had lived comfortably in a segregated army and understood the Southern viewpoint all too well. Further, he had won many Southern votes in 1952 and hoped to bring the South over to Republicanism. He failed utterly to comprehend that racism was the greatest moral issue facing America in the 1950s, and did not understand that the mistreatment of blacks was both wrong and by this late date intolerable. Eisenhower’s silence encouraged Southern resistance. His blindness lost him the best opportunity he would ever have to prove himself equal to the first and greatest Republican president. Eisenhower was no Lincoln and failed to guide unhappy or confused white Americans, much less inspire them. Little Rock was, to a degree, his fault, the inevitable outcome of his neutrality.

Though he blamed the Supreme Court for Little Rock, Eisenhower did not compound the crisis by evading responsibility for it. The Department of Justice moved to enjoin Faubus.
hower spoke with him on September 14, after which the guardsmen were removed. Then on September 23 the nine black students were met at Central High by a mob of 1,000 obscenely abusive whites. That night an angry Eisenhower went on national television to denounce this "disgraceful occurrence." He warned that federal court orders could not be "flouted with impunity by any individual or mob of extremists," and issued a proclamation ordering those doing so "to cease and desist therefrom and to disperse forthwith." Next day, when the mob ignored him, Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent 1,000 paratroopers of the regular army to restore order and enforce the law. Richard B. Russell of Georgia, a great power in the Senate, fired off a telegram comparing these young American soldiers to "Hitler's storm troopers." They remained all the same, chewing gum and drinking Cokes in their fascistic way, until relieved by elements of the Arkansas National Guard. Subsequently, after further maneuvers failed, Governor Faubus closed all of Little Rock's high schools. In 1959 local school closing laws were invalidated by the Federal District Court, and thereafter the reopened high schools were desegregated peacefully, even if at a snail's pace.

Little Rock was a crucial event in the history of civil rights. By forcing Eisenhower's hand it established the limits of federal patience. Eisenhower wanted to build up his party in the South, but there would be no point in trying, as he told a Southern senator, if doing so resulted in the virtual "dissolution of the union." The ghosts of John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis had been laid to rest at last.

Little Rock was important also because it was the first dramatic event in the civil rights struggle to be aired on television. TV news had counted for little up to that time. In the '50s there was still no videotape, no mini-cams, no satellite feeds. Film had to be shot in the old-fashioned way, developed, and flown to a broadcasting center. In consequence radio was still the prestige electronic news medium, even though 70 percent of American homes had television sets. TV carried no more than two to two and a half hours of news and public affairs a week. The nightly newscasts lasted only fifteen minutes. No network, except NBC with two, had any correspondents based outside of Washington and New York. One of NBC's field reporters was John Chancellor who covered the South and Midwest. Chancellor went to Little Rock and for weeks chartered a plane daily at three o'clock for the hour long flight to Oklahoma City, from which he could appear on the "Huntley-Brinkley Report." Because the Little Rock story was prolonged, TV could cover it, sending images of ugly white racists and neat, anxious, resolve black students across the nation and around the world. The contrast between them, so vividly captured by television, shamed and embarrassed Americans and was immensely helpful to the cause of civil rights.

Robert Lowell made the fight over school integration a central theme of his great poem "For the Union Dead" (1960). In it St. Gauden's Civil War relief depicting Colonel Robert Shaw and his black infantry symbolizes the heroic past, Little Rock the sordid present. "When I crouch to my television set," he wrote, "the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons." The black youngsters of Little Rock did not suffer in vain. Their ordeal stiffened Washington and the people too. Ninety per cent of American whites living outside the South told pollsters that they supported Eisenhower's decision to send troops to Little Rock. The frightful face of segregation, shown so vividly on television, could not be allowed to prevail. School integration would go forward, however slowly. As late as 1964 only two percent of black children in the South would attend school with whites. The issue was closed even so. Legal segregation's days were numbered, not just in the schools, but everywhere.

That achievement would not have been realized except for the use of federal power. The executive branch, the courts, independent regulatory agencies all participated in the burial of Jim Crow. Even so the moving force behind, or more often in front of them, was black America itself. Northern blacks and their white allies demanded and got the armed forces desegregated, greater federal employment opportunities, and much else. The NAACP, a nearly all black organization, obtained Brown vs. Board of Education. Southern blacks, voiceless and voiceless as they were, lagged behind, until in 1955 they suddenly took the lead.

To most whites the Montgomery bus boycott was at first mystifying. They could understand the drive to integrate schools and win the vote as these things offered material benefits. Segre-
gated buses seemed a minor offense by comparison, unworthy of all the effort it would take to integrate them. This lack of comprehension showed the immense gulf between black and white America. Negro poverty was bad enough, the closed doors and unequal opportunities still worse. But the most soul-destroying aspect of white racism was the elaborate and degrading social code, embedded in segregation laws, that humiliated every member of what Southern society defined as the inferior race. No black, however distinguished, could eat at a white restaurant, stay at a white hotel, or even drink from a white water fountain. Every black had to defer to every white, regardless of social status. The crucial fact about being black in America, especially in the Southern states, was not that Negroes were poor for the most part and subject to class distinctions, but that they constituted a separate caste from which none could escape regardless of achievement. Caste membership, assigned at birth, degraded the entire black race and subjected everyone in it to shaming—even when not physically harmful—rituals of abuse and servitude. Blacks could serve whites and speak to them respectfully. Most other contacts were prohibited, in theory if not actually in practice. The exceptions were chiefly sexual, as when whites enjoyed the services of black prostitutes—the reverse being almost unknown on account of savage and even lethal penalties.

Whites did not understand the consequences of this racial code, rigidly enforced by law and custom alike; and blacks did not explain them very well. Black writers tended to focus either on the major horrors—lynching, rape—or on the psychological complexities of being black, as Ralph Ellison did in his great novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The routine humiliations in between were usually taken for granted. Two books by white writers, though making no pretensions to art, later helped fill this information gap. As members of the dominant race both authors were able to personalize their experiences in ways that whites could understand. And both, once their eyes had been opened, were shocked to learn what Southern blacks took for granted as part of an average day.

*Black Like Me* (1961) is the work of a white man who darkened his skin chemically so as to pass for black. Because he was everywhere presumed to be a Negro, John Howard Griffin experienced every humiliation in his travels through the South. Particularly gripping to a white reader was his struggle, outside of large cities, to find a place to sleep, eat, and relieve himself. Not only were most all facilities separate and unequal, for blacks they were often nonexistent. Small towns frequently had no black restaurant, hotel, or public restroom. Stripped of what would later be called “white skin privileges” Griffin could explain to whites, as no black had ever done, the physical difficulties imposed by segregation.

Another valuable work is *Confessions of a White Racist* (1971) by Larry L. King, who was raised in West Texas. Though it was a cut above Mississippi or Alabama in terms of race relations, life for blacks there was still horrendous. Unlike most white racists, King had his prejudices shaken by service in the desegregating postwar army. Meeting blacks on an integrated basis made him realize how they were mistreated at home; badly educated in Jim Crow schools, denied access to most good jobs, and everlastingly made the objects of white humor, cruelty, and contempt. Even in the army conditions were far from ideal. King once asked a cook what it was like to be black in an otherwise white outfit. “It’s all right,” the man answered, “if you ain’t got no pride.” In West Texas pride never had a chance. Blacks were pushed and bullied by every white with a mind to, preachers justifying their degradation, policemen enforcing it brutally. Once his eyes were opened, King could no longer get along with his own parents, who were no worse than others but no better either. Once his father told him how a black cowherd, in a moment of high good humor, was scrubbed down with his clothes on in a barrel of cold water, ostensibly to remove the smell blacks were supposed to have. It was all in fun, his father made clear, and the victim took it well. “Jesus Christ!” King exploded. “How the hell else could he take it, without you peckerwoods hanging him?”

That was how things stood in 1954 when Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Montgomery, Alabama, a small city of 70,000 whites and 40,000 blacks. The previous census revealed that 63 percent of employed black women were domestics and 48 percent of black men either domestics or laborers. In consequence while the median income of Montgomery whites came to $1,730 annually, for blacks it was $970. Accordingly 91 percent of white homes had flush toilets while only 31 percent of black residences were so equipped. Their poverty helps explain why bus segregation imposed particular hardships on Negroes. Most black work-
ters did not have cars and were forced to commute by bus, subjecting themselves daily to the exercise of white power in its crudest form. Blacks had to pay at the front of the bus, then board at the rear. Drivers were often surly and sometimes drove off before black passengers could get through the rear doors. After boarding black passengers were required to sit from back to front. If the bus was full blacks had to give up their seats, front to back, and were required to vacate row by row instead of seat by seat. Few other aspects of black life in Montgomery entailed so much regular humiliation. Thus when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat it was not just on account of tired feet, as she always said. It was long-suppressed rage and a hunger for justice which were moving her on that historic day.

Mrs. Parks had refused to obey the segregation laws previously, but had simply been denied entry, or put off the bus. This time she was arrested. When E. D. Nixon, local head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, head of the state NAACP, and a former employer of Mrs. Parks, learned of her arrest he asked Clifford Durr to represent her. Durr was a lawyer and member of an aristocratic Montgomery family, one of the few white Southerners who both hated segregation and could not, thanks to strength of character and social standing, be intimidated. On learning from Durr that Parks had been cited for violating the Alabama Segregation law Nixon rejoiced. Here was the test case he had been looking for. Two things had stood in the way of challenging bus segregation. First, the black had to be arrested under a segregation ordinance, not just removed from the bus or arrested on another charge. Secondly, the individual had to have courage and a spotless reputation. Three blacks had been taken off buses and arrested that year, but none of them measured up to these exacting standards. In Mrs. Parks, who had once been employed by him, Nixon knew that he had a winner. Her record was blameless, and she was just back from the Highlander Folk School, an integrated training center for antisegregationists. Nixon knew that she would not fold and could not be smeared. Rosa Parks was promptly found guilty by a white court, which thus played into Nixon's hands.

Her trial, on December 8, 1955, set the stage for what would prove to be a successful challenge to the state's segregation law. It also justified an immediate citywide bus boycott. The boycott was decided upon that night at a mass meeting of what became the Montgomery Improvement Association. Its president was Martin Luther King, Jr., pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

Little in King's personal history suggested the role he was to play in American life. He had been exceptionally privileged by any standard, remarkably so for a Southern black. His father, known as Daddy King, was a prominent minister in Atlanta, Georgia, the only Southern city (except for Washington) with a sizable black middle class. As blacks owned their own shops, restaurants, insurance companies and the like, Atlanta blacks, especially if middle class, were shielded from white racism to a greater degree than elsewhere. King seems to have had almost no direct contact with it while he was growing up. He graduated from Morehouse College, an excellent black institution in Atlanta, and then from Crozier Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. King went on to earn a doctorate in theology from Boston University. Extremely well educated, King was to put his education to the best possible use. In the course of his graduate training King developed a unique personal philosophy, made up in part of the Social Gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr's writings on man's fallen state, and—most unusually—the pacifism and nonviolence of Thoreau and Gandhi. As an intellectual King planned to become a theologian once he had acquired practical experience in the field. Destiny had other plans for him.

In 1954, after completing his course requirements at Boston University, King accepted the call to Dexter Avenue. It was his intention, realized despite everything, to write his thesis on the side while conducting an active ministry. Even that early, King had all the attributes that would make him a great leader except one. His oratorical style was too formal and academic. As a working preacher King learned how to temper the intellectual content of his sermons. Since blacks were only free to be themselves in private or in church they did not wish to be lectured at. This obliged King to adapt his sermons to the emotional needs of his congregation. They remained substantial but were leveled down and delivered in the "call-and-response" mode traditionally employed by black preachers. Though he had been in Montgomery for only a year and was just 26, King had already become a great speaker, as would soon be evident. A natural leader too, he was chosen by the black community's foremost men to become president of the Montgomery Improvement Association.
King ended:

If we protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, "There lived a race of people, of black people, of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights, and thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization."

In sixteen minutes King had brought God and history to the side of civil rights, transforming the cause and the nation. His speech, even more than Brown v. Board of Education, was the beginning of the end of Jim Crow. It was the beginning too of King's incredible career as a race leader. In short order he was to demonstrate himself to be part prophet, part orator, part intellectual, part man of action, and, all in all, a non-violent revolutionary. The audience broke into wild applause, and, more importantly, took what King said to heart. The boycott would last for a year and prove to be, not 60 percent effective as the Montgomery Improvement Association had hoped, but almost 100 percent. Best of all, there would be no violence on the part of blacks.

Many things contributed to the boycott's success. Thanks to donations from churches around the country the association was able to buy fifteen station wagons, one for each of the black churches in Montgomery. Though none was ever harmed, no local company would insure these vehicles, which were finally protected by Lloyds of London. Car pools and wagon routes, efficiently organized by a central office, helped; though most black workers relied on Shank's mare while the strike lasted. A favorite story told over and over again concerned one elderly woman who was advised by King to take a bus as no one expected the old and infirm to hike. She insisted on walking. "Aren't your feet tired," he is said to have asked. "Yes, my feet are tired but my soul is rested," was her reply.

You could murder people who had this spirit, but you couldn't beat them. And, in fact, you couldn't murder them either owing to the glare of publicity. Earlier, lynching blacks had entailed little risk on account of the lack of outside interest. Such was no longer the case. Emmett Till's murder had been reported around the world, and every event of Montgomery's boycott would be so. Newspapers and news magazines printed millions of words and thousands of pictures of the boycott. They
made King an overnight celebrity and raised, in effect, a protective shield over the boycotters.

This did not mean there was no violence, no coercion, no threats or intimidation, only that they didn't work. On January 30, 1956, King's house was bombed. It was perhaps the crucial moment of the boycott; for, though no one had been injured, an angry black crowd gathered, some in it bearing arms. King spoke to the potential mob, reminding his listeners what they stood for and invoking the high principles raised at their first mass meeting. The crowd dispersed, and thereafter the boycotters' discipline held firm. When bombings failed to break their nerve, some ninety leaders, including King, were indicted for organizing an illegal boycott. After a four-day trial King was found guilty and appealed to a higher court, the other cases being continued pending the outcome of his case.

Meantime the boycott ground forward, black Montgomerians clocking mile after weary mile on foot while the lawyers argued. On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court declared bus segregation to be illegal. The first integrated bus rolled on December 20, with King and other leaders aboard. It was a "great ride" he told reporters. A white bank employee took a dimmer view, saying that blacks would find "that all they've won in their year of praying and boycotting is the same lousy service I've been getting every day." He was mistaken, for as Time magazine put it after Montgomery, Jim Crow would never again be quite the same.

There was a last round of violence. A few days after being integrated city buses were fired upon by snipers. A teenage black girl was beaten by white men after getting off a bus. A pregnant black woman was shot in the leg. On January 9, 1957, four churches were bombed and two homes, that of the Reverend Robert Gratzi and that of the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, King's closest associate. Gratzi was the white minister of all black Trinity Lutheran Church and a special object of racist venom. Like the black preachers he would not be intimidated. "If I had a nickel for every time I've been called a nigger-loving s.o.b.," he told the press, "I'd be independently wealthy." Despite these reprisals the struggle was over; bus integration was an accomplished fact. Seven white bombers were arrested and five indicted by a grand jury. Though the first two who went to trial were found not guilty despite having signed confessions, the lesson was not lost. Arresting the bombers put an end to white violence, and thereafter bus riders traveled in safety.

Though the implications of the boycott could not yet be fully grasped the meaning of it was perfectly clear. The February 18, 1957, issue of Time ran a cover story on King, describing him in vintage Time-ese as "sturdy (5 ft. 7 in. 164 lbs.), soft-voiced Martin Luther King." Even Time, famous for superficial reporting, could not miss the message. "King reached beyond law books and writs, beyond the violence and threats, to win these people—and challenge all people—with a spiritual force that aspired even to ending prejudice in man's mind." A year later the Saturday Evening Post then a weekly magazine with immense influence, carried a thoughtful essay by Chester Bowles, a former ambassador to India, who nailed down the important points.

Bowles first reviewed the history of Gandhi's movement for Indian independence, which at bottom, he pointed out, appealed "from man-made discriminatory laws to a higher natural law, to the moral law." That was what King had done in Montgomery. Again, like Gandhi, he aimed to raise up the oppressor as well as the oppressed. "We are seeking," King had emphasized, "to improve not the Negroes of Montgomery, but the whole of Montgomery." Bowles concluded:

The Gandhian way of persuasion and change is designed to make a profound moral issue of this kind clear, to stir the conscience of the great decent majority who believe in the laws of God, and persuade that majority to bring its actions in line with its beliefs.

"It may be through the Negroes," Gandhi once said, "that the message of non-violence will be delivered to the world."

This, it may be said, will take no less than a miracle of greatness: That is true. But we Americans are living in an age of miracles and we are capable of greatness.

Bowles was right. King would work miracles and Americans would respond to him. That response was never to be as wholehearted as might be wished. Injustice and prejudice could not be destroyed in one generation, or perhaps in a thousand. Even so the decade following Mrs. Parks arrest would see legal segregation demolished and black Southerners gain the vote, changing everything. And though in private racism survived, the public exercise of it gradually disappeared, putting an end to customs that had disgraced the South and the nation.
As King predicted ending segregation raised up whites as well as blacks, materially as well as spiritually. The new, more civilized South became a better place in which to live and do business. Talent and money flowed into it, turning the once depressed region into a land of opportunity. Its climate and abundant natural resources notwithstanding, the South could never be part of the Sun Belt so long as it was gripped by the dark and bloody hand of racism. The defeat of the white South was also its salvation, an irony that seems to have escaped general notice.

The fight against segregation was not won by King alone. Millions of Americans, white and black, contributed to it in various ways. Some, like King, gave up their lives for the cause. However nonviolence, both as ethic and tactic, owed everything to him. Black Montgomerians did not need King to tell them that violence, since whites possessed a virtual monopoly of it, would be unproductive. But without King, the discipline required to stay peaceful and the inspiring ethic that attracted world attention would have been absent. If viewed only as a method, nonviolence had its limits. Dr. Kenneth Clark, the leading black psychologist, pointed out in 1966 that it was "actually a response to the behavior of others, effective directly in terms of the ferocity it meets." It worked well in Montgomery and even better in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. White brutality employed against King's nonviolent army led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which climaxed the Negro revolution. Nonviolence was less effective when faced with the Northern attitude of "benign intransigence," as Clark put it. Even if young militants had not committed self-destruction in pursuit of the fantasy of Black Power, the movement was bound to slacken after 1965. The most attainable objectives had been taken. What remained was the far more frustrating and difficult task of qualifying blacks to exercise those rights already won.

Though nonviolence is seldom if ever practiced now in a formal way, as an ethic it can never die. King taught that blacks—and by extension all oppressed peoples—should, besides resisting their enemies, love them too. By doing so they would raise the struggle to a transcendental level and ultimately save victim and criminal alike. By this he did not mean that blacks should feel affection for those who were beating and abusing and killing them, which would have been absurd as well as impossible.

Rather he advocated what the ancient Greeks called "agape," that is, an understanding and redeeming good will for all of humanity. It was not enough to defeat those who were behaving evilly; they had to be restored to the family of man. King's final aim was brotherhood on a higher plane of moral existence. King would fail, as all the best people, including those now considered to have been divine or the agents of divinity, have always failed. But each such effort brings humanity a little nearer the light.

King was human and therefore imperfect. His judgement was sometimes flawed. Worse still, he was promiscuous, which we know because the FBI—to its everlasting shame—spied upon his bed. King's adulteries endangered the movement, wounded his loyal wife and family, and, worst of all, perhaps, in his own eyes were sinful. There can be no excuse for them. Yet it may be that his weakness made him sympathetic to the failings of others. In fighting racism he always condemned the sin, not the sinner. Though acclaimed by the world and laden with honors, King never became arrogant. Probably the guilt was not worth the gain to him. It was a positive thing nonetheless if it deepened his understanding. Wars and all, King was a great American, one of the greatest ever, the glory of his time, the pride not just of the black race but of the human race. He will never be forgotten.

Of the forces working to undermine Eisenhower's equilibrium, civil rights was most important. It was profoundly moral in character. It posed a fundamental challenge to American society that could not be denied, evaded, or finessed. To meet it would require sweeping changes in every part of the country. Civil rights was a test that, for these reasons, Eisenhower largely failed. Even if he had wished to promote fair treatment, because of its moral and emotional content, racial equality did not lend itself to his style of leadership. The hidden hand was well suited to politics as usual; but the hotter the issue, the harder it was to manage from behind closed doors. A man whose greatest talent was for avoiding danger would not be able to mount his pulpit on behalf of an unpopular cause. In the event, Eisenhower had no wish to do so. The time was not yet ripe for a president to say, as Lyndon Johnson would, "We Shall Overcome." The best that Eisenhower could manage was We Shall Enforce the Law.