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AAS350

Final Reading Response: Factors that Contributed to the he Dawn of the Fair Housing Act of 1968

*This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*

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**Introduction**

The landmark Civil Rights act of 1968 defined a shift in American legislature, the end of an era of legislative housing discrimination. No longer would the government tolerate housing discrimination based on race, directly affecting practices within real estate nationwide. How did the United States government come to pass such a radical act for the time? The United States of the 20th century was remarkably dynamic in all facets of its existence: from the invention of flight to the Moon landing, from the exploration of its Western frontiers to the creation of great megalopolises on its West Coast, and from a young nation to the rise through world geopolitical ranks to emerge as the superpower. This era of American history is marked with unprecedented growth and change. This trend however is disingenuous in the development of the United States housing market. In going from legislation defined largely by race to its abolishment and promise of fair treatment, reactionary factors led to this societal and legislative dynamism. A closer look into the pivotal social events for America in the first half of the 20th century rejects the claim that America was a model for social change by enacting Fair Housing because of the manner that this law was able to be passed.

**Cultural Shift in Post-WWII America**

Making the transition into the modern world, discoveries and events of World War II launched the United States into power unforeseen in its history. This forthcoming power and success were built on the backs of the 405,000 American soldiers who lost their lives fighting in the European, Pacific, and African theaters.1 Among the millions of Americans who risked their lives, the number of Black servicemen tallied greater than one million.1 These men and women prioritized their country at the expense of themselves in a manner equal to that of their White compatriots. Thus, upon conclusion of the war, there was a change in attitude of servicemen toward the status quo the country provided. Citizens that sacrificed everything they have were disenfranchised by the same entity they fought to protect.2 They are not to fight for the rights of European citizens against the tyranny of fascism be prioritized by a nation that does not value large sects of its own people. These arguments directly contributed toward growing frustration toward the practices of the American housing market. Returning veterans were left with living condition back home which did not represent their sacrifice and time served in the war. Thus, as seen throughout the course, often veterans were among the most vocal critics of these living conditions.3 This sparked an outrage that was previously unforeseen in the community and fostered an environment of rightful entitlement. These beliefs led to the expansion and prevalence of grassroots anti-establishment movements regarding housing, with the onslaught of this beliefs reaching a nationwide lens as their frustrations were increasing voiced.

**Civil Unrest and Black Resistance**

Frustrations began to mount to the extent in which the government was forced to face the reality that most of its urban constituents are unhappy and losing faith in the ability for governance to improve living situations. This came to a tipping point in many cities where riots then ensued. The power of the riot is that it takes the issue affecting the people and forces it on the ruling class – if they are unwilling to change, they demonstrate the ramifications in doing so. Examples of race riots are splattered throughout America in the 50s and 60s, with housing being a focal point of contention. The policies at hand constrained Black Americans to neglected redlined areas unfit for such large populations. Among the most important of such riots is the Detroit 1967 riot. This extreme riot led to nationwide media coverage, with some calling the riots indicative that “the country wasn’t going to make it”, as the riot inspired others across the country to take up in arms the cause – with activity noted in over twenty cities across the nation.4 This swiftly inspired Michigan lawmakers to instill the Michigan Fair Housing Act, which not only promised for fair housing, but importantly tenant rights. This landmark legislation has gone down as a great success from grassroots frustration, with modern political scholars calling it “stronger” than the eventual federal Fair Housing Act.5 This was possible due to the structure American cities began to take. In tandem with “White Flight” – the mass migration of White families from the city centers to the suburbs, policymakers of the inner cities were forced to the realization that much of the voting class was Black. This greatly impacted reelection results and for once ruling parties had to consider the needs and desires, which lead to state policy for fair housing that predates the federal act, serving as inspiration.

**Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

Among the most publicized social movements of all time was the American Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. The success of his nonviolent protests across the American South catalyzed the enacting of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – prohibiting “discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin”.6 King was heralded as a hero of Black Americans, and as a conqueror of the tyrannical rule that policymakers held across the country. Yet, this act did not secure needed housing reforms for many Black Americans living in cities. In the wake of rampant rioting in 1967, the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 brought about a wave on unrest across American cities. In response, then-president Lyndon Johnson immediately urged Congress to pass the fair housing bill originally proposed by North Carolina Sam Ervin. The pressure and magnitude of the situation led to passage of the federal Fair Housing Act a mere 7 days after the assassination. The devastation brought about by the killing motivated swift action by the Legislative Branch. Further discourse is required to discuss the process and motivation that led to the passing of the Fair Housing Act. The ease of Congress to get the act passed in only a week following the riots offers insights into lawmakers continued hesitation to offer Black Americans equal housing rights. Why did it take a tragedy for the job to get done? It took fear, not reason to solve this issue.

**Conclusion**

The development of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was reliant on the societal events of the times to propel the needs of Black Americans both into the spotlight of the people but also lawmakers. In this reliance, it offers insight into the true status of American social progression during this period: socially, the development of America was behind in comparison to its aspects that made it among the greatest nations in the world. If America is to be on the cutting edge globally in social development, it should take introspection to make a difference, not tragedy.

**Citations**

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