

The Black Upsurge Against Racial Segregation

by Tasha Boettcher

In her classic protest song of the 1960s, Janis Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” In 1950, about two percent of all African Americans in the southern states were registered to vote, black children attended schools with few of the basic amenities needed to create a true learning environment, and all southern blacks were forced to use separate and unequal public facilities; indeed, they had “nothing left to lose.” It was in these circumstances that the civil-rights movement began.

Any classroom discussion of the civil-rights movement must either begin or end with the question, “Is the movement over?” It is important that students understand that the effects of the civil-rights movement can still be seen today in socio-economic segregation and racism—and that various people in American society are still fighting for their civil rights. The best way to begin that conversation is through the voices of those who can convey the conviction, the exhaustion, the frustration, and the passion of the movement as it unfolded in the 1950s and eventually exploded in the 1960s. In so doing, our students learn to recognize the roots of current problems in the United States.

Document Based Questions

RICHARD WRIGHT

1. Do you think World War I had an influence on African Americans and their migration to the North? How? Why do you think the migration slowly dramatically after 1928?
2. What does Richard Wright’s description tell you about the experience of moving from the South to the North? How do you think the African American migrants felt? What were some of the challenges in attempting

to create a better life? What were some of the differences between southern and northern life?

3. What were working and living conditions like in the North? Did it appear to be a better life? How? How was the treatment of blacks in the North and South similar? How was it different?

LANGSTON HUGHES

1. In the sixth line, whose feet do you think the author is talking about? What are they doing?
2. What do the narrator's inner feelings appear to be? What is his outward persona? What does the poem tell you about the life of the narrator?
3. In "Harlem," what are the essential two outcomes of a dream deferred? Which do you think unfolded? Do you think Langston Hughes had a feeling about the nature of the future?

ANNE MOODY

1. How does this document exemplify the planning involved in the civil-rights movement?
2. What did non-violent demonstrators have to endure? What qualities do you think the demonstrators had? Do you think they had any special skills or training? Who were the different people who sat at the counter? What do these facts tell you about the movement?
3. Why do you think the police did not intervene? Do you think they had an obligation to do so? What does this tell you about the role of much of the local law enforcement during this time? Was this fair?

JOHN LEWIS

1. What part of the speech do you think the other civil rights leaders wanted John Lewis to change? Why? Do you think it was a wise idea?
2. Why do you think John Lewis did not support the civil-rights bill? What issues did it not address? What examples does he use to make his point?

3. John Lewis asked, "I want to know, which side is the Federal Government on?" Which side do you think the government was on? Did it this change? Cite evidence to support your opinion.

MALCOLM X

1. What is the overall message delivered by Malcolm X?
2. Do you think Malcolm X makes a strong argument against the justification of violence against blacks? What examples does he cite?
3. How did Malcolm X attempt to unite African Americans in his speech?

MARTHA HONEY

1. How does Martha Honey describe her experience as an activist? What is different about her experience compared to that of black activists?
2. What does Honey's letter tell you about the state of Mississippi?
3. Is Honey proud of her contributions? Why, or why not?

FANNIE LOU HAMER

1. What makes someone a first-class citizen? Why? What is so important about being able to vote?
2. What risks did African Americans face when attempting to register or after they registered?
3. Was Fannie Lou Hamer's arrest justifiable? What was the treatment of her like?

RITA L. SCHWERNER

1. How were Rita Schwerner and her husband treated because they were white activists? Would you say they faced discrimination? Give examples.
2. According to Schwerner, how did police use fear and intimidation? What would you do if you were an activist facing these tactics?

3. Why did Schwerner go to see the governor? What was his response? Why do you think he responded the way he did?

ALICE WALKER

1. Which section of the poem most struck a chord with you and why?
2. What did the poem tell you about African Americans' view of themselves?

SANDRA A. WEST

1. Why would African Americans riot and burn their own neighborhood? What was being expressed? Do you think rioters had a goal?
2. Why did families who were fearful not leave their neighborhood?
3. Do you think rioting was an effective form of protest? Why, or why not?

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

1. How does King describe black socio-economic conditions? How are conditions for blacks today similar to or different from King's description of black society in 1967?
2. What role does King's religious faith and his "audacious faith" play in his speech?
3. In 1967, King stated, "Now, when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated." Can you apply this statement to issues today? How?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 17, "The Black Upsurge Against Racial Segregation"

After reading Chapter 17 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points:

1. Fear, violence, and death were used to control African Americans and intimidate civil-rights leaders of all colors.
2. Freedom is never achieved without a struggle.
3. Not all civil-rights leaders agreed to use non-violent civil disobedience as means to achieve freedom.
4. The slow action and the inaction of the federal government influenced the evolution of the movement over many years.
5. Despite the abuse and violence many African Americans experienced during the civil-rights movement, many were not daunted in their efforts to bring about change.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 17,
“The Black Upsurge Against Racial Segregation” and in
A People’s History, Chapter 17, “Or Does It Explode?”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 17 in both books. Following are four additional points if using both books:

6. The roots of the civil-rights movement are firmly grounded in over 350 years of oppression of African Americans.
7. The civil-rights movement was a well-planned and organized effort, not a spontaneous uprising.
8. All who participated in the movement had to overcome enormous obstacles, often at great personal risk.
9. The issues of racism, war, and economic injustice are interrelated.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 17, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. Why do you think the end of World War I led to such a huge migration of African Americans from the South to the North?
2. How would you compare and contrast the views on Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X concerning the civil-rights movement? How did each want to achieve his goals? Did they have the same goals? In your opinion, which was more effective? Explain.
3. Why do you think Rosa Parks' action set off such a chain of events? Do you think it was planned or spontaneous?
4. What made the 1960s—rather than the 1950s—the time to seek change? What gave the movement momentum, and what things were in place that contributed to its success? Why do you think violence escalated over time?
5. How did World War I, and particularly World War II, influence the way United States society dealt with racism? Why do you think the United States government took steps toward the integration of the military after World War II?
6. Several of the documents discuss the fact that blacks could not and would not vote. Why do you think it was made so hard for African Americans to vote? Why do you think many chose not to attempt to register? Why do you think the movement focused on registering blacks? What is the power in voting? Are there any limits to this power?
7. How was the Million Man March in October 1995 a legacy of the voices you heard in this chapter?
8. Why do you think so many southerners were so vociferously and violently opposed to equality for African Americans?
9. How would you define a revolution? Do you think the civil-rights movement was a revolution? Why, or why not?
10. Do you believe the social and economic justice Martin Luther King, Jr., and others sought has been served? Why, or why not? Give examples.
11. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any on the five themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?
12. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most and least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 17 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

13. Why do you think Howard Zinn entitled Chapter 17 in *A People's History*, "Or Does it Explode"? Do you think the title is well supported by the chapter's contents? Explain.
14. What was the Scottsboro Boys incident? Why was mention of the incident included in Chapter 17?
15. What is the NAACP? What did people hope to gain by associating the actions of the NAACP with Communism? Were they successful in their aims? How and why? What role did the NAACP play in the civil-rights movement?
16. What was the immediate impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*? What was the long-term impact? How well has desegregation met the goals and expectations of the champions of *Brown*?
17. Considering that the federal government had authority to enforce aspects of justice and equality in society, why did the government refrain from getting involved in the evolving conflict in the southern states? How and why did the federal government get involved when it did?
18. What were some of the tactics used by civil-rights activists? What tactics were used by their opponents? How are they similar and different? Which do you think was more successful?
19. Affirmative action is a current controversial issue that has arisen from the civil-rights movement. What is affirmative action? What are its goals? Why would such a system be used? Do you think it is an effective way to right socio-economic injustice?
20. What does happen "to a dream deferred"? What dreams did African Americans have to defer in the years leading up to the civil-rights movement? Which dreams might continue to be deferred in the twenty-first century?
21. What other voices might have been added to Chapter 17 in *Voices* that

might have provided a more complete understanding of Chapter 17 in *A People's History*?

22. Young people—including thousands of pre-teens and teenagers—formed the core of the civil-rights movement. Knowing the risks, why do you think they got involved? Why do you think their parents allowed them to become involved?
23. Was the civil-rights movement confined to the United States' South? Was racism, segregation, and disenfranchisement of the African American community confined to the South?
24. How did the FBI help undermine the civil-rights movement? What role did it play in discrediting the Black Panthers?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journal, oral reports, visual aides, etc.

1. Using a search engine of choice, find a web site that includes primary documents about the civil-rights movement. A good source is the United States National Archives and Records Administration (KARA) at www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/. What does the document tell you about the civil-rights movement?
2. Explore personal experiences by reading a biography of a civil-rights activist. (Two suggestions are *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody and *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Patillo Beals.) How did this person's experiences compare and contrast with those of the voices you read in this/these chapter(s)? Which was most compelling and why? What new information did you learn about the civil-rights movement from the book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Why?

3. Learn more about the origins of the organizations that worked to achieve the goals of the civil-rights movement: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Congress for Racial Equality (CORE); Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). (Be sure to reference the relevant sections of Chapter 18 in *Voices* when researching these organizations.) How were their origins and goals similar and dissimilar? What do you think were the greatest achievements of these organizations?
4. Watch a feature-length movie that depicts part of the civil-rights movement. Some suggestions are *Mississippi Burning*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *Malcolm X*, *Boycott*, *Men of Honor*, *Four Little Girls*. Which parts of the readings did it reinforce? Do you believe the movie is historically accurate? Research the film's accuracy to prove your position.
5. Watch the documentary series *Eyes On The Prize*. How does the documentary bring the writing in *A People's History* and *Voices* alive? What is the importance of having images of history? What part of the readings did it visually reinforce?
6. Learn more about the role of religion and song in the civil-rights movement. Investigate their significance and the spiritual motivation they inspired.
7. Research any two of the following historical legislative acts and judicial decisions related to the movement including: the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson*; the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*; the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. What were the strengths and weakness of each? How were the acts carried out? Who enforced them?
8. Learn more about the historical origins and beliefs of the Nation of Islam (NOI). How did these beliefs influence the civil-rights movement? How did Malcolm X influence the movement? How has the NOI evolved?
9. Using a search engine of choice, investigate the history of lynching. What was the role of lynching? Who participated? Was there any organized opposition to lynching? Does lynching continue to occur in contemporary American society?

10. Learn more about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Explore how their views compared and contrasted.
11. Research the history of the Ku Klux Klan. What influence did it have on the South prior to and during the civil-rights movement? What social and occupational arenas did it enter? Did it have an effect on the way southern officials dealt with African Americans? What role does the Klan play in contemporary American society?
12. View art collections about the civil-rights movement. Norman Rockwell created some exemplary pieces. What do they tell you about the movement? What do they tell you about the individuals involved? Why would art be created to express the civil-rights movement?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. It is argued that one cannot understand the civil-rights movement unless one understands the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Do you think the civil-rights movement was purely a black movement? Use evidence in the readings to support your answer.
3. Do you think Martin Luther King's dream to one day say, "We have overcome! We have overcome! Deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome," has been achieved? Do you think King would be disappointed today? Use examples from the readings and from contemporary society to support your answer.
4. How has black consciousness changed since the civil-rights movement? How was it expressed then? How is it expressed today? Provide examples.
5. The evolution of federal involvement in matters concerning the rights of African Americans was very slow. Why do you think the federal government neglected to enforce civil-rights laws for so long?
6. What were the different strategies used as the civil-rights movement progressed? Why do you think it started to quiet down in the late 1960s?
7. Howard Zinn writes that the black revolt of the 1950s and 1960s should not have come as a surprise to people of the United States. Support this statement with historical evidence.

8. How is the civil-rights movement a contemporary example of the historical debate over federal versus states' rights?
9. Is the civil-rights movement over? Carefully explain your answer, using historical and contemporary examples.
10. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "And so we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promise land of freedom." What criteria do you think King used to define freedom? How do you define freedom? Do you think African Americans were free in 1967? Are they free today?
11. How has reading chapter 17 in *Voices* broadened your understanding of the civil-rights movement?
12. What voices of resistance in Chapter 17 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling and why?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine that you are Martin Luther King, Jr., and you are in jail in Birmingham, Alabama. Before you write your famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," write a letter to Henry David Thoreau in which you discuss your feelings about the successes and failures of civil disobedience over a hundred years later.
2. Create a panel of veterans from organizations that worked to achieve the goals of the civil-rights movement: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Congress for Racial Equality (CORE); Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Imagine that these veterans of the movement have gathered in the early twenty-first century to discuss with their audience (class members) how their goals for freedom and equality in the 1960s have and have not been met over forty years later.
3. Stage a debate that might have been held in 1967 between Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X about the goals and anticipated outcomes of the struggle for civil rights.
4. Write a poem or song or create a work of art that expresses the goals of any

contemporary group of United States residents who currently experience political, social, and/or economic injustice.

5. Hold a town meeting in your classroom in which the residents (students) come prepared with a list of contemporary civil-rights issues that have arisen within the community at large and within your school environment. Discuss the similarities and differences of the issues that arise, whether they are issues that are typical or atypical of other communities, and any possible solutions that could be enacted both within the larger community and in the school community.
6. Write a new section to be added to your history textbook's coverage of the civil-rights movement that is entitled, "The Civil Rights Movement in the Twenty-first century."