

AFRICAN – AMERICAN LEADERSHIP AND MASS MOBILIZATION

DURING THE THIRTEEN YEARS after Rosa Parks initiated the Montgomery bus boycott movement, African Americans launched a series of escalating protest movements and insurgencies. Small-scale acts of civil disobedience sparked sustained civil rights campaigns in hundreds of black communities, mostly in the southern states. These non-violent movements gave way in the mid-1960s to violent racial rebellions in dozens of cities throughout the nation. The mass struggles of the early 1960s enhanced the impact of African Americans on national politics, prompting the passage of major civil rights and anti-poverty legislation. As these struggles became increasingly militant, they also provoked a white backlash against pro-black policies and a concerted campaign of repression by local police forces and federal agencies. In the years since 1968, mass mobilizations in African-American communities have declined in frequency, intensity, and effectiveness. This article explores the causes and consequences of the rise and decline of these mass mobilizations.

LEADERSHIP: FROM THE TOP AS FROM THE BOTTOM

Modern African-American history focuses more on nationally-prominent black leaders than on black social movements, but for the most part, the black mass protests and insurgencies of the 1950s and 1960s were grassroots movements that emerged with little guidance from national African-American organizations or their leaders. National civil rights leaders offered inspiration, resources, and ideological guidance to grassroots movements, but locally-based mass movements were largely beyond their control. In contrast mass protests and demonstrations at the local level gave political leverage and credibility to national leaders who spoke on behalf of African Americans. Black power proponents of the mid-1960s saw themselves as more in tune with grassroots militancy than civil rights leaders, but their political influence was also derived from mass movements which they could not control. Civil rights protest movements of the 1950s and early 1960s and the urban rebellions of mid-1960s rarely responded to direction from above. Instead, African-American mass movements of that period forced established leaders to respond to surges from below. Such leaders also faced new competition from emergent grassroots leaders more in touch with the sentiments of movement participants.

The Montgomery bus boycott, for example, began in December 1955 as the result of an unplanned, independent act of defiance by Rosa Parks, an officer of the local NAACP chapter. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as a nationally-known leader and proponent of nonviolent resistance only after the Women's Political Council, led by Jo Ann Robinson, had launched the boycott.¹ "I did not start this boycott," King acknowledged to boycott participants early in 1956. "I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman; ... if I am stopped this movement will not stop."² As later movements provided opportunities for other emergent leaders, the Montgomery movement provided a setting in which

King's exceptional talents as a conciliator and visionary spokesperson could blossom. The NAACP's national office assisted the Montgomery movement, but the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) directed the successful year-long boycott. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed after the successful conclusion of the boycott, more accurately reflected the activist orientation of King and other protest leaders.

The SCLC, led by King, did not exert much control over the next major mass mobilization - the student-led lunch counter sit-ins of 1960. After the initial Greensboro sit-in on February 1, 1960, the SCLC, NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were among the organizations that sought to provide ideological and tactical guidance for the sit-in campaign that followed. However, student protesters insisted on forming independent local groups under their own leadership. Even the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in April 1960 by student protest leaders, saw itself as helping rather than directing local movements. SNCC distinguished itself from other civil rights organizations through its consistent support for grassroots leadership and the principle of local autonomy.³

CORE INITIATED THE FREEDOM RIDES Of 1961, but this desegregation effort did not become a social movement until CORE abandoned the rides when white racists attacked its initial contingent. Student militants, many of them veterans of the sit-ins, then took over the freedom rides. Dozens of the most committed freedom riders served terms in Mississippi prisons, and some later became full-time organizers in Mississippi and other strongholds of white supremacy. Accepting the aid but rarely the advice of the established civil rights organizations, many freedom riders were nevertheless attracted to SNCC's decentralized structure.⁴

From 1961 to 1963, beginning with the Albany protests of December 1961, grassroots activists and full-time civil rights organizers were able to mobilize major marches, rallies, and direct action protests in many southern communities and a few northern cities. Local leaders - often affiliated with but acting independently of the NAACP, SCLC, or CORE - initiated and led most of these mass mobilizations, which attracted substantial working-class participation and which sought economic goals as well as desegregation. King's SCLC attempted to orchestrate the Birmingham demonstrations of Spring 1963, but local activist Fred Shuttlesworth, leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, had already prepared the ground. In Birmingham, as in other local movements of the period, national civil rights groups were able to mobilize black communities only with the support of grassroots activists. Furthermore, as the Birmingham campaign garnered national attention and sparked massive demonstrations elsewhere, the southern struggle acquired a momentum over which national black leaders had little control. When veteran labor leader A. Philip Randolph proposed a march on Washington, he argued in a June 1963 meeting with President Kennedy that "the Negroes are already in the streets. It is very likely impossible to get them off." Randolph assured Kennedy that the march would not manifest the increasing grassroots militancy but would instead divert that militancy into safer channels: "If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by

organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about nonviolence?"⁵ Randolph's remarks underscored the new political direction: Black Power.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

The national civil rights organizations supported the Black Belt voting rights campaign, but in this instance too local leadership played crucial roles in mobilizing black communities. In areas of Mississippi and Alabama where white resistance was most fierce, SNCC (and to a lesser extent CORE and SCLC) organizers worked under the auspices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coordinating body led by black Mississippians. Once again, these organizers were effective only to the extent that they secured the support of indigenous leaders. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), formed in 1964, became increasingly independent of national civil rights organizations and leaders. This gulf became evident at the Democratic National Convention of 1964 when Lyndon Johnson's supporters indicated that they would seat only two MFDP delegates rather than displace the entire all-white regular delegation. King and other national civil rights leaders argued in favor of this compromise, but Fannie Lou Hamer spoke for the majority of MFDP delegates when she responded, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats!"⁶ The formation during the following year of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) in Alabama symbolized the determination of black grassroots activists to assert their independence from the national civil rights leaders and their white allies. The LCFO's slogan, "Black Power for Black People," established the theme of subsequent African-American militancy.

By the time of the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, civil rights protests were already declining in significance within the larger African-American freedom struggle. The Los Angeles rebellion of August 1965 accelerated the ongoing shift in the focus of African-American politics from issues of legal equality toward broader political, economic, and cultural concerns. Nevertheless, as during the period of civil rights protests, a pattern of autonomous grassroots activism characterized black power advocacy. Indeed, mass mobilizations in black communities often took the form of inchoate racial rioting that did not respond to centralized direction. During the mid-1960s, black power advocates and black nationalists insisted that they, rather than established civil rights leaders, spoke for the black masses, but few of them actually led mass protest movements or insurgencies. Black power advocates, like civil rights advocates, gained national prominence less through mobilizing movements than through skillful manipulation of media.

Moreover, both civil rights and black power leaders were able to gain national prominence most readily by emphasizing intangible goals - civil/human rights and increased group pride - rather than tangible, especially economic, goals. Black leaders could more easily deliver intangible gains, because such gains did not involve fixed-sum values and thus could be achieved without decreasing the amount possessed by non-blacks. In contrast, tangible goals, such as jobs, housing, services, and representation on decision-making bodies, could not be increased rapidly for African Americans without

decreasing the amount available for other groups. Black power proponents and black nationalist leaders challenged civil rights leaders to transform the living conditions of the black masses, but all black leaders found it easier to transform the status and esteem of African Americans than to change racial realities. As a result, the black consciousness movements of the 1960s and 1970s achieved psychological and cultural transformation without having much impact on the living conditions of poor and working-class blacks. The black masses acquired an ideological vocabulary to express their anger and frustration but still lacked the political awareness necessary for effective collective action.

THE LEGACY OF MALCOLM X

MALCOLM X INFLUENCED MANY of the leaders; who sought to give guidance to the grassroots militancy of the black power era. However, his intellectual legacy did not bridge the divide between black leaders and mobilized black masses. Despite his rhetorical support for black militancy, Malcolm himself did not lead a protest or insurgent movement. Indeed, Malcolm's principal contribution to the black nationalist tradition was to link that tradition with the mass movements of his time. As Malcolm observed the intensifying civil rights demonstrations of 1963 and 1964, he moved from harsh criticisms of nonviolence and integrationism to a more subtle critique that distinguished between national and grassroots civil rights leaders. Although Malcolm continued to challenge King and other established civil rights leaders, he also became increasingly critical of the Nation of Islam's apolitical orientation: "I felt that, wherever black people committed themselves, in the Little Rocks and the Birmingham and other places, militantly disciplined Muslims should also be there for all the world to see, and respect, and discuss. It could be heard increasingly in the Negro communities: 'Those Muslims talk tough, but they never do anything, unless somebody bothers Muslims.'"⁷ By the time of the March on Washington, Malcolm combined attacks on national black leaders - "they control you, but they have never incited you or excited you" - with generous praise for "local leaders," who had begun "to stir up our people at the grass-roots level."⁸

After leaving the Nation of Islam, Malcolm formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and began reaching out to militant grassroots leaders. In October 1964, while on a tour of Africa, he met with SNCC representatives, convincing them to cooperate with his newly- establish group. In December he hosted Fannie Lou Hamer and other MFDP leaders at a Harlem OAAU meeting and also met with a delegation of teenagers from the McComb, Mississippi movement. During February 1965 he traveled to Selma, Alabama, to address young voting rights activists. While there he attempted to meet with Martin Luther King, Jr., but, because the civil rights leader was in jail, he assured Coretta Scott King of his desire to aid the civil rights struggle. By the time of his assassination on February 21, Malcolm's variant of black nationalism emphasized militant political engagement rather than racial-religious separatism.⁹

Many of Malcolm's posthumous followers continued to quote his speeches as minister of the Nation of Islam, the group whose leaders condemned Malcolm as a traitor "worthy of death."¹⁰ After his death, most followers gave more attention to Malcolm's

criticisms of civil rights leaders than to his efforts to forge ties with grassroots activists, more focus to his racial ideas than to his political thought. Malcolm's intellectual legacy became a diverse set of ideas that had both conservative and radical implications - ideas that encouraged generalized pessimism about the future as well as revolutionary enthusiasm. Black power advocates, such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, and Black Panther leaders popularized Malcolm's brand of rhetorical militancy, but they had little success in building politically effective mass movements. Black power militancy produced lasting ideological and cultural contributions but also fomented destructive ideological and cultural conflicts within the black militant community. Intending to create a unified and revolutionary black movement, black power advocates instead competed with one another to determine which ideas should become the basis of racial unity.

In retrospect, the assassination of Malcolm X can be seen as the prototype of subsequent deadly and demoralizing black-against-black battles that made black militancy more vulnerable to external manipulation and repression. Rather than serving as "organic intellectuals"¹¹ building on the emergent ideas of ongoing grassroots struggles, some black power advocates, assuming that ideological conversion and cultural training were necessary preconditions for effective racial struggle, arrogantly sought to "raise" the black masses to a predetermined level of consciousness. Narrowly conceived, purist, or "blacker than thou" ideological formulations that were intended to unify African Americans instead divided them. Black ideologues unwittingly competed for the role of the black "messiah," who, in the fantasy of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, could "unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement."¹²

"GROUP-CENTERED" LEADERSHIP VS. "LEADERSHIP-CENTERED" GROUPS

Acceptance of the notion that the mass mobilizations of black people during the 1950s and 1960s resulted from top-down leadership has obscured a valuable aspect of the legacy of that era's struggles. The ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X have become far better known to the current generation of African-American youth than have the organizing techniques that made possible grassroots movements. King and Malcolm have become larger than life icons - Great Men who were agents of historical change rather than products of their time. They have become symbols of the two major competing African-American ideologies that made possible the mass struggles of their times rather than as brilliant orators who reflected at different times the sentiments of mobilized black masses. These two male icons have become far more widely known than the diverse, often female and youthful, leaders who collectively were more responsible for changing the course of African-American history. Contemporary black youth are likely to see King and Malcolm as representing irreconcilable ideological positions rather than each as offering partial, incomplete insights into fundamental issues of the African-American experience.¹³

The legacy of the modern African-American freedom struggle is not only ideas about political strategies and racial destiny but also about ways of organizing communities.

The most successful black organizers of the 1960s established a model of community mobilization that emphasized the nurturing of grassroots leaders and organizations. The most successful SNCC projects unleashed the power of communities, allowing residents to become confident of their collective ability to overcome oppression. SNCC's organizing approach reflected the influence of Ella Baker, who suffered elitism and sexism as a field secretary for the NAACP and director of SCLC's headquarters. Rejecting King's charismatic style, Baker advised SNCC organizers to promote "group-centered leaders" rather than "leader-centered groups." The most effective organizers of the 1960s realized that their job was to work themselves out of a job. They avoided replacing old dependencies with new ones. The black freedom struggle's largely decentralized structure made it responsive to local needs and encouraged leaders to emerge from groups that were traditionally excluded because of gender, poverty, background, educational deficiencies, and age - from participating in political decision making.

THE EMPHASIS OF IDEOLOGY OVER ORGANIZING

AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL MILITANCY of the period since 1965 has more often drawn inspiration from the speeches of Malcolm X than from the organizing techniques developed by Ella Baker. African-American consciousness movements clarified issues of racial identity, but they fostered destructive leadership competition and undermined the role of local leaders who lacked exceptional oratorical skills and national reputations. King and Malcolm symbolize alternative directions for future black politics, but both leaders appreciated the crucial role of grassroots leaders. Unlike many of their followers, both King and Malcolm moved during their last years toward ideological positions that incorporated the emergent ideas of the modern African- American freedom struggle. Rather than symbolizing irreconcilable positions, King and Malcolm represent complementary understandings of the dilemmas facing black people. Both men understood the importance of building strong, black-controlled institutions in African-American communities. Both realized that non-violent tactics could be used militantly and were essential aspects of any mass struggle. Martin was firmly committed to racial reconciliation and nonviolence, but his final book *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* contains a moving testament on the need for mass militancy driven by a positive sense of black identity.

One of the tragic consequences of the assassinations of King and Malcolm has been that they were unable to control the ideological warfare that was later conducted in their names. Had they lived, they may have been able to restrain followers who assumed that building strong black institutions was incompatible with achieving equal treatment as American citizens. King recognized that African Americans would never be free until they signed their own emancipation proclamation "with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood," and Malcolm understood that freedom could be achieved only through sustained militant struggle rather than apocalyptic rhetoric. They would certainly have resisted efforts to simplify their complex ideas into neat dichotomies - integrationism versus separatism or nonviolence versus armed self-defense. More importantly, they

would have remained human beings with flaws and limitations rather than historical icons.

At a birthday celebration for Ella Baker held in 1978, former Mississippi organizer Bob Moses remarked that SNCC and the black struggle as a whole became stymied by the question King had addressed in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* "The problem with that question is 'We,' who we are," Moses explained. "Because, if you really stop to think about it, that's where we left off." African-American debates over issues of racial identity and destiny have been enormously important, but they have also obscured the ideas associated with successful community mobilization efforts. The traditions of civil rights activism and that of black nationalism each offer incomplete responses to the ambiguities of African-American identity and destiny. As W. E. B. DuBois commented early in this century in his seminal *Souls of Black Folk*, African-American history involves an effort to merge a "double self into a truer self." The African-American struggle to realize the democratic dream has transformed the United States in ways far beyond the conceptions of the nation's white, male founders. Still black nationalists have consistently reminded African Americans that multicultural democracy is a dubious unfinished experiment.

The revival of African-American mass militancy is vital for future black progress and for the realization of democratic ideals. The assumption that exceptional black leaders will foster such a revival is contrary to the lessons of recent African-American history. Great leaders have provided African Americans with important insights about the meaning of their experience, but they have rarely mobilized the black masses into sustained political movements capable of affecting the American political system. Waiting for the messiah is a human weakness unlikely to be rewarded more than once in a millennium. Careful study of the modern black freedom struggle offers support for the more optimistic belief that participants in a mass movement can develop their untapped capabilities and collectively improve their lives.

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NOTES

1. See especially J. Mills Thornton III, "Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956," *Alabama Review* 33 (1980): 163-235; Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); and Stephen Michael Millner, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott: Case Study in the Emergence and Career of a Social Movement," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

2. Quoted in *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 31, 1956.

3. Cf. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
4. See Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp.44-61; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 138-139; Carson, *In Struggle*, chapter 3.
5. Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 854-855.
6. Carson, *In Struggle*, p.126. The best account of the Mississippi voting rights campaign is John Dittmer's *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
7. Malcolm X, with Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965, 1973), p.289.
8. George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1965),p.13.
9. Quotes from February 29, 1968, FBI memorandum from Director Hoover to field offices regarding Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), Black Nationalist-Hate Groups. See Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 134-136.
10. Louis X Farrakhan quoted in Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1991), p.43.
- 11 - Cf. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle. Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).
12. See Carson, *In Struggle*, p.263.
13. See the thoughtful discussion in James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1991).