

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

Fine Words One Thing, Application Another

(Last of 10 articles)

"It has been a revolutionary decade, 1954 to 1964. The most far-seeing of men, standing at the beginning of the period, would have been quite unlikely to predict that at the end of it the stereotype of the apathetic, satisfied Negro would forever have been destroyed; that the indifference of white America would have given way to sympathy and to admiration for and some fear of the fervor and courage of the new Negro; that the Federal Government would have abandoned a hands-off attitude of 80 years standing and come to the point of total commitment against racial segregation in schools and streetcars and at lunch counters."

—Anthony Lewis of The New York Times, "Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution"

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Incredibly, these things have all come to pass in America within the last 14 years.

The catalyst for all these changes occurred May 17, 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled that persons "required on the basis of race to attend separate schools were deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment."

The South, faced with genuine desegregation right where bigotry or tolerance starts — with children — responded with vehemence.

James Meredith

In addition to adults like James Meredith at the University of Mississippi, grade school children were made martyrs. Black boys and girls who entered schools in cities

like Little Rock and Birmingham were spit upon and stoned. White mothers, their faces contorted with frenzied hatred, yelled, "Kill the niggers!"

For the first time in history, television showed those faces to millions of other people. And Anthony Lewis theorizes that this had a tremendous effect upon white reaction in America.

Segregation and rabid racism had been abstractions to many of these people — particularly to Northerners, most of whom had been practicing de facto segregation all their lives without giving it a second thought. Now they could look upon prejudice and hatred at its ugliest.

Those violent first years of school desegregation caused a jarring examination of consciences in America.

Prime Concern

The nation also was forced to realize that race relations were of prime concern by Martin Luther King Jr.

One quiet day in 1955, a seamstress named Rosa Parks got on a bus in Montgomery, Ala. Mrs. Parks found a seat, but she was ordered to get up and give it to a white man. For the first time in her life, she refused to move to the back of the bus, and she was arrested.

In retaliation, Dr. King — a Baptist minister — suggested that Montgomery's 50,000 Negroes refuse to ride buses until the company treated them courteously and allotted seats first-come, first-served.

The boycott forced the bus company to raise fares for white riders.

Dr. King and almost 100 Negroes, including 24 other ministers, were arrested on

boycott charges. Dr. King was to spend a lot of time in jails over the next decade, but he maintained the philosophy of "return love for hate" and broke down racial barriers long considered unbreakable.

White Liberals

His use of Gandhi's passive-resistance techniques spread to other groups and individuals besides his Southern Christian Leadership Conference. CORE (since gone militant) and SNCC, among others, adopted "sit-ins" to protest segregation at lunch counters and on public transportation. They were joined by white liberals.

The harder the South fought desegregation, the more white consciences were stirred. Congress passed President Kennedy's sweeping civil rights measures in 1963, and hundreds of white college students, priests — even housewives, like Viola Liuzzo of Detroit, who was shot by a sniper between Selma and Montgomery — moved in to help Negroes with voter registration in backwoods areas, and to desegregate primaries for the first time since Reconstruction.

Backlash to this new determination grew too. Not only in the South but in the North where open housing is a prime issue. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer observed in their joint Negro history that "the jubilation which millions of American Negroes felt following a series of historic Supreme Court decisions in the 1950s affirming the basic rights of democracy for all, gradually subsided as the realization grew that noble words on paper are one thing, and their application in bigoted communities quite another."



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Violence increased: dogs were set loose on Negro marchers and white companions; homes were bombed, and civil rights leaders like Medgar Evers were cut down.

Turned Militant

Segments of the Negro population have repudiated Martin Luther King's ideas, and "tired of waiting over 300 years for justice," have turned to militancy, to riots and destruction. Declared H. Rap Brown: "Blacks built America. If America don't come around, we're going to burn America down, brother. We're going to burn it if we don't get our share of it."