

## Epilogue: The Struggle Continues

The Johnson administration's compromise failed to satisfy either of the delegations from Mississippi. Most of the white Mississippians refused to pledge their loyalty to the Democratic Party and Lyndon Johnson. All but three walked out immediately, and many left Atlantic City in protest. In the years after the convention, many southern white Democrats would leave the party to join the Republicans, the political party they had opposed since Reconstruction. In the presidential election that year, Barry Goldwater received less than 40 percent of the vote nationally, but in Mississippi he won 87 percent of votes cast.

Against the advice of many national civil rights leaders, the MFDP also rejected the compromise.

***“The whole issue around the compromise for us, and for me, was that it was some kind of political ploy that they understood, but for us, for Mississippi, it was what was right and what was wrong. It was we who had been done wrong. Our rights had been taken away, and you just couldn’t issue some two seats at large to correct that. And it was a moral situation that had to be righted.”***

—Unita Blackwell, SNCC activist

The 1964 Democratic National Convention was a turning point for the movement in Mississippi. For years, black Mississippians had been asking the federal government to use its power to enforce voting rights, protect civil rights workers, and end racial violence. For some activists, the Democratic Party's unwillingness to seat their delegation shattered their hopes that politicians in Washington could be counted on to support the push for justice and equality.

***“Never again were we lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the ‘good’ people of***

***America could eliminate them. We left Atlantic City with the knowledge that the movement had turned into something else. After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation.”***

—Cleveland Sellers, SNCC activist

The disagreement over whether to accept the compromise reflected larger disagreements about the goals and tactics of the civil rights movement. These disagreements would divide the movement in Mississippi and around the country in the years to come.

### ***What happened in Mississippi after the convention?***

Following the 1964 convention, many key community organizers in the Mississippi movement began to step back from their work. People like Bob Moses, who had given years of their lives to the movement, took less active roles or left Mississippi altogether. This drained the movement of valuable experience and energy.

The political differences that had emerged at the convention further divided COFO's different member organizations. These factors led to the collapse of COFO in 1965.

Nevertheless, the struggle for racial justice in Mississippi continued. Civil rights groups organized voter registration drives, boycotts, and marches in communities throughout the state. The Mississippi movement became one of the strongest and most comprehensive of any state in the South. By the end of the decade its accomplishments were clear to see. African Americans won the right to participate in electoral politics, and in 1968, more than 250,000 black Mississippians registered to vote.

When an all-white Mississippi delegation asked to represent Mississippi at the 1968 Democratic Convention, the Democratic Party refused this time. Instead they seated an alternate and integrated delegation that included

### The War on Poverty

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson began an effort to alleviate poverty in the United States. As part of the “War on Poverty,” Johnson started many government programs that provided employment and economic assistance to poor people. Many of the War on Poverty programs had a positive impact on poor black communities throughout the country. Some of them—including Head Start, VISTA, and the food stamp program—are still in operation today. Funding for Johnson’s poverty programs began to decline as the U.S. government increased its military spending during the Vietnam War.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Aaron Henry, and others who had their hopes dashed in 1964.

The movement did away with legal segregation—the defining feature of the Jim Crow era. In 1969, after a Supreme Court order, Mississippi’s schools finally integrated. The Mississippi civil rights struggle also brought an end to most of the violence and terror that pervaded everyday life for African Americans under Jim Crow, though civil rights activists continued to face white hostility when they pushed for change.

### The Voting Rights Act

Much of the black activism of the 1950s and early 1960s focused on integration and voting rights. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which integrated public spaces, activists and sympathetic politicians turned their attention to legislation that would ensure African Americans’ right to vote. These efforts came to a peak in 1965 following the Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches in Alabama.

In 1963, local African Americans and SNCC activists had begun working on voter registration in Selma, Alabama. In 1965, a protestor was shot by a white policeman and movement leaders called for a march to the state capital of Montgomery to demand justice. On their

first attempt, the marchers were attacked by local police, forcing them to turn back. The violence drew more people to the cause and two weeks later eight thousand marchers set out for Montgomery. They marched for four days, finally reaching the capital building where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech.

The Selma to Montgomery marches had a strong impact on public opinion. People around the country, including President Johnson, were moved by the images of police violence. President Johnson presented the first version of the Voting Rights Act to Congress two nights after the first march attempt. The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965. It outlawed the discriminatory voting practices that had been practiced in the South since Reconstruction. The Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act were two



President Lyndon Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Photo by Yoichi Okamoto. IBJ Library.



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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (center) during the Selma to Montgomery marches in March 1965. SNCC Chairman John Lewis is at the right of the photo.

key pieces of federal law to emerge from the civil rights movement. They were an assertion of the federal government's supremacy over state and local law in protecting the rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

### ***How did the civil rights movement change in the late 1960s?***

By the end of the 1960s, activists across the country understood that voting rights and integration were not enough to achieve justice and equality. The movement began to focus more on economic justice. National civil rights leaders, like Bayard Rustin, began to argue that integration did not matter if African Americans remained poor and unemployed.

***“What is the point in earning access to public accommodations for those who lack the money to use them.... I fail to see how the movement can be***

***victorious in the absence of radical programs for full employment, abolition of slums, the reconstitution of our educational system.”***

—Bayard Rustin, 1965

Before his assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began the “Poor People’s Campaign” to end poverty and homelessness. He called for an economic bill of rights that would address the lack of affordable housing and income inequality issues.

***“There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in America?’ And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.... We are called upon to help the discouraged***

***beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.***

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., August 1967

### ***What was the black power movement?***

Some activists began to question whether integration should even be a goal of the movement. They supported black self-determination and separation from white society. No longer willing to rely on authorities for political support or protection, they argued that African Americans should develop their own political institutions.

In 1966, James Meredith (the man who had integrated the University of Mississippi in 1961) began a solo march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi to protest racism. He was shot and injured by a white gunman. Civil rights leaders from around the country came to Mississippi to continue the march. In a speech to these leaders in Greenwood, Mississippi, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael declared that African Americans needed “black power.”

***“We have to organize ourselves to speak from a position of strength and stop begging people to look kindly upon us. We are going to build a movement in this country based on the color of our skins that is going to free us from our oppressors and we have to do that ourselves.... We have to organize ourselves to speak for each other. That's 'black power.' We have to move to control the economics and politics of our community...”***

—Stokely Carmichael, July 28, 1966

The slogan “black power” became a rallying call in the late 1960s, and inspired new organizations like the Black Panther Party. Black power activists felt that if African Americans wanted to achieve freedom and

racial equality, they needed to stop depending on the established political system, which was controlled largely by whites. Many African Americans felt that the phrase “black power” symbolized the strength and solidarity of the civil rights movement that had been building for generations. In practice, some organizations took black power to mean a shift in their leadership and activism to African American members only.

For others, like the Black Panthers, black power involved moving away from nonviolent direct action. Black Panther activists argued that violence was necessary in certain situations when fighting against white supremacy and defending their communities. In particular, the Black Panthers took issue with police brutality in black communities. The Black Panthers also started programs that provided services, like free breakfast and medical care, to poor people in the inner cities.

The concept of black power divided the civil rights movement. Some civil rights leaders criticized black power activists for being too confrontational. White liberal groups stopped funding organizations like SNCC that embraced black power.

### ***Why were some of the gains of the movement rolled back in the decades that followed?***

The goals of the civil rights movement had always been broad. Civil rights activists in SNCC and other organizations were not just fighting for legal rights, but political power, social equality, and economic opportunity. After the 1960s, some politicians began to argue that the movement had been nothing more than a legal fight to create a color-blind society. They argued that the movement had succeeded in passing laws for equality, and that civil rights issues were no longer relevant.

From the 1970s onwards, many of the programs developed during the 1960s to address problems of economic injustice—including expanded social services and programs to counter racism and discrimination in education and hiring practices—were diminished.

## Civil Rights Today

The mass civil rights movement challenged the racism that prevented African Americans from gaining access to politics, education, and good jobs throughout the United States. It made it possible for more black people to join the middle class. African Americans began attending college and finding employment in the public and the private sectors at much higher rates. Today, African Americans occupy positions of power throughout society—from corporate boardrooms, to prestigious universities, to the oval office. In 2009, Barack Obama became the first black president of the United States.

The movement also inspired legislation that helps prevent civil rights abuses to this day. Although many activists thought them insufficient at the time, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act created federal legal standards that protect the Constitutional rights of all citizens.

### *What civil rights challenges remain?*

Despite many meaningful victories, the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did not end racism or racial inequality in the United States. Many of the injustices and inequalities that African Americans fought to overcome during the early 1960s remain today. Although new opportunities exist for African Americans, 27 percent of black people in the United States live in poverty. In Mississippi, 45 percent of black families continue to live under the poverty line as of 2010.

The legacies of Jim Crow and other forms of historical discrimination remain. For example, although the movement eliminated legal segregation throughout the country, neighborhoods and schools remain largely segregated. School systems with majority black populations are often underfunded.

African Americans are also disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system. One in three black males in the United States will go to prison in their lifetimes, compared to just one in every seventeen white males. In



A protest for racial justice in 2011. The poster on the left is of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, killed on June 12, 1963 in Jackson, Mississippi.

Sunset Parkerpix. Creative Commons ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License.

Mississippi, 75 percent of state prisoners are black. These disparities are caused by a variety of factors including high rates of crime in poor communities and racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. Studies have shown that people of color are far more likely to be stopped by the police than whites.

While the 1965 Voting Rights Act officially banned voter discrimination, many African Americans continue to have difficulty exercising their right to vote. For example, new voter identification laws passed in 2011 in a number of states make it impossible for people without a photo ID to vote. African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to lack photo ID. While defenders of these laws portray them as a way to protect the integrity of the electoral process, critics see them as similar to the various methods used during the Jim Crow era to reduce the political power of African Americans and other minorities.

The regular lynchings of the Jim Crow period have long since ended, but racism and racial violence have not. People of color in the United States continue to face discrimination and sometimes violence because of their race.

## Conclusion

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s transformed the United States, wrenching it away from the Jim Crow era and challenging the systemic racism that denied African Americans their Constitutional rights. And while national figures like Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks are celebrated for their important roles, the foundation of the civil rights movement was the local activism and organizing that took place in communities throughout the country.

In the South, particularly in Mississippi, local civil rights activism often meant working every day for years in a dangerous campaign to register voters. It meant walking door to door and convincing people that if they were willing to take a stand then justice was possible. It meant participating in direct action protests against racial hatred, oppression, and inequality.

Thousands of individuals—sharecroppers, laborers, domestic workers—risked their safety, jobs, and lives to participate in the civil

rights movement. Young people led canvassing drives and joined older activists at demonstrations, and boycotts to end racial injustices.

In these pages you have read about some

of the people who rose to the challenge of organizing their communities in Mississippi in this struggle. All of these stories (and there are many others) remind us that the civil rights movement was not simply a national movement led by a few, it was a series of local movements for racial justice with many participants and leaders. These stories remind us of the collective power of individuals to change society and affect the course of history.

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**“The strength of the civil rights movement was in the fact that there were so many local people involved. We had marvelous high-profile national spokespersons, but the day-to-day work, the hanging in there was done by the local people.... Local people made the difference.”**

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—Victoria Gray Adams, SNCC activist