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Change Through Time: Civil Rights

Shortly after the abolition of slavery, the United States began to see a new movement emerge based on the idea of improving the quality of life for African American citizens who had continuously been treated unequally. As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, many differing opinions emerged regarding how African Americans should handle the prevalent amount of white supremacy that controlled their lives. Important African American leaders, such as Booker T Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King Jr, had a tremendous impact on the changing ideologies of African Americans and the development of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement changed drastically between 1895 and 1955 from the passive stance of African Americans to a more resistant and active response toward white supremacy. As the movement progressed, African Americans were able to gain more equality and independence from white Americans due to the changing ideals from the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, throughout the Great Depression, and after the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

The Civil Rights era began with the idea from Booker T. Washington that African Americans should remain in the south, turn away from agitation, adjust to segregation, and seek to improve the African Americans economic condition with white assistance. His goal was to establish a new era of industrial progress and cooperation between whites and blacks.¹ This began the Civil Rights Movement with a goal of white cooperation which would hopefully lead to better treatment of African Americans. Additionally, Washington argued that it was more important for blacks to establish a program of “industrial education” that gave vocational

training rather than participating in academic studies because it was important for African Americans to “dignify and glorify common labor.”² However, this wasn’t a long-lasting viewpoint because it didn’t increase equality for African Americans.

The Great Depression hit the United States with extreme force, especially the African Americans since they were poor and treated unequally. The New Deal programs sought to help Americans, however they were discriminatory and didn’t provide aid to black communities. During this time, a shift in the Civil Rights Movement was needed to help African Americans survive the depression. One of the most famous ideals was from W.E.B. DuBois who changed the attitude from social justice to economic survival through the idea of creating a “nation within a nation.”³ Before the Great Depression, blacks relied on Whites to succeed, however, whites were now struggling to take care of themselves and it was important for blacks to create their own nation in order to achieve economic solidarity.⁴ The goal of creating a united community of African Americans was thought to be achieved by, “the use of their political power, their power as consumers, and their brain power.”⁵ Instead of depending on white Americans, blacks began to build communities of their own which saw several positive impacts such as an increase in economic cooperation, organized self-defense, and necessary self-confidence.⁶

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Rosa Parks in 1955, gave rise to new leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr who helped change the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement.⁷ After Rosa Parks led one of the first protests against black segregation, the attitude toward the Civil Rights Movement shifted from isolated black communities, to activism and protests which advocated for racial justice. This change was promoted by Martin Luther King Jr. who believed that African Americans needed to work together to achieve justice. This change was caused by

the Montgomery Boycott and the continuous oppression and humiliation of African Americans. King advocated for black citizenship and emphasized that they should be able to, “apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning.”⁸ He believed that the only weapon needed was the weapon of protest and it was important to work together in a non-violent way to inhibit social change and equality. This change in the movement inspired thousands of people to protest against discrimination. This had a significant impact on the meaning of the movement and caused a shift from oppression to acceptance and inclusion.

In conclusion, the impact of strong African American leaders and the shift in ideologies over time led to the change of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement changed from an isolated, passive black community to a united, active black community that fought for their equality. As the movement progressed, African Americans faced less discrimination and more equality that eventually led to the integration of African Americans into regular American society.

¹ Booker T. Washington, *Address at the Atlanta Cotton Exposition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972-1989), 57.

² *Ibid*, 59.

³ W.E.B. DuBois, *A Negro Nation within a Nation* (*Current History Magazine*, 1935), 187.

⁴ *Ibid*, 189.

⁵ *Ibid*, 188.

⁶ *Ibid*, 190.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, *Meeting at Holt Street Church* (New York, NY: The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr, 1963), 267.

⁸ *Ibid*.