American Resilience

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History

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Editor's Note: Ms. Kovalchek's article originally appeared as a series of posts on a multi-media web blog. If you wish to view her complete project, please go to https://rileykovalcheck.wixsite.com/americanresilience

To begin, I'll admit this project began as a mandatory assignment for one of my classes, Recent American History. My professor, Dr. Welky, started the semester off by asking each student to identify 1) the most important theme in American history since the 1960s or 2) the three most influential individuals in this period of American history.

My initial thought was to focus on three of my biggest inspirations (and three badass men) - Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Barack Obama. To me, those three individuals personify unity, perseverance, and resilience.

As I started brainstorming, a bigger picture came to mind... This theme of overwhelming *resilience* in the African-American community across the nation. There is no doubt that as a whole, this demographic has single-handedly been more suppressed than any other throughout the history of the United States, but yet even more resilient in the long run. So, for this project, I decided to focus on this overall theme of resilience

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- solely among African-Americans - and in particular, the role of men in politics, women in their local communities, and the unification and organization in social movements like the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter. To highlight how revolutionary these accomplishments were, I will also discuss white resistance that was overcome in the process.

Being a history student, I recognize that we are often taught the same old story of American history, focusing on the same leaders and accomplishments, and that is what I aimed to oppose. I wanted to focus on the fundamental role of Black citizens and the lesser-known stories of the heroism that have undoubtedly shaped the world I know today.

These individuals and the movements they were a part of have laid the foundation for activism and equality protests today; the injustices and systematic oppression they were protesting are still present today. The Civil Rights Movement is taught as something that has a beginning and end date - I challenge this. This movement started in the 1960s, but has been continuous fight among every suppressed demographic since then, in the fight for Civil Rights and complete equality across the board. The precedents were set in the 1960s, but we are still in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement today.

"I Have Been to the Mountaintop"

To discuss the Civil Rights Movement or African-American activism as a whole, there is simply no way around Martin Luther King Jr. He is that one iconic name that has stuck with America since the 1960s. Hell, we have a national holiday in his honor. To kick off my blog, I wanted to discuss King's contributions to the Civil Rights

Movements, his ideologies, and how his energy has lived on despite his untimely death in 1968.

King is easily the most recognized icon from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, but have you ever asked yourself, *why?* What was it about King that actually made his opposition listen? What was more unifying about his voice than the voices before him?

Because King was not the first. He was not the first African-American to speak out on behalf of equality and integration. However, he was the first voice that was practically impossible to oppose. From the beginning of his involvement in Civil Rights, King religiously used what I like to call the 'faith claim,' no pun intended. This has been used consistently throughout history, from temperance to abolition to suffrage. When you have an entire nation opposing you, claiming that God has called upon you to be a radical activist is often the only justification that works. But, let me clarify - I am not stating that King's religion or morals were some kind of facade. Rather that being motivated by religion is more of an acceptable way to spearhead radical changes in the American political system.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." - Martin Luther King Jr.

Education

Dr. King was more educated than most for his time, regardless of race. He attended Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was said to have skipped both his freshman and junior year, entering Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of fifteen. To much surprise, in the years of his youth, King often struggled with his religion and what it meant to him. It was not until his junior year of

college that his commitment to religion was renewed. By 1948, he had graduated from Morehouse with a degree in Sociology. In the years following, he would become valedictorian of his class at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania in 1951.

It was during his last years at the Seminary that King was introduced to Benjamin E. Mays, the college president. Mays was overtly opposed to racial inequalities and strongly encouraged King to pursue social justice. After his time in Pennsylvania, King was accepted to many universities for his doctoral studies, but enrolled at Boston University.

Non-Violence

Dr. King is commonly known for his use of non-violent protesting, which has echoed in social activism since. This approach consisted of the infamous sit-ins and bus boycotts that are some of the most well-known moments from the 1960s. These kinds of protests are *still practiced today*. On Presidents Day of this year, students protested in front of the White House by doing a "lie-in" after the shooting of 17 children at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. King had a calm, collected voice that spoke for thousands of individuals in a way that could be positively received by the rest of the United States. His dedication to non-violent protest was based on the belief that if Black citizens were peaceful, well-mannered, and properly dressed, it would force the question, what *was* so second-class about them?

> *"Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored... The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so*

crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door for negotiation." - Letter from a Birmingham Jail

King fought relentlessly for equality throughout his career and adult life, living almost constantly under close-watch and death threats. King was lucky enough to see the Civil Rights Act passed in 1965, but correctly believed that true equality did not end there. In the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, King addressed the socio-economic issues, lack of education, and lack of opportunity in lower income neighborhoods, aka Black neighborhoods. He recognized early on that the privilege of being born into a middle or upper-class family, in a safe neighborhood, with great schools and teachers completely changed the opportunities a person would have throughout their lives and sought to close that gap. By 1966, King saw the American economy as more of a caste system than one capable of the American dream and presented an economic bill of rights that would ensure a minimum annual income for every American. While the bill he presented was radical, and of course, shot down, he was not far off in his thought process. This socio-economic gap still plays into the lives of every American. The blessing of being born with privilege is not one to be taken lightly, nor is the struggle of being born without. Unfortunately, it is typically people of color that are born without this unearned status in the hierarchy.

What did King leave behind?

King was seen as radical for his time by some, but spoke on behalf of thousands. His calm, collected voice is how we best remember the Civil Rights Movement and its participants. His "I Have a Dream" speech from 1963 is arguably the most influential speech of the twentieth century. He, along with the rest of the Big Six, were able to speak and protest in a way that was difficult to challenge and oppose. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 was a ground-breaking moment in

American history, but the story of equality does not end there. In the years following, the continuation of inequality provided a platform for radical militant groups like the Black Panthers to grow support like never before.

"By Any Means Necessary"

When it comes to social protest, a perfectly balanced opposition can be more powerful than anything else. This was especially true in the Civil Rights Movements, with two opposite ideologies personified in Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

While Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were both religiously grounded and motivated, they took their faiths in completely different directions. X followed the Muslim faith adamantly, while King was a man of the Christian faith. Malcolm was a major leader of the Nation of Islam, as well as a leader for black nationalists, which would lead to the creation of the Black Panthers.

> *"Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner. You must be eating some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American."* - Malcolm X

Malcolm's voice became increasingly validated in the later part of the 1960s. Surprisingly, after the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed, tension in the United States continued to spark, rather than to burn out. This was a moment when Americans assumed racism and segregation would end on their own time, rather than actively working to rewire mentalities and create equal opportunities, you know, the hard stuff, the stuff that makes people uncomfortable, or effects their day to day lives. The socio-economic gap between White and Black Americans was widening and offering a majority of opportunities to Whites, and

Whites alone. It was also during this time that African-Americans were getting sent to Vietnam at ridiculously high numbers. When X started to vocalize his frustration and resentment for White men, it was something that a uncomfortable amount of people could relate to.

X was completely unafraid to voice his skepticism towards a nonviolent approach, in his eyes, and in the eyes of many others, the struggle for racial equality had been fought for too long, 340 years to be exact. X believed that King spoke for the purpose of pleasing white men, which he was entirely opposed to. From his perspective, the Black community would be better served uniting against their common enemy - white men - instead of fighting amongst each other.

In his "Message to the Grassroots" in 1963 (Below), X bluntly explains how White men have been the "common oppressor," "common exploiter," and "common discriminator" for every Black or Brown person in the United States and around the world. He simply stated that "we're all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You're nothing but an ex-slave." The power of his words was practically the anthesis of King's nonviolent, calm tone - his radical perspective carried a more militant attitude, but spoke to many African-Americans, all fed up with the same grievances.

X saw the world in very black and white terms - you were either with him or against him, and because of this, he encouraged self-segregating. To X, African-Americans would always be seen as second-class to White men, so they'd be better off uniting together and choosing to segregate themselves. This ideology was a huge turn in what the Civil Rights Movement had aimed for just years beforehand but related to people in an entirely new way. X was radical and there is just no way to deny it. His ideas of self-segregating were seen as aggressive, militant, and intimidating, which is ironic when considering that white men were more than willing to segregate, but apparently only on terms of their own.

"If not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

When I think of one person who defines an American badass, the first name that comes to mind is John Lewis. He was one of the Big Six in the Civil Rights Movement and an extremely close colleague of Martin Luther King Jr. While Lewis doesn't have a national holiday in his honor, he has never been paralyzed by fear, in fact, he was beaten and jailed on more than one occasion.

> *"What I try to tell young people is that if you come together with a mission, and its grounded with love and a sense of community, you can make the impossible possible."* - John Lewis

A Series of Radical Events

1957: Lewis is attending the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, TN. This was where he learned the intricacies of nonviolent protests, like sit-ins and boycotts, began to organize them himself, and would eventually be arrested due to the demonstrations.

4 May 1961: Lewis participates in the Freedom Riders, who tested the desegregation laws of interstate travels from Washington D.C. to New Orleans. The Riders were bombed once they entered Alabama, and assaulted by a mob once they reached Birmingham. These rides resulted in getting beaten and jailed for many black citizens, Lewis included.

28 August 1963: A quarter million Americans marched at one of the largest political rallies in history is organized: The March on Washington. The event was organized with Lewis' help and he was the youngest speaker in attendance. Fun fact: his speech was having to get rewritten minutes beforehand, basically to be more acceptable to white

listeners. Listen to his revolutionary speech by watching the video above.

7 March 1965: The Civil Rights Act had been passed, but it was not any easier for African-Americans to get their votes in. These grievances were organized by Lewis and Hosea Williams and the March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. After crossing the Edmund Puttus Bridge, protestors were met with state troopers and attacked. Lewis was personally beaten so badly he suffered from a fractured skull.

1981: John Lewis is elected on to Atlanta's City Council.

1985: Lewis is elected to represent Georgia's 5th District in the United States House of Representatives. Since the eighties, Lewis has been a committed and upstanding member of the American Congress. He has consistently stood for education and healthcare reform, as well as socio-economic reforms to aid the crisis of poverty.

15 February 2011: Barack Obama awards John Lewis Presidential Medal of Freedom. This moment was particularly special for these two men; Obama and Lewis have been close colleagues throughout their time together in Washington, and Obama has seen Lewis as a huge inspiration throughout his life.

> *"He is known as the conscience of the United States Congress, still speaking his mind on issues of justice and equality. Generations from now, when parents teach their children what is meant of "courage," the story of John Lewis will come to mind. An American who knew that change could not wait for some other person or some other time."* - Barack Obama on John Lewis

John Lewis is that person who really personifies the resilience I see throughout the story of the United States. Lewis grew up in a time of great suppression in America, but nonetheless, never lost hope that

the American dream could be his, and everyone's, regardless of their race. Lewis has proven to never be fearful of what is uncomfortable or unpopular, but has fought literally his entire life for justice and equality. He is a living, breathing piece of American history, and that is what makes him so important. Not to sound cynical - but I can't think of anyone willing to get repeatedly beaten, jailed, and even suffer a fractured skull to fight for their equality. His participation in Congress has made the values of the 1960s stay alive in American politics, some even referring to him as the "conscience of Congress." He worked to lay the ground work of total justice and equality, but has luckily been alive to continue the work - the hard stuff - that his fellow activists like King were not able to.

"Segregation today...Segregation tomorrow...Segregation forever..."

With this blog being dedicated to African-American perseverance and activism, I felt that it was important to have reminders of what, and who, the opposition was. It seems obvious to discuss white resistance in the Civil Rights Movement because if there wasn't any... there would not have been a fight in the first place, right? Well, yes. But, have you ever noticed how *it is not discussed* in the traditional story of the Civil Rights? That's because it's ugly. It's an unflattering time in our history, and it is much easier to focus on the inspiring words left behind from leaders like Martin Luther King in shining moments like the March on Washington. It is important to recognize what, and who, the opposition was. Just like revolutionary activists have laid the ground work for social protest, white resistance of the 1960s is unfortunately still echoed in politics today - whether we can admit it or not.

For this post, I am choosing to focus on the white resistance, specifically in the state of Alabama. This choice seemed appropriate to me because so many well-known protests took place in their cities, and

it is clear to see how the events of fifty years ago still affect the state today. The leaders of the Alabama state government in the 1960s were not celebrating the ideas of equality and integration in the slightest, but their cities were being taken over by nonviolent protesters, forcing the conversation of equal rights for all.

The 1961 Freedom Riders are some of the first well-known protesters of the Civil Rights Movement. The previous year, the Supreme Court had ruled that it was illegal to segregate interstate traveling, so why not test how well implemented this law actually was? The riders started in Washington D.C., and and aimed to make it all the way down to New Orleans, but found that all public places like cafeterias and restrooms, were still segregated. Once the bus made its first stop in Alabama, it was bombed. A second bus continued on to Birmingham, where they were quickly assaulted by a mob. The Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor, had close ties to the Klu Klux Klan, and ensured them that "15 to 20 minutes would elapse before the police arrived."

The nonviolent protests in Alabama continued to be met with police brutality - *another theme we could draw parallels to today*.

Being the history major that I am, I love a good time line. So that is how I'll present the year of 1963 to you, reader. But first, let me give you some context of what activists were hearing from the other side.

Birmingham was a hotbed for Civil Rights protesting. The South was populated heavily with white men and women who were terrified of integrating their "Great Anglo-Saxon Southland," as well as a population of aggravated and suppressed African-Americans, ready to push the boundaries of racial equality.

14 January 1963: Just another day?

George Wallace was elected as Governor of Alabama and made his inaugural address at the beginning of the new year, which clearly

revealed his racist ideologies. His speech begins by addressing "his people." Those living in the "Cradle of the Confederacy," the very "Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland." He proudly states his belief in "segregation forever," saying his children will not be sacrificed to any kind of integrated schools... "and you can write that down!" His speech was filled with racist ideas that white men needed to "fight for their freedom." Which begs the question - what exactly *was* a white mans *fight* for freedom? Was there one at all? Or was it protecting the superiority they thrived on? Wallace supported his claims by encouraging the 'separate but equal' status, which more or less equates to "out of sight, out of mind" and had consistently left Black citizens in the dust and forgotten about.

Wallace, like King, employed the faith claim in his speech, saying that these Southern men simply wanted a government founded "simply and purely on faith," that allowed them to renew their faith as "God-fearing men... not government-fearing men." He argued that desegregation and voting rights were issues to be decided upon in each state, not by a federal government that would be out of touch.

It is of the utmost importance to remember what it would have been like hearing these words stating publicly and proudly if you were an African-American in the United States at this time, and gives an insight as to why these activist could not be stopped.

Spring 1963: Project C & The Birmingham Campaign

These tensions built for many years, but came to a head through Project C. African-Americans began a series of sit-ins at lunch counters, marches to City Hall, and boycotting local shops and merchants. These second-class citizens were pushing the conversation. How effective can sitting a lunch counter be? How much discomfort could be brought by people marching down the street? Enough for men, women, and children to be attacked with police dogs and fire hoses. The peaceful

protest strategies of the Birmingham Campaign were told to stop and "maintain order," but when the marching and boycotting continued, they were met with police force and violence.

While White men and women maintained their superiority over the Black protesters, they were clearly intimated by their relentless attitudes. And what does this intimated lead to? Incarceration. Yet another theme we can still see in the United States today.

Martin Luther King was sent to jail due to his leadership and involvement in these protests. In his Letter From a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King bluntly states "there can be no gainsaying in the racial injustice that engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States." This long, eloquent letter firmly addresses the "disease of segregation" that has taken over, and explains why he cannot abide by laws reinforcing injustices. Again, we see King use the faith claim in his letter, stating he is a man of God and a man of law and order, and does "advocate obeying just laws" but has a "moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

The subtle attitude of white nationalism has remained in Bible-belt politics for decades, it did not start in the 1960s, nor did it end there. In the last few years, the United States has unfortunately seen a resurgence of this mentality, from the Trump Campaign to the events in Charlottesville last year. And while it does not speak for a majority of Americans, it plays to small amount that thrive on racist and prejudice beliefs. But, this year, for the first time in twenty-five years, Alabama elected Democrat Doug Jones to the Senate over Republican, Roy Moore. A major contribution to this election were Black women, they hold 17% of the population and 98% of African-American women gave their vote to Jones in 2017, which gave him the victory.

The opposition and resistance towards racial equality was consistent throughout the 1960s in many cities and states across the nation, it was not solely in Alabama. But these few instances are

examples of how extreme protests got, and how passionate Americans were on both sides to fight, or maintain, what they defined as freedom.

We Shall Overcome

Protesting for racial equality has proven to be no easy task, and one that, in many ways, we still are fighting today. The Civil Rights Movement is marked on paper with a beginning and an end, and seems to exist only in a past tense. But to understand fully how and why African-Americans successfully made the massive strides towards equality at this era, you must understand the decades of work that built a sturdy foundation for activism. This kind of success does not happen over night, but takes generations to accomplish.

The Black Church and overall role of religion in African-American communities has proven to be fundamental in their success. The beginning of the twentieth century marked a time when organization and sense of community were invaluable in African-American neighborhoods. This community-building mentality and emphasis on education was heavily reinforced through African-American women. Activism for this demographic was already radical and revolutionary, even for men, so naturally, women worked mostly in the background. The classic tale of American history, men in the center-stage; women working behind the scenes.

> *My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice... People have to be made to understand they cannot look for salvation anywhere but themselves."* - Ella Baker

Religion was held at the center of the lives of many Americans, black or white. But in African-American communities, these churches

served as a safe space that simply was not present in other communities. This emphasis and dependence on religion got its initial roots from slavery and the slave trade. After being totally uprooted from their native homes, slaves found a sense of serenity in the belief that God could one day provide them salvation for their suffering. Even after slavery was abolished, this ideology prevailed due to the continuous segregation and unequal treatment that African-Americans faced, and made its way into Black neighborhoods across the nation.

By the late eighteenth century, there was a growing sense that African-Americans needed to build institutions of their own that were "independent of white institutional and ideological control." Collectively, Blacks came to the realization that in order to see black social progression, separate spheres needed to be established. Churches in these communities started as a safe space, free from racial control, and evolved into a springboard for Blacks to participate in changing American society. Meetings were held at churches, even during times of complete crisis, helping community members find strength in one another and stay "committed to the struggle against the unjust system of segregation and white domination." It was through powerful sermons, hymns, song, and prayer that African-Americans found a sense of renewal and revival, and through God that they found the power and obligation to fight for their constitutional rights.

It is critical to remember that although individual churches can seemingly only make a difference on the local level, this was happening in different cities across the United States, and that is what contributed to their success. Social protest of any kind is not a small task, and can seem overwhelming if you try to digest everything at once. The biggest movements, the most successful movements, all begin *locally.*

Churches became a place of education and organization that extensively influenced the Civil Rights Movement, bringing communities together in positive ways. Women working with women

to spread news on upcoming events, educating their children together, supporting their politically active husbands, *together*. The values, words, and sermons that were preached in these churches became echoed in the voices of Black activists.

The few well-known activists "differed little form the thousands of nameless women who carried the movement... It was women, as much if not more than men, who dropped their coins in the collection plate, who spread the word of coming events, who encouraged and prayed for male spokespersons, and who planned and marched, and agonized and celebrated." Once Black women were granted the right of voting and ability to hold office, they wasted no time. By 1989, around 1,800 Black women held office, which accounted for over a quarter of all black elected officials. Not bad, right?

It is easy to take for granted the work women did in simply spreading news of upcoming protests, but keep in mind the lack of media that was available at the time. Today, all it takes is a decent number of followers on any social media to get words and ideas spreading. Fifty years ago, as we know, it was not the same. For the most part, news, information, and events were spread on a person to person basis. While this kind of news lacked sufficient technology to spread immediately, media platforms like television news and journalism were becoming more relevant than ever. There is no doubt that the documentation of the marches, protests, sit-ins, and the brutality as a consequence helped pushed the Civil Rights Movement along.

This was the first social protest that Americans had to see in their own living rooms. Seeing attack dogs and water hoses used on American citizens becomes much harder to accept and ignore when it's broadcasted on television and in newspapers for the entire nation to see. Photographs like those taken during the Harlem Riots in 1964 made

Americans of all demographics accept realities that they otherwise could have easily ignored.

"Pull Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps"

For anyone in a less-than-ideal socio-economic status, there is a sense from the rest of America that individuals need to empower themselves, rather than be victims of their situation. This mentality was ingrained in to the minds of young African-Americans, raised by parents who had been victims of slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and humiliating racism. During the earlier part of the Civil Rights, many Black men saw the military as this kind of opportunity; a way to earn respect and benefit from economic growth, unfortunately the Vietnam War proved to be more fruitful in theory than in execution. For many other African-Americans, especially women, education was the biggest door for opportunity.

Education was a gift that kept on giving for women participating in the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did it open doors for better jobs, which led to more influential roles, but it made it possible to educate others around them. Ella Baker and Septima Poinsette Clark are two of my favorite examples of educated, women who know how to get shit done.

> *"The greatest evil in our country today is ignorance... We need to be taught to study rather than to believe."* - Septima Poinsette Clark

Clark was raised in North Carolina by a father who was an ex-slave, forced to be a messenger for the Confederate army, and a mother who was born in Haiti as a free black. Both her mother and father constantly reminded Clark of how fundamental an education would be to her success; but she was not the only one. This value of education swept over African-American during the 1930s and 40s. Numbers don't

lie; in 1933, only 15,000 Black students were enrolled in college, but by 1945, this number increased to 44,000. (And yes, as a whole, Americans in general were getting increasingly educated. However, Black citizens had significantly less options, and obviously could not attend the same universities as White students.)

During this time, teaching was a new career field that was open to women, so it makes sense that Clark pursued teaching throughout her adult life. Clark achieved obtaining a teaching license but quickly found it would be difficult to do in Charleston with segregation being at all time peak. It was in 1919 that Clark joined the NAACP, went door-to-door, and collected signatures rejecting the cities law against black citizens teaching. She got two-thirds of the city's African-American demographic to sign, and a year later this ban was overturned. Like many other activists at the time, Clark was not satisfied with one, small victory. She continued to advocate higher wages for black teachers, and although it took her twenty years, she saw the equalization of teachers compensation (at least legislatively) in 1945.

Clark continued influencing the generation through education by teaching at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee (photos above; courtesy of The Tennessean). This school proved to be instrumental in improving literacy, promoting nonviolent protest, encouraging African-Americans to vote, and teaching students about their civil rights. This institution was not easily accepted, and like every other aspect of the Civil Rights Movement, was met with resistance. The state of Tennessee eventually revoked the school's charter, forcibly closed down its buildings, and even arrested teachers on "bogus charges." However, Clark dedicated her life pursuing her own education and educating others, in turn. It is said that perhaps "more than any other individual, Clark is responsible for Blacks in the South challenging the denial of voting rights."

If Martin Luther King Jr. is recognized as the "Father of Civil Rights," it is fair to identify Ella Baker as the "Mother" of this movement. Like most of the influential women of this era, her name and accomplishments are much less well-known than King. She was the granddaughter of slaves, and her parents were the kind of people who would have given their last dollar to someone in need. To say the least, her passion for social justice started at a young age, and she was raised by the beliefs that she would be the most effective through recognizing her individual power and connecting with her community.

Baker not only valued her education, but kicked ass during her time as a student and used those schools far beyond the classroom. In 1927, she was valedictorian of Shaw University in Raleigh. She was involved in some of the most influential organizations of the century: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Like most institutions, these were all dominated by male leaders, but nonetheless, Baker worked her way up. It was Baker who went door-to-door, convincing African-Americans to peacefully come together and protest for their rights. It was Baker who created targeted campaigns to oppose lynching and promote equal pay for all educators. She was undeniably radical and vocal about it, but never allowed her voice to be silenced.

Although African-Americans were mostly protesting for the same things, their methodology differed, even within organizations. As it turns out, the "Mother" and "Father" of the Civil Rights had marital problems in their beliefs of how to successfully protest during this time. Baker did not believe in intertwining religion and politics in the way that Dr. King did. Throughout her time in the SCLC, "Baker had serious philosophical disagreements with King over leadership styles, arguing for a more participatory and less Baptist model." And, while it is King

who is recognized as the head leader of the SCLC, it was Baker who can be credited for setting the group's issues and agenda.

It comes as no surprise that men are more politically recognized in the Civil Rights Movement, as this is typical for practically every movement and moment in history. Gender roles played a huge part in the names we remember from this era, but it is also fair to say that Baker was not seeking the spotlight. She was relentlessly dedicated to educating others and encouraging them to protest for their rights. What I find so inspiring about Baker, was that she understood that a person from any city, of any race, and any age could find a way to impact injustices around them. This attitude has lasted in American culture; we can see today, more than ever, how young adults feel empowered to vocalized their grievances and have their voices be heard.

> *"Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it."* - Ella Baker

"**The greatest threat to the internal security of the United States**"

Setting the Stage - The United States in 1966

Like many other resistance groups, the Black Panthers have a message and history that has been misinterpreted throughout its existence. It is easy to take the Black Panthers at face value and see them as nothing more than an overly aggressive, militant group from the late sixties. But, when you understand what led to such radical movement, what they truly stand for, and why, their radicalism becomes rationalized.

Two words to sum up the latter part the decade are tension and frustration. Yes, the Civil Rights Bill had been passed. And there is no

denying that this was huge step for African-Americans, and all other minority demographics, but the work was not done. On the contrary, it had barely begun. As crazy as it sounds, this legislation was the easiest piece of the mission towards equality. The hard stuff was only just beginning. Unfortunately, Americans did not suddenly wake up the next day completely freed of their racism, prejudices, and stereotypes. In the years following the bill's passing, African-Americans were becoming increasingly frustrated that they still were not experiencing equality in their day-to-day lives. The socio-economic gap between African-Americans and White citizens did not go anywhere. African-Americans still suffered from:

1. Poverty and overall poor living conditions
2. Reduced public service in their neighborhoods
3. Higher unemployment rates
4. More violence and higher crime rates in their neighborhoods
5. Chronic health problems
6. Basically no way to change their circumstances

The issue of privilege and the racial economic gap is still very, very present in American society, and is something I am passionate about adjusting. But it didn't happen out of nowhere; our country was quite literally built to keep African-Americans uneducated and living in shitty neighborhoods, which makes the idea of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" just a little easier said than done.

When I study the Civil Rights Movement today, it is easy to see the cause and effect - how little events and victories led to much bigger and better things. But, what is essential to remember, *is that in the midst of this seemingly endless and exhausting battle, there was no timeline or clear outcome.* This was a daily battle to be treated with a shred of humanity, and after a lifetime of fighting, it seemed necessary for blacks to take it a step further.

The BPP is commonly associated with Malcolm X, his aggressive and unapologetic attitude spoke to black individuals in the mid and late sixties. X saw the Civil Rights Movement from an entirely different perspective than Dr. King did; X was sick of trying to get approval from white men, and speak in a way that suited them, rather than speaking to fellow black Americans. After X was assassinated in 1965, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California.

There were many similar organizations at this time, the BPP differed in a variety of ways. Rather than seeing all whites as racist, they actually allied themselves with their white supporters. From the very beginning, the BPP laid out a Ten Point Program, clearly explaining their perspective and goals.

1. We want freedom. We want the power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want to end the robbery by capitalists of our black and oppressed communities.
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want decent education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society.
6. We want completely free health care for all black and oppressed people.
7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people, other people of color, all oppressed people of the United States.
8. We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression.
9. We want freedom for all black and oppressed people now held in the U.S. federal, state, county, city and military prisons and jails.

We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace, and people's community control of modern technology.

The groups reputation is largely based on misinformed exaggeration, but their militant attitude and love for the second amendment was not exaggerated. It was in 1967 that the group first got its major coverage, due to Huey Newton and the few other members marching to the California State Capitol, fully armed, in resistance to the Mulford Act. In the years following, Black Panthers would both patrol their own neighborhoods to watch for police brutality, but also patrolled white neighborhoods, carrying legal fire arms. The idea behind this, was to give white citizens the same feelings of *fear, discomfort, and hostility that blacks experienced daily as white officers patrolled their streets.*

The BPP addressed the racial economic issues that so many black citizens were suffering from, and what most people don't know is that the Black Panthers were heavily invested in their communities and improving them by setting up public programs like health clinics and offering free breakfasts, ultimately feeding 20,000 children receiving a full breakfast before going to school.

This was organization advocating "black and proud" not speaking in a language acceptable to white Americans, and this was executed, in part, through self-segregation. By self-segregation, I mean that blacks were choosing to segregate themselves, creating all the stores and shops they needed in their own communities. The irony is that self-segregation often comes across with an intimidation factor, even though white citizens were in favor of segregated lifestyles.

While the interpretations and reputation of the Panthers has been skewed in every direction, it is essential to understand the true values and intentions of this group. Radical groups are radical for a reason, but

their purpose is often misrepresented by their opposition in their favor. This happened with the Panthers, and continues to happen with activism groups today, most notably, Black Lives Matter; but that is a rant for another blog post. Regardless of personal beliefs, we must understand who these groups are and what their goals are. The Panthers play into the overall theme of activism in the United States. Following the initial and mainstream Civil Rights Movement, the Panthers emerged with intentions of ending profiling and systematic, economic inequality. While I can't deny that their approach was radical, it is just as hard to deny the validity in their frustration.

Ain't No Revolution Without Women

The conversation around the Civil Rights Movement is typically dominated by men and their achievements - it seems like Rosa Parks sitting on a bus is pretty much the only time a woman and her contributions are discussed. For this post, I wanted to focus on a woman whose activism and confidence I find truly inspiring. To me, she is the definition of a badass woman, from whom we could all take a little bit of advice. Angela Davis has had a long and influential career intertwining activism and education. Like other radicals, her reputation is often inaccurate and misconstrued, particularly due to her ties with the Communist Party in the 1970s (don't worry, I'll cover that later). It comes as no surprise that her most radical moments are the ones most definitive of her life, but relentless attitude is one that demands to be heard and respected.

Davis grew up in Birmingham, Alabama in 1944. As you may recall from an earlier post, Dr. King described this town as the most "thoroughly segregated city in the United States;" so it comes as no surprise that Davis was surrounded by racism and segregation in her childhood. As I have previously stated, it is truly hard to exaggerate the amount of racial and economic tension that was overtly present during

this time. While these grievances have been addressed and relieved to *some* extent, they are still here, and Davis still works against them today. To fully understand how Angela Davis reached her extreme ideologies, we must fully comprehend her childhood and upbringing that undoubtedly shaped her view of American culture.

Imagine Your Childhood

What are your first memories? What images stick with you the most? For Davis, her first memories are "the sound of dynamite exploding." I can't and wouldn't speak on behalf on any readers out there, but I feel that it is (fairly) safe to say, most of us did not grow up in a neighborhood that was frequently bombed. But Davis did. Houses only a few doors down from her own were attacked. She watched as white citizens threw bombs out of their car windows and quickly sped off. This violence was very, very real, unavoidable, and unpredictable. Her neighborhood is know as "Dynamite Hill" in "Bombingham," Alabama, an area that was often bombed by members of the Klu Klux Klan. Many black families challenged the constructs of segregation by moving to the west side of town, across Center Street, that was known as the racial divide of the city. Between the late 40s and early 60s, there were more than forty bombings that took place, all of them unsolved. *Reminder:* Davis was born in 1944, so these bombings inevitably shaped her childhood, as well as her understanding of segregation, public safety, and in general what it meant to be an African-American living in the United States.

Davis was lucky to have smart and strategic parents; her mother was an elementary school teacher, actively involved in the NAACP, and was a national officer and leading organizer for the Southern Negro Youth Congress. The SNYC aimed to unite blacks living in the south but was also closely linked to the communist party, which shaped her political opinions. In the United States particularly, we have a very deep

and jaded connotation with communism, which has had an effect on Davis' career and has often been used against her. But what I find most important, is that Davis realized the value of education and activism at such a young age.

By the time Davis was 11, she was involved in an interracial discussion group at her church and as a Girl Scout, she marched in protest of racial segregation in her hometown. During her junior year of high school, she was accepted to the Quaker program, "American Friends Service Committee," which relocated black students in the south to integrated schools in the north. As her mother was completing her masters degree at NYU, Davis went to school in Greenwich Village where the ideas of socialism and communism were presented to her.

In 1961, she was accepted to Brandeis University in Massachusetts, where she study abroad for a year in France and also lived in Germany. It was during her time in Germany that she visited Berlin and came to believe that eastern Berlin was more effectively dealing with the consequences of fascism. In her time abroad, she learned of the 16th Street Bombing, that killed four young girls with whom she was acquainted in Birmingham. Once she returned the states, she quickly became involved in civil rights activism. By 1967, Davis felt more influenced and connected to Black Power movements, which drew her briefly the Black Panther Party, and later the Communist Party.

A Lifetime of Activism

Truthfully but unfortunately, many activists of this time were imprisoned, assassinated, or have become less involved in the decades following the Civil Rights. For icons like X or King, they were majorly influential, *but only for a brief period.* In no way am I discrediting the legacies of either leader, but there is something to be said for the individuals like Angela Davis or John Lewis who have continued the

fight for equality, because like I have said before, the fight did not end with the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and is (obviously) not done today.

As I discussed in "Pull Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps," the power of knowledge and a good education was not ignored by African-American women. With women and African-Americans separately struggled to be valued, black women clearly fell to the bottom of the totem pole, but Davis is not and was not the type of woman to accept this complacent mentality and used her education as a powerful weapon of influence.

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement
Education

In 1969, Davis accepted a position at UCLA as an assistant professor in Philosophy. It was during the 1970s that she was fired due to her ties to the communist party. From 1980-84, she was a professor of Ethnic Studies at San Fransisco State University. In the 90s and early 2000s, she taught at University of California, Santa Cruz, as well as at Rutgers University. In recent years, she has again taught at UCLA, but claims that students are now more "sophisticated" and ask deeper, more complex questions. Her teachings have focused in on feminism, as well as race and class issues, using her own education to influence the education of future generations.

Politics and Reform

In the early 1970s, Davis became disturbed with the American prison system, and began working towards reform. She sympathized heavily with the Soledad brothers, and when they attempted to escape prison, she became a suspect to the murders that had taken place during the failed attempt. Some of the guns used had been registered in her name, which resulted in her fleeing to avoid arrest and being placed on the F.B.I.'s list of Top 10 Most Wanted Criminals. She ultimately spent

sixteen months in jail, facing charges of murder, kidnapping, and criminal conspiracy, all of which were acquitted in her 1972 trial. Her involvement led to Ronald Reagan (then Governor of California) campaigning that she not be able to teach at any California university - he was clearly unsuccessful.

In both 1980 and 1984, Davis ran for Vice President on the Communist ticket. She claims to have ran on the Communist Party as a way to suggest other options to Americans outside of our polarized political arena. Davis has since left the Communist Party - disagreeing with issues such as free speech - but still believes that it would be valuable to realize what works and what does not in both communist and capitalist countries.

> *"We have to think about what in the long run will produce decarceration, fewer people behind bars, and hopefully, eventually, in the future, the possibility of imagining a landscape without prisons, where other means are used to address issues of harm, where social problems, such as illiteracy and poverty, do not lead vast numbers of people along a trajectory that leads to prison."*

Angela Davis has become a world-renowned author, scholar, and activist, her lifetime has seen crucial moments in the fight for equality that she has relentlessly pursued. Yet another way she has continued the conversation on racial equality is through prison reform. Rejecting the idea that we are now living in a society free of racial violence, she bluntly and confidently addresses the endless flaws of the American incarceration system, which she views a continuation of slavery within a democratic society.

Relentless is one word that comes to mind to describe Davis - she has been fired, jailed for over a year, been threatened, and seen the continuation of racial inequality throughout her lifetime, but her voice

has never been silenced. She has not stopped addressing the issues she sees as injustices. Individuals such as Davis are reminders that the "Civil Rights Movement" is far from complete. She, and many other activists, reject the belief that racial inequality was solved by the passing of legislation and understand that it has been fundamentally ingrained into our society. If we do not make conscious efforts to understand the full historic context of tragedies such as the 16th Street Bombing, we will never be able to truly fix the problems. Instead, we will close the book on racism and ignore the role it currently plays in society, allowing an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality that is complacent and simple.

"Got It Bad Cuz I'm Brown"

It's safe to say that most Americans are somewhat familiar with the hip-hop group N.W.A., where rappers Dr.Dre and Ice Cube got their big break, back in the 1990s. One of their biggest, and most controversial songs, was titled "F*ck Tha Police," and was written in response to LA officers forcing the group to lay down on the street with guns to their head. This song dropped in 1988, and was completely appalling to many, but for others, was totally relatable. Only three years after this song was released, Rodney King was brutally beaten by police officers, and this song truly became an anthem for minorities living in South Central Los Angeles - and across the nation.

The conversation of police brutality has earned a seat at the table in recent years due to the Ferguson protests and the creation of Black Lives Matter. But the story less-told is one of harassment by police officers for decades beforehand. It was not until 1991 that this kind of violence would make the news and permanently change the conversation about race and police in American culture.

Why Rodney King?

There is nothing particularly special about King. He never wanted to be the center of attention or in the public eye. He was just another 25-year-old, black man living in South Central Los Angeles where racial tensions were peaking. The LA Times did a study in 1991, showing that since the 1980s, only 13% of police officers had been prosecuted for excessive force charges, whereas 77% of civilians were prosecuted for these charges. At least 278 officers had been released of their charges during this time.

King was intoxicated and trying to evade the police, but when they did finally pull him over, four police officers took it upon themselves to taze, kick, and beat King with their batons around 53 times. He was hospitalized for two days and left with 11 fractures, permanent brain damage, bruises, a broken leg, and a scar for the 50,000 bolt stun gun. What these officers didn't know was that a man living across the street was recording the incident after hearing something outside. King told reporters in the days following that he truly feared for his life and felt lucky to be alive. The video and images of the violence circulated all over the media and served as clear evidence that the issue of police brutality was undeniable.

The four police officers who were charged with excessive force went to trial the following year, 1992, and all four police officers were acquitted. Tensions were mounting at this area already due to a 50% unemployment rate, drug epidemics, gang activity, and violent crime, so seeing four white police officers get off the hook for very clearly beating a black man was simply the breaking point. It was only a matter of hours after the jury's decision was made that riots broke out in Los Angeles. And unlike the Civil Rights Movement or Black Lives Matter, it was not peaceful, organized protesting.

This is an example of what I would call reactionary protest. People were furious were the complete absence of value towards black

and brown citizens, and these protests were done on impulse. The LA Riots of 1992 started on April 29 and lasted five days. They were not pretty and ultimately resulted in 50 dead, 2,000 injured, 1,000 buildings damaged or destroyed, and an estimated $2 billion worth of damages to the city. These protestors were setting fires and damaging liquor and convenience stores. By May 3, 1,100 Marines, 600 Army soldiers, and 6,500 National Guard troops were sent to patrol the streets of Los Angeles.

Although the protests lasted only five days, the relationship between people of color and officers of the law was altered forever. Rodney King's name is one that is iconic in recent American culture. But what has changed? It's been almost 30 years since this disgusting beating took place, so it would be easy to assume that *someone* has done *something* about this. I'll be the bearer of bad news and tell you that in 2017, 987 citizens were shot and killed by police. This year, 289 people have lost their lives already. About a week ago, 22-year-old, Stephon Clark lost his life in Sacramento, CA. He was shot by a police officer while he was knocking on his grandmother's front door; he was holding a cell phone that police claim looked like a gun.

The purpose of this blog has been to challenge the story of American history that we classically learn, and rather focus on the untold stories - the good and the bad ones. And it is clear to me that while the words and achievements of activists are so relevant to life I know today, so is the story of violence towards people of color. In 1963, police were using attacks dogs and water hoses on African-Americans in the Birmingham protests. Almost thirty years later, Rodney King was traumatically harassed by police officers. And, almost thirty years later, Stephon Clark is losing his life for a holding a cell phone.

"We Gon' Be Alright"

In the 1990s, N.W.A.'s "F*ck Tha Police" became the anthem for African-Americans as they protested in Los Angeles. Rap took over the charts as it was finally something that was blunt and relatable, discussing the issues that come with being a minority or living in a low-income neighborhood. Hip-hop has stayed relevant through the decades, and Kendrick Lamar released "Alright" it became the new anthem for African-American activists.

Twenty-two years after Rodney King was assaulted by police officers in Los Angeles, it would seem logical to believe that police violence towards African-Americans had been relieved or progressed in some kind of way. But, after the back-to-back deaths of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, it seemed obvious that the end of racial profiling was nowhere in sight. Police violence had continued in the decades following King's assault and the riots - happening a lot more often than the media presented.

In 2012, however, Trayvon Martin (17 yrs. old) was shot and killed after purchasing Skittles and Arizona tea from a convenience store. When the shooter, George Zimmerman, was acquitted, Black Lives Matter was birthed by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza. Shortly after Martin's death, Michael Brown (18 yrs. old) was also killed by a police officer in St. Louis. These two events resulted in the Ferguson protests in 2014.

Reality Check

To many Americans, the deaths of Martin and Brown seemed random and just one moment of bad judgement. But for others, this was frequent. This was reality. Police violence did not subside in the 90s and early 2000s, but it isn't something most people *want* to talk about or even just see on the news. Recent studies show us a lot about the reality of being an African-American in the United States. In 2015, a study

showed that 6 out of 10 black men said at some point they had been treated unfairly by an officer due to their race.

In 2016, 963 people were killed by police officers, 24% of them were black. While 24% is not the majority, only 13.3% of the United State's population was African-American. Although these numbers sound outrageous, this is the world we live in. Seeing statistics such as these make the creation of Black Lives Matter more understandable.

> *"Every day, we recommit to healing ourselves and each other, and to co-creating alongside comrades, allies, and family a culture where each person feels seen, heard, and supported. We acknowledge, respect, and celebrate differences and commonalities. We work vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people."* - Black Lives Matter

Misconceptions

After the founding of BLM, there (of course) was backlash. Many understood the organization to *only* promote the improvement of black lives, however this is far from the truth. The belief of this foundation is that America values people on a black to white spectrum. It is clear that the lives of African-American do not hold the value of whites, so once black lives matter, all lives will matter in the eyes of society. The founders, Cullors, Tometi, and Garza are all African-American women, however, their welcome and accept members of all races and genders. Alicia Garza clarifies Black Lives Matter and why it is so necessary in today's political climate.

The creation of BLM was a like a whirlwind. It happened quickly and smoothly; these activists wasted no time organizing and getting to Ferguson to participate in the protests. There was some violence at these protests, but none of it was associated with Black Lives Matter. As a

group, they practice complete non-violence**.** One of the goals of this blog is to take a close look at the long-term influence of the Civil Rights Movement, and there is no way to ignore BLM in that conversation. Not only were they non-violent, but in order to get activists to Ferguson, they coordinated "freedom rides**,**" sound familiar? Writer and activist Darnell Moore, a friend of Cullors, coordinated rides from New York, Chicago, Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Boston to Missouri. Another factor that resembles the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s is their impeccable organization. After Ferguson, they kept their momentum by organizing local chapters, which created safe spaces for activists.

Their protests are almost always organized, which adds to their strength. The Black Lives Matter movement has been seen as radical to some, but their goals are really what African-Americans have called for for the last century. The conversations around race, class, and opportunity are completely intertwined. Black Lives Matter simply recognizes that African-American's have been more directly targeted for demise than any other demographic, and demand that it comes to an end.

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