Which was more important to the Civil Rights movement: Legal procedures or mass mobilization?

Viewpoint: The Civil Rights movement owed much of its success to national publicity.

Viewpoint: Despite the high drama of the public campaign against segregation, the mass movement would not have succeeded without the less dramatic work of legal pioneers such as Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston.

Viewpoint: The Civil Rights movement was more than just an accretion of legal precedents: it was a change in the hearts and minds of a people, and it is best understood as a mass action.

Thurgood Marshall was not an overly sensitive man, but still he could be rankled. For sixteen years he had traveled the back roads of the American legal system, as chief counsel for the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), not only defending African American men and women accused of crime, but also arguing cases involving their civil rights. He argued cases in courthouses where he could not use the bathroom because he was black. Marshall, however, worked within the law, arguing one case at a time that the law forbids the government to treat black men and women differently from white men and women. Black school teachers had to be paid the same as white teachers; private contracts that forbid the sale of property to blacks could not be enforced in a court of law; and graduate schools could not refuse to admit qualified black applicants and, once admitted, could not separate them from other students. On 17 May 1954, Marshall enjoyed a moment of triumph, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal, the justification for race segregation the Court had established in 1896, was unconstitutional.

At that moment no other American had done more to advance the cause of civil rights than Marshall. However, his singular role was not to last. In 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, a boycott of segregated buses not only propelled into leadership the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., it also ushered in a new era of civil-rights struggle. Instead of patiently building a body of law that protected the civil rights of all, African Americans took direct action against the forces of segregation. It was a bold strategy, but also a dangerous one. Courts could find boycotts illegal and jail boycotters, and the social disruption the boycott caused probably would not be worth the potential benefit. Marshall counseled against direct action, in Montgomery and later, when college students began sitting in at lunch counters. For his caution and his insistence on working within the law, he was regarded as too conservative and not in touch with the movement, though when the movement’s leaders and foot soldiers wound up in jail, they called on Marshall and the LDF to bail them out.

History has slighted Marshall. Though he was rewarded for his service to the law and to the Civil Rights movement with a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, King was honored with a Nobel Prize and a national holiday. In the essays that follow, Bryn Upton, Matthew Mason, and Adam Mack assess the role of the law, and the role of mass mobilization, in the Civil Rights move-
Andrew Young, once an aide to King and later American ambassador to the United Nations, once asked a black South African in the days of apartheid why South Africa's blacks did not use the tactics of nonviolent direct action against the repressive regime. The South African replied that King and his followers, though they were breaking unjust laws, had the law on their side.

The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision, which Marshall had helped to achieve, made the Constitution of the United States color-blind and allowed the brave men and women of Montgomery and other towns and cities to protest against laws that violated it. Could the mass movement have succeeded without Marshall's patient effort to establish equality before the law? On the other hand, could equality before the law have been achieved without the mass movement of women and men who demanded it?

Nine black students were scheduled to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, on 5 September 1957. The students had been selected for their academic excellence to be the first wave of integration. On Labor Day, 2 September, Governor Orval Eugene Faubus dispatched the National Guard to Little Rock's Central High School. No one was certain what the meaning of this action was, but that night the governor made everything clear. From the chair of the highest office of the state and to a live television audience, Faubus delivered the infamous words, "blood will run in the streets" if black students should attempt to enter Central High School.

When the first day of school finally came, again the showdown was covered by the media. One of the students, Elizabeth Eckford, did not arrive with the others and consequently faced a huge angry mob alone. As local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Daisy Bates would later write in The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir (1962), "Elizabeth, whose dignity and control in the face of jeering mobsters had been filmed by television cameras and recorded in pictures flashed to newspapers over the world, had overnight become a national heroine."

Prior to the fall of 1960 few people knew the name Ruby Bridges. That fact would change on 14 November of that year when she became the first black student to enter the William Frantz Elementary School. On the same day three other six-year-old black girls were integrating another school in New Orleans, but Ruby was a special case in that she was the only black student going to her school. Some 150 whites, mostly housewives (who were later nicknamed the Cheerleaders) and teenage youths, clustered along the sidewalks across from the William Frantz School when the pupils marched in at 8:40 A.M. As reported by The New York Times, one youth chanted, "Two,
Four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate; six, four, two, we don’t want a chigaroo.”

Forty minutes later four deputy marshals arrived with a little Negro girl and her mother. They walked hurriedly up the steps and into the yellow brick building while onlookers jeered and shouted taunts.

The girl, dressed in a stiffly starched white dress with a white ribbon in her hair, gripped her mother’s hand tightly and glanced apprehensively toward the crowd.

Almost immediately, a teacher who refused to give her name strode from the building and drove away. A short time later, white parents began arriving to remove their children.

Although there were television cameras and a documentary-film crew present, the pictures were not shown on New Orleans television. Local coverage was in the print media only. ABC News, however, went national with the documentary crew’s coverage of Bridges. Those images were shown in New York; Washington, D.C.; Boston; and the rest of America—images that had an important impact on those who viewed it. No newspaper could print the words that the white demonstrators shouted, and television producers purposely blurred the obscenities. The visual images of screaming angry faces of middle-aged housewives and white teens, spewing their venom on a six-year-old girl, nonetheless were powerful enough.

Not all integration challenges were major media events; those cases, however, that did capture national media attention featured substantially more women than men. Young women were conspicuously placed on the front row of
marchers to give integration the least confrontational face.

Other demonstrations were filmed by television cameras. Marches and boycotts derived support from all over the country after the nation was shown firsthand the conditions that were being faced. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956 became a media event and thereby made a minor celebrity of the young reverend who was its leader. Martin Luther King Jr. clearly had a gift for oration and was beginning to gain notoriety in the press, first in publications such as Jet, Hue, Crisis, and American Negro. Soon the white press took up the story: King and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) were featured in Newsweek, The New York Times, and Time. Even network television began covering the events there, with one ABC commentator comparing the protestors to Mohandas Gandhi and the bankruptcy of white Montgomery’s position to that of the British in India.

It was because of the successes of the Montgomery campaign that King first found himself on the cover of Time on 18 February 1957. The profile of King was laudatory, although some black leaders felt it gave King too much credit at the expense of others, and it helped make King a nationally known figure. After the feature in Time, The New York Times Magazine ran a history of the Montgomery Boycott that was mostly about King, and NBC’s Lawrence Spivak invited him to become only the second African American to appear on “Meet the Press.” Over the years King would appear on many television programs and magazine covers, and he was named “Man of the Year” by Time in 1963.

King was often the focus for the media, but the movement desired press coverage for all of its direct assaults on segregation. Leaders within the movement believed that if the world could see the injustices being wrought upon them, there would be popular outcry and support. One major news incident came on 7 March 1965 when a group of civil-rights demonstrators attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery. The marchers, largely from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), met heavy police resistance crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Troopers used tear gas to disorient the marchers, then attacked with nightsticks. It was early evening by the time the news reports of the bloody attack on Highway 80 began to spread across the country. Many television viewers were astounded by the graphic film of the troopers’ assault on the peaceful marchers as ABC interrupted a movie broadcast, Judgment at Nuremberg, to present footage that depicted how racial hatred could generate awful violence in contemporary America, not just Nazi Germany.

Time after time during the Civil Rights movement the violence that came down upon nonviolent protestors was reported in the mass media. John Lewis describes in Walking With the Wind (1998) an incident in Selma: “I watched Sheriff Clark’s temper play right into our hands. Again it was a woman he confronted, and again the press delivered a blow-by-blow account of the fight.”

Support for the movement continued to grow in the North, outside of the United States, and even in parts of the South because of explicit coverage by the media. Through television millions of people saw the brutality of racial repression for the first time. U.S. attorney general Robert Kennedy, who had long been an advocate for civil rights from a basic legal standpoint, was deeply affected by pictures of teenage students being attacked by dogs and pummeled by water cannons. It forever changed Kennedy and his approach to dealing with civil-rights issues.

The media was not always on the side of protestors during the Civil Rights movement, and the press did not always agree with its leaders, but through the act of reporting on the demonstrations the press became an ally to the movement. Without the media, especially television, the Civil Rights movement might not have happened as it did. Some of the most powerful and lasting images came from the newspaper photos and television footage taken across the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Money, sympathy, support, and understanding were by-products of this press coverage. There is also a lasting legacy of video images that have been used to teach later generations about the struggle in a way that most history lessons can never be taught.

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Viewpoint:
Despite the high drama of the public campaign against segregation, the mass movement would not have succeeded without the less dramatic work of legal pioneers such as Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston.

In the past two decades scholars writing about the Civil Rights movement have focused largely on the grassroots level, attending to the mobilization of African American communities above all else. Accompanying this focus has also
been a tendency to downplay the national arena, to shift attention and explanatory power away from the civil-rights leaders who sought to effect change through the courts and the national political process. In many ways this new focus has been salutary, giving us a fuller picture of how the changes wrought in the 1950s and 1960s came to pass.

It is, however, unfair and inaccurate to dismiss the importance of the work done in the courts and with the federal government more generally—either to neglect or dismiss it as too conservative to notice. The victories won by the legal arm of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from the 1930s through the 1960s and the efforts to enlist the power of the entire federal government on the side of civil rights were of tremendous significance on both moral and practical levels. Legal victories played an important role in convincing all Americans that fundamental American ideals were in accord with the Civil Rights movement, and the weight of white American opinion moved a hesitant federal government to play a key role as a third player in the South. It is most constructive to view the legal and legislative wing and the grassroots wing of the Civil Rights movement not only on equal footing, but indeed as working together, if not always in perfect harmony, to effect change.

This description is not to say that there was no difference between the legalistic approach that predominated from the 1930s to the early 1950s and mass mobilization that began in earnest in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. The people involved in the movement experienced this shift toward grassroots activism as a real change. Joseph Lowery, a black minister in Alabama who became an ardent supporter of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–1956, said that the movement begun by Rosa Parks and led in time by Martin Luther King Jr. marked “the beginning of self-determination.” “Prior to the bus boycotts,” he explained, “the determination of our freedom rested with the courts. With the bus boycott, we determined it. It didn’t make any difference what the court said. The court could say what it liked, we weren’t gon’ ride—in the back of the bus. We’d walk.” Lowery unduly minimized the courts’ importance in Montgomery. Yet, his observation concerning the difference between mass mobilization and the legalistic approach was powerful and accurate. While the two approaches complemented each other, the bus boycott brought a vigor to the movement, a new sense of self-determination to African Americans in the South, in a way that even spectacular legal successes wrought by a few lawyers in distant courts could not.

Nevertheless, it would also be a mistake to interpret statements such as Lowery’s as evidence of the conservative nature of the legal assault on Jim Crow. The legal and legislative challenges, while unavoidably involving a federal government hesitant to embrace and participate in change, did have a major transformative impact.

One consequence of the legal victories of the NAACP has to do with the power of law to establish norms and teach values of a society. The extent of this power is in dispute and cannot be resolved here. Yet, Supreme Court decisions striking down the legality of various features of Jim Crow—such as the Democratic white primary and discrimination in the Southern judicial system, interstate travel and commerce, and graduate and law schools—had enormous significance in signaling, and even teaching, a new interpretation of basic American documents and ideals.

This significance is true particularly for Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in all levels of education unconstitutional. In overturning the doctrine of “separate but equal,” which had reigned since the Supreme Court declared segregation constitutional in its 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, the court also sought to overturn racial separation and de facto subjugation. Back in 1896, Justice John Marshall Harlan, in his dissent from the Plessy decision, argued forcefully that the cultural and moral power of law is great. He thus protested that upholding segregation was tantamount to permitting “the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law.” Lifting that sanction in 1954 should not be underestimated. Contrary to those who tell us that we cannot legislate morality, law by its nature prescribes morality; it is a measure of what lawmakers and/or their constituents deem to be immoral or moral. Thus, a shift in the constitutional doctrine of the highest court is a shift of no small significance.

 Granted, the effect of Supreme Court decisions on African Americans’ conception of the morality of their cause was probably slight and thus should not be overestimated. African Americans struggling for freedom and equality, whether as slaves or nominally free people, have long insisted that those American ideals were on their side, and thus the Supreme Court’s reversal of interpretation seems to have had small effect on black Americans’ attitudes toward what freedom and equality mean. Furthermore, as Richard H. King has so powerfully argued in Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom (1992), the Civil Rights movement was not so much about trying to get respect from whites as it was about African Americans asserting their own self-respect.
Yet, having the prevailing constitutional winds in the movement’s favor did give its participants a greater measure of moral authority and confidence in addressing America as a whole. It allowed civil-rights spokesmen to appeal to white Americans as advocates of the Constitution and of the law, which was important given the general veneration of American institutions and the Cold War context of touchiness concerning criticism of those institutions. Thus Martin Luther King Jr. could speak to a key ally, the American Jewish Committee:

Civil disobedience in its true sense has not been employed by Negroes in their struggle. To utilize civil disobedience in its authentic, historical form involves defiance of fundamental national law. . . . We must see that the Negro today, when he marches in the streets, is not practicing civil disobedience because he is not challenging the Constitution, the Supreme Court, or the enactments of Congress. Instead, he seeks to uphold them. He may be violating local municipal ordinances or state laws, but it is these laws which [contradict] basic national law. Negroes by their direct action are exposing the contradiction. The civil disobedience, or I should say, uncivil disobedience in this situation, resting on unjust foundations, is that of the segregationists.

Only after decisions such as Brown could King take this powerful position. The position could only help the movement gain support among Northern whites, which was key to bringing the federal government in as a third player in the struggle against the Southern power structure. Local African American demonstrations also helped greatly in this process, attracting national and international attention and thus putting pressure on the federal government to at least partially abandon its usual modus operandi of delay tactics and half-measures. Yet, the outside attention was much more likely to be favorable if the movement seemed to be about squaring American practice with American ideals, or, as King maintained, if it seemed to be in harmony with the fundamental law of the land.

The realities of the situation required a strong outside presence for change to occur. Advocates of change faced a South wherein whites were in the majority and segregationists controlled the levers of power and influence. Courageous stands by local African Americans and some white Southern moderates were key to challenging this power structure, but insufficient in themselves. Civil-rights leaders understood that forcing the federal government to act in their behalf was necessary, and that meant continued activity in the courts, as well as using direct-action techniques (and the media coverage they attracted) to prod elected officials.

Indeed, civil-rights leaders’ willingness to use a combination of direct action and legal means belies the subsequent tendency of scholars to establish a dichotomy between the two approaches. For instance, in Montgomery, rightly held up as the beginning of the mass mobilization that would thereafter characterize the movement in most people’s minds, successful court actions combined with the better-publicized bus boycott to achieve change. In December 1955 King argued the need for both tactics. As he understood it, the nonviolent direct action of the bus boycott was a tool of “persuasion,” whereas court decrees and legislation were tools of “coercion,” and success would require both. King’s formulation and the fact that the boycott ended successfully only when the circuit courts and Supreme Court ruled that segregated busing was unconstitutional contradict those who envisage the legalistic approach as inherently conservative and nonthreatening.

Recent works that heavily emphasize the grassroots aspects of the movement have made great contributions to the literature, but (sometimes despite themselves) they also demonstrate the need for outside intervention. For instance, John Dittmer’s excellent study of the movement, despite the emphasis suggested by his title, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (1994), deftly illustrates the interplay between national and local people in working for change. His account details the need for outside activists to reinvigorate sometimes dispirited local organizations. Yet, Dittmer hesitates to recognize the key role of outside attention and power, for his tendency is to emphasize the local. In discussing the failure of school integration in Mississippi (in 1968 only 3.9 percent of black children went to previously all-white schools), his evidence suggests—but he is hesitant to acknowledge—that the lack of outside attention to the problem severely hampered integration efforts. Despite the unprecedented level of violence against school integrators in the town of Grenada in the mid-1960s, national civil-rights leaders and media paid only passing notice, distracted by talk of Black Power and urban riots. Hence, local people were left to themselves in the struggle against white domination and despite their courage wrought less change than when they had that vital third player from outside.

Yet, on the other hand, without local activists, the decisions and enactments won in circuit courts and in Washington, D.C., would likely have gone unenforced. As Donald G. Nieman has pointed out in Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order, 1776 to the Present (1991), the Supreme Court in fashioning decisions such as Brown tried to retain its unanimity and ensure the enforcement of its
decisions by hedging its language and urging all deliberate speed. Yet, massive resistance by white Southerners to these decisions betrayed these hopes, and it was left to local African Americans to enforce these laws, largely by means of pressing court action against local authorities. Furthermore, the much-celebrated Civil Rights Act of 1964 would likely have been a dead letter in places such as Mississippi were it not for determined local people who forced integration of public places despite intimidation and harassment.

Recent scholars writing in the grassroots vein have taken this evidence to mean that federal intervention was of only secondary importance, but a view of the whole scene shows that one cannot separate local and national aspects of the Civil Rights movement. It is an incomplete picture and a faulty understanding of the movement that emphasizes one aspect at the expense of the other. The same is true for the tactics of mass mobilization on the one hand and the legal and legislative approach on the other. As Nieman has written, "neither law nor mass protest was, by itself, sufficient to end the caste system; only a combination of the two would accomplish that monumental task."

Finally, perhaps the best evidence that the legal/legislative approach to change was a threat to the Jim Crow establishment was the response to the NAACP’s legal successes. This threat is particularly evident in the segregationist response to Brown, aptly referred to as “massive resistance.” Desegregating schools struck home with segregationists in a dramatic way and produced a dramatic resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as the introduction of a new organization, the White Citizens’ Council.

The White Citizens’ Council presented itself as more “genteel” or moderate than the Klan. While it tended to rely on economic intimidation (its members were largely the employers of the South) rather than physical violence, it did not constitute a mild response to the proposed desegregation of schools. During the Birmingham bus boycott, a leaflet circulated at a White Citizens’ Council rally read, in part: “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to abolish the Negro race, proper methods should be used. Among these are guns, bow and arrows, slingshots and knives. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all whites are created equal with certain rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead niggers.” While this rally was not a specific response to Brown, this rhetoric does illustrate that there was precious little moderation in the main organizational embodiment of that response.

NAACP legal successes clearly threatened the white establishment in the South. The legal and legislative approach to working for change formed a key part of the Civil Rights movement. While many in the movement grew impatient with its slow pace, and some historians have joined these dissenters in labeling it overly conservative, the freedom struggle’s successes came when grassroots direct action was combined with appeals to the courts and the national government. The two aspects formed two sides of the same coin and should be remembered as such.

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**Viewpoint:**

The Civil Rights movement was more than just an accretion of legal precedents: it was a change in the hearts and minds of a people, and it is best understood as a mass action.

In 1989 veteran activist Bob Moses wrote that the Civil Rights movement was characterized by two distinct organizing traditions. The first was concerned with large-scale community mobilization, generally for national goals, and was represented by familiar events such as the March on Washington and the protests in Birmingham and Selma. The second tradition involved work at the local level, focusing on grassroots organizing and development of indigenous leadership. Representing departures from the legalistic strategy practiced by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), these two organizing traditions were primarily responsible for the major changes brought by the Civil Rights movement. Community mobilization prompted the federal government to pass transformative civil-rights legislation that dismantled the system of legalized segregation in the South, and grassroots organizing empowered black communities by helping develop leaders and institutions to carry forth the struggle for the long term. The Civil Rights movement was a collaborative effort, and legalistic activism made significant contributions to its success, but mass mobilization and local organization did the most to transform the racial landscape of the South.

There can be no doubt that legalistic activism furthered the civil-rights cause. A key point is that for the first half of the twentieth century racial segregation was entrenched in state law and, since the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, endorsed by the Supreme Court. Victories won
by the legal arm of the NAACP from the 1930s through the 1950s—which included judgments against the white primary (1944), segregation in interstate travel (1946), racially restrictive covenants (1948), separate graduate and professional schools for blacks, and eventually segregation in all levels of public education (1954)—thus made critical contributions to the freedom struggle by undermining the legal structure of Jim Crow in the South. At the same time, these victories put the weight of the Constitution behind the emerging Civil Rights movement, giving moral as well as legal credibility to its goals.

Nevertheless, the NAACP’s legalistic strategy was a limited instrument for racial change. As much as legal victories seemed to promise the downfall of Jim Crow, court decisions were not self-enforcing; without strong federal support, they could be evaded relatively easily by Southern obstructionists. This situation became painfully obvious in the aftermath of the court victories of the 1940s and 1950s. Although the Supreme Court removed a major obstacle to African American disfranchisement by outlawing the white primary, whites continued to keep blacks from the polls through a combination of intimidation and technical devices such as literacy tests. Moreover, the Court’s ruling against segregated interstate travel was ignored in most of the South, and discrimination in housing and employment remained a fact of life. Perhaps the best example of Southern racial intransigence was white resistance to Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Although Brown had an immediate effect on school desegregation in parts of the Upper South, it had essentially no impact in the Deep South, as whites mounted a campaign of massive resistance to the ruling. While the NAACP undertook the time-consuming business of filing desegregation suits, obstructionists used violence, token integration plans, and a host of creative legal devices to prevent implementation of the Brown decision. Meanwhile, the federal government refused to aggressively enforce the decision, enduring if not promoting Southern defiance.

Only when African Americans mobilized for direct confrontations with the Jim Crow system was the entire federal government compelled to intervene to help make real changes in the South. By the early 1960s, civil-rights proponents had learned that the best way to force the federal government to take decisive action was to create a crisis that drew national attention to the overt denial of basic citizenship rights to African Americans. More than any other civil-rights organization, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) succeeded in mobilizing black communities for dramatic nonviolent protest campaigns that captured media attention, aroused public support, and prompted federal intervention, including the passage of civil-rights legislation.

This strategy was used most effectively in nonviolent direct-action campaigns in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. Both these campaigns brought the brutality of white supremacy to light by generating shocking scenes of local law enforcement using violence to suppress peaceful demonstrations. Appearing on the front pages of national newspapers and on television, events in Birmingham and Selma led to significant increases in public sympathy for the movement and moved the ever hesitant officials in Washington to take a stronger stand for civil rights.

According to Adam Fairclough in To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1987), the turbulent events of the Birmingham campaign and the spinoff demonstrations that followed convinced the Kennedy administration—which had been following a piecemeal civil-rights policy—that racial crises would continue to occur in the South unless the federal government took action by passing strong civil-rights legislation. This decision, Fairclough argues, led John F. Kennedy to introduce legislation that was eventually passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a measure that expanded the federal government’s power to challenge segregation in public accommodations. Two years after the Birmingham protests, SCLC launched a campaign in Selma to address the problem of black disfranchisement, an issue not adequately addressed in the Civil Rights Act. As Fairclough has pointed out, the public reaction to the suppression of demonstrations in Selma energized the Johnson administration’s efforts to produce a strong voting-rights law, increased Congressional support for such legislation, and thus paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The 1964–1965 federal civil-rights legislation was not a panacea for problems facing African Americans in the South, but its significance should not be underestimated. Unlike previous Supreme Court decisions and earlier civil-rights laws, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act included strong enforcement measures and brought dramatic change to the South. Although there was some resistance to the Civil Rights Act, within a relatively short time after its passage, Jim Crow signs came down in much of Dixie, and public accommodations were opened, in a legal sense, to blacks. Described by Fairclough as the “crowning achievement of the civil rights movement,” the Voting Rights Act transformed the South’s political landscape. By providing new methods of
enforcement such as federal registrars and election observers, as well as the suspension of literacy and other voting tests, the act streamlined the government's ability to protect African American voting rights. In the decade after its passage black voter registration increased significantly (in Mississippi it leapt from 6.7 percent to 67.4 percent), more and more African Americans were elected to public office, and unfavorable white candidates were defeated. Although whites continued to hold the lion's share of regional political power, the growth in the black electorate ushered in a new racial tone in southern politics as white politicians openly courted black votes; visible political racism generally became a thing of the past.

However, direct action alone did not engender the transformative civil-rights legislation of the mid 1960s. Indeed, part of the credit must go to NAACP lobbyists who helped push the measures through Congress. Similarly, while the NAACP did not fully embrace direct-action tactics, the protest campaigns of the mid 1960s benefited from timely legal and financial aid from the association. As King and other civil-rights proponents realized, the success of the movement depended on the interplay of NAACP-style legalism and direct action practiced by other groups; scholars should think twice before separating the two approaches completely. As King put it, "Direct action is not a substitute for work in the courts and the halls of government. Bringing about passage of a new and broad law by a city council, state legislature or the Congress, or pleading cases before the courts of the land, does not eliminate the necessity for bringing about the mass dramatization of injustice in front of a city hall. Indeed, direct action and legal action complement one another; when skillfully employed, each becomes more effective."

Of course, the movement would not have accomplished anything without local people who took to the streets to challenge Jim Crow. Yet for ordinary African Americans, the gains achieved through direct-action protest went beyond the passage of strong civil-rights legislation. The act of striking a blow for their own freedom—something difficult to do when activism was focused in faraway courtrooms—promoted a new sense of self-determination and self-respect. Reflecting on the movement in the mid 1970s, Franklin McCain, one of the four black students who started the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in movement, described his feelings after participating in his first demonstration: "If it's possible to know what it means to have your soul cleansed—I felt pretty clean at that time. I probably felt better on that day than I've ever felt in my life. Seems like a lot of feelings of guilt or what-have-you suddenly left me, and I..."
felt as though I had gained my manhood, so to speak, and not only gained it, but had developed quite a lot of respect for it. Not Franklin McCain only as an individual, but I felt as though the manhood of a number of other black persons had been restored and had gotten some respect from just that one day."

In recent years scholars have looked closely at how the movement changed the lives of local people, turning their attention from the familiar protest campaigns led by King and the SCLC to the less-glamorous work of organizing at the grassroots level. Sustained local organizing, these historians argue, wrought remarkable change by empowering black communities through the cultivation of indigenous leadership and the creation of institutions to support movement activity for the long term.

One of the best examples of the grassroots organizing tradition, and a movement that has received considerable attention from scholars, is the work done by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi. Starting in the early 1960s, SNCC organizers dug in across the Magnolia state and began the slow and steady work of organizing black communities to challenge the racial status quo. Refusing to back down in the face of white violence and intimidation, these activists' persistence had a transformative impact on local blacks. As Charles M. Payne suggested in his study of the Mississippi movement, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (1995), when SNCC activists proved that challenges to white supremacy could be survived, much of the fear that had governed race relations in Mississippi broke down, giving local people the confidence to join the movement. For SNCC, unlike some other groups, the purpose of drawing local people into the movement was not so much an attempt to develop a steady stream of volunteers for demonstrations aimed at securing outside intervention; instead, SNCC sought to help local blacks fight for themselves. Through participation in voter-registration campaigns, mass meetings, and citizenship-education classes, thousands of local people were politicized and, significantly, began to believe that they could affect the decisions that impacted their lives. Out of these movements emerged indigenous leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer, a former timekeeper on a Mississippi plantation who provided a dramatic example of the empowerment of local people by helping lead the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in its challenge to the state’s all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

Payne’s study also reveals how the efforts of grassroots organizers promoted the creation of movement-related institutions at the local level. Focusing on Greenwood, Mississippi, Payne shows how local blacks activated by the movement went on to establish a variety of political organizations, activist groups, and educational programs. Well after the full-time SNCC organizers left town, these organizations continued working to transform race relations in Mississippi. For instance, the Greenwood Movement, an organization led by local blacks, sponsored a highly successful boycott of downtown merchants in the mid 1960s. While this boycott was initiated to protest discriminatory hiring practices and disrespectful treatment of black customers, it was also meant to win larger goals by putting indirect pressure on city hall. By the end of the 1960s, the city, under pressure from the boycott as well as civil-rights lawsuits, began hiring African Americans and making improvements in black neighborhoods such as paving roads and putting up street lights. Although these gains were significant in the context of Mississippi, the important point is that local blacks had begun organizing on their own to challenge the white power structure. Considering the lack of large-scale, organized resistance in Mississippi before the Civil Rights movement and the state’s historically stifling racial climate, this local-level organizing was a transformation of no small significance; it was one of the main accomplishments of the grassroots movements.

The Civil Rights movement did not end the problem of race in America. It did, however, destroy the system of legalized segregation that imposed second-class citizenship on African Americans in the South. Equally important, the movement empowered blacks at the local level by helping indigenous leadership and movement-related institutions take root. Only when the focus of reform efforts shifted from a legalistic approach to a strategy based on community mobilization and grassroots organizing did these changes become possible. Court victories and legislative lobbying helped effect change, but the real credit belongs to the activists and ordinary people who confronted Jim Crow in the streets.

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