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An Analysis of the Effectiveness of the Non-Violent Civil Rights Movement

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When discussing the Civil Rights Era as a whole, it is easy for one to say that the non-violent movement was successful on its own. After all, many of the names that are written in history textbooks decades later were a part of the peaceful side of the movement: Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Rosa Parks. Thus, it is easy to neglect Malcom X and the Black Panther Party's importance in the violent part of the movement – which is a momentous error because, from an historical perspective, neither part of the Civil Rights Movement, violent or non-violent, would be possible without the other.

While John Lewis was an adamant proponent of the non-violent movement towards the Civil Rights Act, even he gives due credit to those who fought for the same cause with violence, such as Malcom X (*March*). One must have respect for the work that those protestors did even if one does not agree with them, purely because they gained attention and achieved results. Going back to the very beginning of the Civil Rights movement, it is clear that one of the major events to 'set the wheel turning' so to speak, was the murder of Emmett Till. Emmet Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who, while visiting relatives from Mississippi, whistled at a white woman. He was beaten so badly before his death that the murderers were set free on the account that Till's body was unidentifiable. This act of atrocious violence was nationwide

news. And it was this very act of violence that acted as the straw that broke the camel's back for many African Americans. It created a conscious need for change, setting up the perfect opportunity for the beginning of an era. Violence, regardless of which side it came from, gained results for Civil Rights protestors.

Just as violence began the need for a movement, it became a means to an end for that era. July of 1967 was riddled with violence. Race riots had already erupted in Los Angeles, and were now beginning in Newark and Detroit. These riots were broadcast throughout the country. The violence was intriguing and engaging to the American people. It forced the government to fix corrupt policies and to take action instead of remaining passive and ignoring the injustices people faced every day. These riots, although they only lasted for a few days each, combined with another violent event in April of the next year to create a perfect storm. The gruesome riots and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., prompted President Lyndon B. Johnson to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1968. While some may argue that this is nowhere near the end of the Civil Rights Movement – and I would agree – this act is the last piece of national legislation regarding Civil Rights until the Reagan administration twenty years later, far outside the spectrum of the traditional Civil Rights Era. Thus, violence, be it on the side of those against integration and equality or those for it, was the main course of results for the Civil Rights Movement.

While violence produced much of the results seen from the Civil Rights Movement, it could not have stood alone. The non-violent movement is responsible for garnering support for the cause of Civil Rights activists, and more importantly, for putting into perspective the violence that was to ensue. The evidence for this is seen in an event that John Lewis himself was a part of: the Freedom Rides organized by the Congress of

Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), both of which involved John Lewis. On these freedom rides, those participating experienced relentless violence including verbal assaults and physical attacks. But the Freedom Riders maintained their non-violent ways. They resisted silently by not returning the hatred they received. They gained sympathy from the American people who had witnessed the violence they had endured. That sympathy would play a key part in justifying the violent methods to be used later in the movement. Once the protesters had this sympathy, they could use violent tactics without losing their support for 'senseless violence,' because it was now violence for a purpose. It is a very Machiavellian principle, found in Chapter Eight of *The Prince* in which Machiavelli discusses the importance of using cruelty 'well' (*Machiavelli*). The principle is that a ruler, or in this case a movement, must always justify a use of cruelty (violence, in this case) so as not to lose the support of the people. Thus, a movement towards equality that was built solely on violence would have lost the majority of followers and respect. But one with peaceful protests justifying the violence would keep supporters and, moreover, capture the attention of the government. While it is unlikely that the proponents of the civil right movement used a book known for its immoral and sometimes violence endorsing content to justify a non-violent movement, the concept remains the same. Without the peaceful protests, the violent ones would have been ineffective and counterproductive. Thus, it is the non-violent Civil Rights Movement that justified the violence that achieved results and legislation.

To further elaborate this claim, look to two major events of the Civil Rights Era: the Greensboro Four and the Birmingham Church Bombing; one event could be described as a starting point, the other as a turning point. The Greensboro

Four sit-in involved four college students sitting at Woolworth's counter every day – and not being served until six months into their daily protest. This sit-in sparked a fire in students throughout the South to stage their own non-violent protests – mostly sit-ins – many of which were effective, to some degree. They were successful in the fact that they gained an immense amount of support because involvement in them was relatively easy and noncommittal. But while this tactic worked in the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement to make small gains like integrating individual businesses and start a movement going, it would not have worked near the end of the movement to gain lasting results. The Greensboro Four's non-violence would have petered out in effectiveness. Thus, this is a starting point, a non-violent movement focused on garnering as much support as possible with very little legislative or drastic changes as a result.

However, events such as those surrounding the Birmingham Four would shape the latter half of the movement. While attending Sunday school, four young black girls were killed when a bomb planted by the Ku Klux Klan exploded at their Baptist Church (“About the Birmingham Church Bombing”). The riots that ensued in Birmingham caused the senseless death of two other youths. But this violence would lead to legislation. It would lead to change. Not six months after the bombing, the Twenty-Fourth Amendment was passed, abolishing poll taxes that had prevented African Americans from voting for decades. The Birmingham Church Bombing and its subsequent riots show the turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. As the movement shifted from non-violent boycotts and sit-ins to riots and bombings, the results of each event shifted from gaining support of the people to gaining the support of the government. This pattern of peaceful protest in the beginning justifying violence in the end characterizes the

Civil Rights Era. Without the non-violent protests to set off a spark the movement would not have begun, nor would it have gained the following that it did. But, without the violence towards the end of the era, the entire movement would have nothing to show for its years of effort.

Like Yin and Yang, the Civil Rights Movement had a specific balance. Had it been a movement made purely of non-violent methods, no lasting results would have been achieved, but had the opposite occurred the movement would have been shut down and not respected due to senseless brutality. Luckily, the movement created was neither of those things. It garnered support through non-violent means and used those means to justify the ‘necessary’ violence that would achieve results. One side would not have been successful without the other, and it is that fact that has led us to where we are today, decades away from poll taxes and segregation but still far from “not [being] judged by the color of [our] skin but by the content of [our] character” (From the “I Have a Dream...” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.). So, as we stand on the cusp of a new era of fighting for social equality, I ask the young leaders of our new movement, the new John Lewises and Martin Luther Kings to look back on our past. Remember the previous Civil Rights Era. Remember that violence alone will do injustice to your cause and peace alone will accomplish a modicum of what you want to do. It is the combination of the two that will make all the difference. Neither side would have found success without the other.

Works Cited

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