

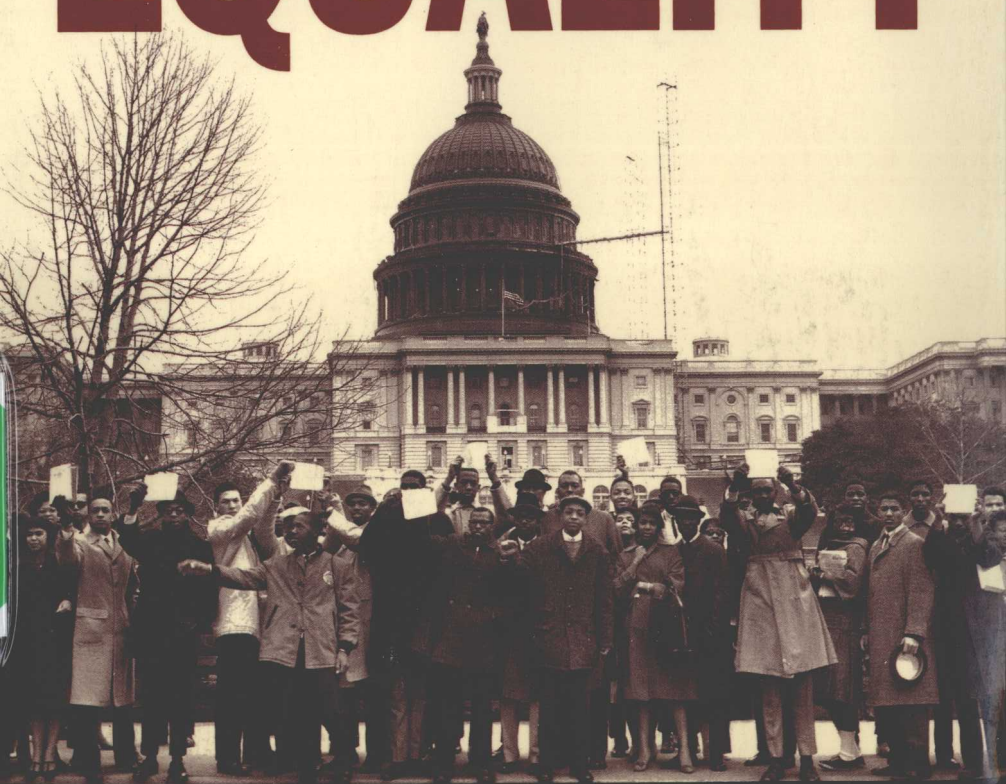
REVISED

1954

EDITION

1992

# THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK EQUALITY



HARVARD SITKOFF

*T* H E  
*S* T R U G G L E  
F O R  
*B* L A C K  
*E* Q U A L I T Y

1 9 5 4 - 1 9 9 2

REVISED EDITION

HARVARD  
SITKOFF

Copyright © 1981, 1993 by Harvard Sitkoff  
All rights reserved  
Published in Canada by  
HarperCollinsCanadaLtd  
Printed in the United States of America  
Designed by Fritz Metsch

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Sitkoff, Harvard.

The struggle for black equality 1954-1992 / Harvard Sitkoff ;  
consulting editor, Eric Foner.

p. cm.—(American century series.)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Afro-Americans—Civil rights. 2. United States—Race  
relations. 3. Civil rights movements—United States—History—20th  
century. I. Foner, Eric. II. Title. III. Series.

E185.615.S572 1993 323'.196073—dc20 92-20244 CIP

*Nineteenth printing, 1994*

## P R E F A C E

.....

This book is concerned with one of the most significant developments in American history: the struggle for racial equality and justice waged between 1954 and 1992. It is designed primarily to provide a succinct narrative and interpretation of the civil-rights movement. I have, accordingly, written neither a comprehensive nor a scholarly account of the struggle. Important developments before 1954 are merely sketched; some events, organizations, and individuals that merit discussion are omitted; and topics that warrant definitive treatment are dealt with concisely. To help the reader who wishes to pursue a particular aspect of the struggle more fully, I have appended a bibliographical essay. The works listed there are also the source for all the quotations included in this account.

Some may consider it presumptuous to publish a historical analysis and synthesis of a recent and controversial subject. The limited perspective of time, the many archival sources still closed, the scarcity of solidly researched monographs, and the inherent biases of most contemporary attempts to record and evaluate the bewildering rush of events from the pathbreaking *Brown* decision of 1954 through the crescendo of violence in the late 1960s combine to make the writing of a history of the modern struggle a hazardous

task. This revised edition is sure to need further revision as perspectives continue to change and still more information becomes available. Nevertheless, I hope it will be of use to future historians. I am confident it will aid readers in the 1990s to develop an informed understanding of the recent past and to come to some preliminary conclusions and evaluations about the enduring significance of the struggle.

The facts of history, of course, do not speak for themselves. Any effort to describe and explain requires judgment; and no historian can entirely escape his basic beliefs. Honesty, however, dictates that a historian consider and test all the evidence according to the canons of the craft, guard against personal biases, avoid forcing the past into preconceived notions, and inform the reader of the author's viewpoint. My perspective derives from association and identification with the movement in the early sixties. I believed then that the struggle was confronting the United States with an issue that had undermined the nation's democratic institutions for nearly two hundred years, and that morality, justice, and a due concern for the future well-being of our society necessitated an end to racial inequality. A third of a century later, I believe it more than ever. Moreover, given the rapidity with which the popular media have relegated the civil-rights battles to the scrap heap of inattention and indifference, I felt compelled to write of the strivings and sufferings of these battles to make real the promise of democracy. I want the reader to encounter the anguish and hope, the violence and passion, the joy and sorrow that the fighters for freedom experienced. My attempt to recapture the drama of the era, as well as my value judgments, will certainly provoke disagreement. Good. At the very least, the writing of history ought to stimulate debate and further inquiry.

My effort to tell the story of the actions and consequences of the black struggle for equality, like the movement itself, has truly been a collective effort. Although a small part of the book derives from archival research and my own participation in some of the events narrated, this synthesis would not have been possible without the

pioneering efforts of those historians, journalists, political scientists, sociologists, and memoirists who have written on aspects of this topic. Their personal accounts and scholarly studies, discussed in the bibliographical essay, underpin this book. My intellectual debt to them is enormous. I owe much, in addition, to the many important substantive and stylistic suggestions offered by my editor, Eric Foner, and my publisher, Arthur Wang. They made the manuscript much better in every way than it would otherwise have been. I am also indebted to many of my students and friends in the movement, too numerous to name individually, who shared with me their questions and observations, and sharpened my perception of the black struggle. As always, the encouragement and inspiration of William Chafe and William Leuchtenburg have been invaluable. The flaws of content, expression, and interpretation that remain are mine alone.

H.S.

## CONTENTS

.....

1. UP FROM SLAVERY	3
2. THE CRADLE ROCKS	37
3. BIGGER THAN A HAMBURGER	61
4. THE LONG JOURNEY	88
5. WE SHALL OVERCOME	118
6. HOW MANY ROADS	155
7. HEIRS OF MALCOLM X	184
8. THE DREAM DEFERRED . . . THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES	210
<i>Bibliographical Essay</i>	237
<i>Index</i>	251

*T*HE *S*TRUGGLE FOR

*B*LACK *E*QUALITY

1954-1992





# UP FROM SLAVERY

There is a difference in knowing you are black and in understanding what it means to be black in America. Before I was ten I knew what it was to step off the sidewalk to let a white man pass.

MARGARET WALKER

Nourished by anger, revolutions are born of hope. They are the offspring of belief and bitterness, of faith in the attainment of one's goals and indignation at the limited rate and extent of change. Rarely in history are the two stirrings confluent in a sufficient force to generate an effective, radical social movement. They would be so in African America in the 1960s.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, few African-Americans struggled hopefully. Many African-Americans resisted, often in subtle and solitary ways, at times in an organized and collective manner, transmitting from one generation to the next a tradition of black protest. But their initial efforts to continue the campaign against Jim Crow initiated by the black abolitionists failed to stem the rising crest of white racism after Reconstruction. Largely

bereft of white allies, blacks fought on the defensive, trying to hold their limited gains. They lost each battle. Congress permitted the white South to reduce blacks to a state of peonage, to disregard their civil rights, and to disenfranchise them by force, intimidation, and statute. So did the Supreme Court. Writing into the Constitution its own beliefs in the inferiority of blacks, the late-nineteenth-century high court tightened every possible shackle confining the ex-slaves. Most American scholars cheered this legal counterrevolution which effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. It exemplified their teachings of inherent and irremediable racial differences, of blacks as the most primitive, degraded, and least civilized of the races, and of the folly of governmental tampering with local folkways. Whether appealing to scriptural or scientific evidence, to Darwinism, the gospel of Anglo-Saxonism, or the new interest in eugenics, a generation of clergymen, editors, and educators propounded the intellectual rationalizations for white supremacy.

Not surprisingly, most white Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century believed that, for the good of all, the naturally superior whites should rule over the baser races. They heard or read little to the contrary. The Southern Way had become the American Way. Even the most humanitarian reformers concerned with racial injustice counseled gradualism. Northern liberals preached the necessity of deferring citizenship for blacks until the freedmen were ready for it; they emphasized the long-term gains to be derived from education, religion, and economic uplift and denigrated strategies predicated on agitation, force, or political activity.

This total acquiescence by government officials and Northern public opinion gave the white South all the permission it needed to institutionalize its white-supremacist beliefs. First came disenfranchisement, accomplished in the 1880s mainly through fraud and force. All the Southern states felt emboldened in the next two decades to follow the lead of the 1890 Mississippi state constitutional convention in officially adopting such disenfranchising techniques as poll taxes, "grandfather clauses," literacy and "good charac-

ter" tests, and white primaries. Black voter registration plummeted 96 percent in Louisiana between 1896 and 1900. The number of African-Americans permitted to vote in the new century hovered around 3,500 in Alabama, which had an adult black population of nearly 300,000; and in Mississippi, with an even larger black population, fewer than a thousand blacks voted.

Political impotency bore on every aspect of African-American life. Unable to participate in the enactment or enforcement of the law, Southern blacks became increasingly vulnerable to physical assault and murder. Over a thousand were lynched between 1900 and 1915. No records exist to tally the number beaten or tortured. Nor can one describe adequately the terror of living with a constant fear of barbarity and violence, of having your security subject to the whim of those who despise you, of having no recourse to police or courts.

The Southern states, in addition, adopted a host of statutes methodically outlawing everything "interracial." These new segregation laws expressed the white South's all-encompassing belief in the inequality of blacks. Most Southern states now formally required Negroes and whites to be born separately in segregated hospitals; to live their lives as separately as possible in segregated schools, public accommodations, and places of work and recreation; and, presumably, to dwell in the next life separately in segregated funeral homes and cemeteries. The rapid proliferation of Jim Crow laws inspired an irrational competition among Southern legislators to erect ever more and higher barriers between the races. "White" and "Colored" signs sprouted everywhere and on everything. Atlanta mandated Jim Crow Bibles in its courtrooms and prohibited African-Americans and whites from using the same park facilities, even from visiting the municipal zoo at the same time. Alabama forbade African-Americans to play checkers with whites, and Mississippi insisted on Jim Crow taxicabs. New Orleans segregated its prostitutes, and Oklahoma, its telephone booths. The lawmakers of Florida and North Carolina saw to it that white students would never touch textbooks used by African-Americans. Such edicts bol-

stered white power and privilege while demeaning the spirit of African-Americans.

Jim Crow, furthermore, easily led to gross inequities in the distribution of public monies for education and civic services. The eleven Southern states in 1916 spent an average of \$10.32 per white public-school student, and only \$2.89 per black pupil. There was one hospital bed available for every 139 American whites in the 1920s, but only one for every 1,941 blacks. And that was not all. Southern governments victimized blacks by bestial convict-leasing and chain-gang practices, and confined them to serfdom on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, doing all they could to implement the view of James K. Vardaman, who became Governor of Mississippi in 1904, that "God Almighty had created the Negro for a menial."

Alexis de Tocqueville's observation early in the nineteenth century that white Americans "scarcely acknowledge the common features of humanity in this stranger whom slavery has brought among them" remained as accurate a century later.

And blacks could do little to alter the situation. More than 90 percent of the nearly ten million African-Americans in 1910 lived in the South, three-quarters of them in rural areas, the vast majority working a white man's land, with a white man's mule and a white man's credit. Theirs was an oppressive, closed society, designed to thwart black advancement and encourage black subservience. All political and economic power remained vested in whites determined to maintain the status quo, however many black lives it cost. Daily facing grinding poverty, physical helplessness, and all the banal crudities of existence under an open, professed, and boasting racism, many blacks grew fatalistic. Segregation and discrimination came to seem permanent, immutable, an inevitable condition of life, and the majority of African-Americans succumbed to the new racial order.

But not all. Some protested by migrating. Between 1890 and 1910, nearly two hundred thousand Southern blacks fled to the North. Others returned to Africa or established autonomous black

communities in the West. A few, mostly members of the tiny, Northern black elite, continued the struggle they had inherited from the black abolitionists and from the inspiring vision of equal rights nourished by the Civil War and Reconstruction. They spoke out for racial justice in such organizations as the Afro-American Council, Monroe Trotter's National Equal Rights League, Ida B. Wells's Antilynching League, and the Niagara Movement. Yet few blacks heard their pleas, and fewer whites heeded their demands. These small communities of resistance and struggle in the early twentieth century, lacking adequate finances, political leverage, influential white allies, access to the major institutions shaping public opinion and policy, and the support of large numbers of blacks, could do virtually nothing to alter the course of American life and thought. As Willie Brown lamented in his blues:

*Can't tell my future, I can't tell my past.  
Lord, it seems like every minute sure gon' be my last.  
Oh, a minute seems like hours, and hours seem like days.  
And a minute seems like hours, hour seems like days.*

The ascendancy of Booker T. Washington at the turn of the century epitomized both the widespread despair of blacks and the powerlessness of the handful of blacks actively fighting against racial injustice. Although he worked covertly to diminish disenfranchisement and Jim Crow, Washington publicly emphasized the necessity of accommodation, conciliation, and gradualism. "The best course to pursue in regard to civil rights," he lectured to blacks, "is to let it alone; let it alone and it will settle itself." When the British author H. G. Wells criticized Jim Crow while on a visit to the United States, Washington answered back: "The only answer to it is for colored men to be patient, to make themselves competent, to do good work, to give no occasion against us." A spokesman for the emerging black middle class, he counseled all blacks to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. Too few, however, even

had boots, and in the years before his death in 1915, Washington's nostrums failed abysmally to alleviate the plight of blacks.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, organized in 1910, fared no better. Declaring its purposes to be "to promote equality of rights and eradicate caste or race prejudice . . . to advance the interests of colored citizens; to secure for them impartial suffrage; and to increase their opportunities for securing justice in the courts, education for their children, employment according to their ability; and complete equality before the law," the interracial NAACP relied on litigation as the chief means to those ends. Despite two victories at the Supreme Court, which declared unconstitutional the grandfather clause and city ordinances mandating residential segregation, the association's goals remained an impossible dream during its first quarter of a century. It could not destroy the edifice of discrimination, lessen the rampant prejudice everywhere in the nation, or deter the mushrooming ghettoization of blacks. Because of continuing white indifference and black impotency, the NAACP could do nothing to affect the racial policies of Southern governments or to compel the necessary corrective actions by the national government.

Indeed, no black leader or organization or strategy could stem the tide of discrimination and segregation in the first third of the twentieth century. Powerlessness fostered frustrations. Defeat bred disillusionment. Blacks in the 1920s squabbled among themselves more than they assailed their oppressors.

Certain harbingers of change nonetheless appeared. Most stemmed from the mass migration of blacks to the cities and to the North. Between 1910 and 1920 the "Great Migration" brought more than half a million blacks northward, and another three-quarters of a million blacks fled from the boll weevil and the lynch mob in the 1920s. Some who followed the North Star looking for the Promised Land found hell instead: educational and residential segregation, dilapidated housing milked by white slumlords, discrimination by labor unions and employers, brutality by white policemen, and liquor and narcotics the only means of escape. Yet,

for most, the Northern urban ghetto meant surcease from permanent tenantry, poverty, disease, and ignorance, and the first step into the mainstream of the industrial labor force.

Northern Negroes, unlike their Southern brethren, could vote. In 1928, for the first time in the century, an African-American was elected to Congress. Other blacks won local offices in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City, and Philadelphia, and the votes of African-Americans became a factor in election results. Politically, the African-American in the North began to command attention. The bonds of hopelessness of the rigid caste system of the Black Belt less and less characterized all of black America.

Hope sprouted also from the seeds of spiritual emancipation planted by the literary movement of the 1920s that African-Americans labeled the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Renaissance, and the New Negro Movement. Whether celebrating the racial chauvinism of African-Americans, affirming their identification with Africa, or decrying lynchings and racial oppression, poets and novelists of color sought to free themselves from white symbols and images and to write in their own idiom. By focusing white America's attention on blacks, by awakening the pride of African-Americans in their race and folk traditions, and by militant protests and demands for civil rights, the New Negro articulated the possibility of change brought about by migration.

So did the NAACP. Led by W. E. B. Du Bois, the brilliant black editor of its monthly journal, *The Crisis*, the NAACP publicized the hostility of organized labor to blacks, railed against disenfranchisement, and demanded that Congress enact an anti-lynching bill. Despite repeated rebuffs, the NAACP kept aloft the banners of racial equality, and gradually gained adherents. Its branches enabled local African-American leaders to acquire organizational skills and to develop networks of resources. Most important, its tactic of loudly complaining at each manifestation of racism slowly eroded the myth that Southern whites and black accommodators had forged: that blacks were content, even happy, with the status quo; that they did not consider the rights and duties of citizenship vital to black in-



terests; and that they preferred the separation of the races to association with whites.

And so did Marcus Garvey's movement for racial pride and self-determination. Garvey convinced millions of blacks to believe in their ability to shape their destiny. A true visionary, he aroused African-Americans to affirm their Africanness and urged the redemption of Africa from European control. A master showman, Garvey dramatized the extreme plight of African-Americans and the desperate necessity of change. An intuitive psychologist, he radicalized the powerless by instilling in them a sense of their potential power. And as a persuasive teacher, the Jamaican leader convinced masses of Negroes that white racism and not black failings explained their lowly status.

In the 1930s, these stirrings began to innervate the struggle for black equality. The proponents of civil rights no longer stood alone. They fought alongside radicals pressing for class unity unhampered by racial divisions, labor leaders wanting strong unions, ethnic and political minorities desiring greater security for themselves from a strong central government that would protect constitutional rights, and liberals battling Southern opponents of the New Deal. African-Americans also benefited from the new ideological consensus emerging in the academic community that undermined racism by accentuating the influence of environment and by downplaying innate characteristics. It stressed the damage done to individuals by prejudice and the costs to the nation of discrimination. It demolished the stereotype of the African-American as a contented buffoon. Intellectually, white supremacy was now on the defensive.

The New Deal's substantive and symbolic aid to African-Americans further stimulated hope for racial reforms. With some success, the New Deal insisted on equality of treatment in its relief programs. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed over a hundred blacks to administrative posts, and the number of African-American federal employees tripled in the 1930s. The Roosevelt Administration began the desegregation of federal rest rooms, cafeterias, and secretarial pools. A host of government publications