

# The Civil Rights Revolution

*Events and Leaders, 1955-1968*

FREDERIC O. SARGENT

*Foreword by Bill Maxwell*



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers  
*Jefferson, North Carolina, and London*

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*On the cover, from the top:*

Ronald Martin, Robert Patterson, Mark Martin

February 2, 1960, at the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter, Greensboro, NC

(Library of Congress No. RAP020204).

Martin Luther King, Jr., and others,

Civil Rights March, Washington, August 28, 1963

(National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-306-SSM-4C[51]15).

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# Acknowledgments

The principal sources of these accounts, biographical sketches, quotations and interpretations are the books listed in the bibliography. Additional insights were gleaned in interviews with curators of several civil rights museums.

Most revealing among the sources are the firsthand accounts by participants and observers. Examples are the books by Abernathy, A. Young, Due, Hunter-Gault, Robinson, Bates, Parks and Lewis, and the oral histories produced by Hampton and Fayer.

Basic to the study of this period are the detailed and scholarly accounts of major campaigns and incidents produced by historians who researched archives and conducted scores of interviews. Examples are Branch, Powledge, Oates, Rowan, Ayres, Garrow, Davis, Townsend and Williams.

Books that focus on single agencies, individuals or cultural dimensions also deepen our understanding of the revolution. Examples are books about the FBI, the KKK, the supreme court, the presidents, black culture and religion, women activists and Thurgood Marshall.

Books by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., are a special category. They elucidate the political, psychological, philosophical and ethical aspects of the revolution and its unique tactic: nonviolent action. A number of encyclopedias provide dates, context and valuable analyses of each event in the civil rights movement.

Because the civil rights struggle was a campaign to make fundamental changes in U.S. law, court records provide an essential part of the story. Two sources are particularly valuable in this regard: the *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to the Supreme Court* (1979), and *Civil Rights and the Black American* (1968).

The civil rights revolution was a complex phenomenon. The sources listed in the bibliography contribute facts, insights and interpretations helpful in understanding the historical happenings involved, and in tracing the shift in the U.S. polity, from support of apartheid to a national commitment to fair and equal treatment under the law, enfranchisement and improved social and economic opportunities for all citizens.

"Freedom is never voluntarily given; it must be demanded  
by the oppressed."

—Dr. King, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, 1963

"What we are seeing now is a freedom explosion."

—Dr. King, Nobel Prize address, December 11, 1964

"The essence of man is found in freedom."

—Dr. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 1967

"Freedom Now!"

—Mantra of the civil rights movement

# Foreword

by Bill Maxwell

In 1955, I was ten years old, living in Crescent City, Florida, with my paternal grandparents. "Whites only" and "colored only" signs governed all of our lives in this town of 1,200 residents. White children attended one school, and black children attended another.

Even with such inequities, my childhood was idyllic, until 1955, when everything changed. This was the year when my black schoolmates and I apprehended how Jim Crow's intentional cruelty—its legal separation of the races—had robbed us of our full potential as U.S. citizens and as human beings.

Indeed, our lives changed in September 1955, when word spread that fourteen-year-old Emmett Till had been brutally murdered in Mississippi. A Chicagoan, Emmett was visiting his relatives when he allegedly whistled at a white woman. A few days later, the child's mutilated body was pulled from a local river. He had been beaten and shot.

For most African Americans, the civil rights movement, or revolution, began in earnest with Emmett's death, when our ignorance, innocence, and complacency died. Sure, we knew about the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* case that was still sending shockwaves through the nation, but Emmett's death was personal. It frightened and galvanized us into action.

During my undergraduate college years, Emmett's death haunted me and influenced me to join the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. On many occasions, I had the honor of marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in several Southern cities, and I had the responsibility of registering thousands of black voters.

When Frederic O. Sargent first asked me to write the Foreword to *The Civil*

*Rights Revolution, 1955–1968*, I was not greatly interested. After all, I had personally participated in the civil rights movement. What could I learn from yet another book about it? Still, I marveled that Sargent had begun his book with the year 1955, when I came of age as a child of Jim Crow.

Mr. Sargent and I had never met, and we had not spoken to each other before. He knew me through my twice-weekly column for the *St. Petersburg Times*. After a brief telephone conversation, I agreed to write the Foreword because I wanted to read a manuscript that promised new insight into what Mr. Sargent refers to as the “second great American revolution.”

Yes, *The Civil Rights Revolution* delivers. It offers new insight into those tumultuous years mainly because of its methodology. Instead of mining one thesis, Mr. Sargent uses myriad first-hand and eyewitness accounts, scholarly studies, press accounts, and official government reports to give the reader the most comprehensive and intimate view of the revolution ever.

I marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, and spent many nights in jails throughout Dixie, the land of America’s apartheid. I gained a better sense of the profound significance of the victims’ courage and accomplishments through Mr. Sargent’s dozens of vignettes of violent confrontations and biographical sketches of the revolution’s leaders.

*The Civil Rights Revolution* makes an essential contribution to the literature of an era when the nation was at a crossroads. Would white America embrace the future or stay the course of legal injustice against an entire group of citizens? *The Civil Rights Revolution* shows the reader how those personally involved in the historic events that changed our nation made their choices. Scholars and average readers alike will benefit from this book.

Bill Maxwell



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## Preface

From 1955 to 1968 hundreds of thousands of Americans of African descent marched, demonstrated, negotiated, sang, prayed, spoke, wrote, and suffered police brutality, job losses and imprisonment in a campaign to end the U.S. system of apartheid in eleven states. The activists were successful. Supreme Court decisions and new federal statutes wiped apartheid laws off the books and fostered implementation of the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution with their promises of equal treatment under the law and the right to vote. This book presents a wide-angle view of this revolution with its geographic, temporal, philosophic, legal and human dimensions.

The African Americans' demand for freedom was professionally and well reported. The white media—press, TV and radio—told their audiences everything they could learn before their deadlines. Headlines, sound bites, news stories and photos of violent acts gave the public a vivid first impression. Four decades later historians describe and analyze the same confrontations but present more cases and more details. Historians spend years researching archival records, conducting hundreds of interviews and reading autobiographies and books by other historians. They study each event with the benefit of historical perspective and produce a much fuller understanding of the period than the original media reports. Today's historians explain the root cause of the revolution, namely, U.S. apartheid. They describe the legal precondition of the movement; the NAACP's forty years of court cases against segregation that resulted in the Supreme Court reversing its stand on that subject. They reveal the key roles of black women, the black community and the black church in providing the physical, psychological and spiritual support that was indispensable to

the movement. They show how the confrontations were civil and nonviolent on one side and brutal and oppressive on the other.

Was it a movement or a revolution? This question is answered by a comparison of media accounts of the '50s and '60s with historians' accounts of the '90s and beyond. The media reports witnessed one incident at a time and called it a "movement." Historians compare conditions under U.S. apartheid in the '40s and '50s with the freedoms delivered by civil rights legislation and court decisions in the '60s and conclude that there was "a fundamental change in political organization"—Webster's definition of a revolution. For African Americans who lived in the eleven apartheid states it was a revolution. In other states where segregation was *de facto* rather than *de jure*, it was a movement. Historians agree that this revolution accomplished one of the principal goals of the Civil War: it gave African Americans the basic civil rights enjoyed by others. President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King called it a revolution and the PBS television program "Eyes on the Prize" termed it the "second great American revolution."

This revolution was ignited by the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954–1955, which found school segregation unconstitutional. It was ended by the passage of half a dozen civil rights laws and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement's incomparable leader.

This story has been told many ways. Here it is presented in fifty-four vignettes of black-white confrontations and sixty biographical sketches of black leaders. The terminology used is drawn from two cultures. The white culture focuses on "civil rights," i.e., the right to vote, equal treatment under the law and the right to seek elected office. The black culture is focused on "Freedom," which includes civil rights plus the concepts of equality, mutual respect and economic opportunities.

This book is intended for students of unvarnished American history and the informed reader who wishes to know what historians are now saying about the civil rights struggle of half a century ago. Readers who wish to learn more about this subject are referred to the bibliography.

Frederic O. Sargent  
August 2004

# I

## Prelude to Revolution

### U.S. Apartheid to *Brown v. Board of Education*

The civil rights revolution of 1955–1968 was a pivotal sociopolitical controversy. It marked the end of racism as the determining ideology in domestic policies. It introduced emphasis on civil and economic rights for all minority groups. To understand that revolution it is first necessary to review its major cause, its philosophical rationale and its legal base:

The principal cause of the revolution was the two-class or apartheid sociopolitical system embedded in the laws of former rebel states. School history books call it “Jim Crow” and minimize its severity, duration and location. Historians call it U.S. apartheid and define it as a sociopolitical system established by federal, state and local governments and enforced by racist courts, police and citizen terrorist groups in eleven states.

The Civil War established the fact that secession is not allowed and it freed the enslaved Africans—temporarily—from the end of the war in 1865 to the end of Reconstruction in 1877. In 1877, the U.S. government, tired of trying to establish democracy in the defeated Confederacy, pulled its armies out and left those states to manage their own affairs. The southern leaders welcomed this decision and proceeded to readopt practices and enact statutes to reconstruct a two-class social system. They were encouraged in this effort by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson* in 1896 that approved “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and by the inaction of the administration and Congress to implement the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution that guaranteed equal treatment under the law.

and the right to vote. Slavery was replaced with share-cropping, which tied the "freed" blacks to their landlords' plantations in debt, ignorance and poverty.

The first state to adopt the "Jim Crow" or apartheid laws was Tennessee in 1875. By 1900 ten more states—Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas enacted them. These apartheid laws were statutory confirmations of the segregation practices that were practiced and enforced by the KKK as soon as the U.S. troops withdrew. If the state statutes omitted some detail of the segregation system it was supplied by municipal ordinances or by local practices.

By 1896 a two-class, apartheid system based on Supreme Court decisions and state laws governed every aspect of the African American's life in the southern states. There were separate white and black facilities for drinking fountains, restrooms, theaters, bus and train stations, hospitals, restaurants, hotels, bars and churches. Black children were excluded from libraries, parks, beaches and pools. The separate black schools were ramshackle cabins that were small, overcrowded, underfinanced, unheated and poorly equipped. School books were castoffs from white schools, except in Florida which had separate "white" and "black" textbooks. Blacks were excluded from political practice, book publishing, good jobs and good housing. Whites treated blacks with disdain and contempt. A black person could be arrested for "loitering" at any time and lynched for talking back to a white person. The state apartheid systems were jointly managed by all agencies of the white establishment: the governor, legislature, judiciary, police and sheriffs. The principal enforcer in the system was the quasi-secret Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

The KKK was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865. By 1867 there were hundreds of local units in every state from Virginia to Texas. By 1867 when the federal government was no longer interested in trying to guide the rebel states to democracy, the KKK was well established and operating as needed to maintain a segregated society. The announced goals of the KKK were to prevent blacks from voting or participating in government and from sharing any public areas or facilities with whites. (The term "white" did not include Catholics and Jews.)

The tactics of the KKK were various forms of terrorism: night riding, cross burning, drive-by shootings, arson and lynching. Lynching of blacks in the South escalated rapidly after Reconstruction. W.E.B. DuBois estimated that 1,700 blacks were lynched in the U.S. during the decade 1885–1894. From 1882 to 1927 a total of 3,405 blacks were lynched in seventeen southern and border states. The Klan enforced *de jure* segregation in the South and *de facto* segregation in the North. At the peak of its power in the 1920s it was politically strong not only in the South but also in Oregon, Ohio, California, Oklahoma, Kansas, Indiana, New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maine and Colorado and it climbed to five million members.

Throughout the South, the Klan leaders were members of the Establishment; U.S. congressmen, planters, lawyers, editors, doctors and local and state officials. The Klan members were white males, including sons of wealthy planters and illiterate poor whites. The Klan was closely allied with white Christian churches. Protestant ministers frequently worked as Klan recruiters. The Klan symbol was the Christian cross and the members' favorite marching song was "Onward Christian Soldiers."



While the Klan employed secrecy, its main protection was their close alliance with establishment leaders. If members were identified after a misdeed, they suffered no penalties. Other Klansmen provided false alibis, intimidated witnesses or officials and manipulated juries. Few were indicted and very few were ever convicted.

By the late '20s the Klan declined sharply in membership and in influence. This decline was brought about by (1) legal attacks on the Klan by the NAACP, (2) an increase in criticism from Golden Rule Christians, (3) inept Klan leadership and (4) public revulsion at their terrorist tactics.

The ideology that rationalized apartheid was racism—a belief that the white race was superior and the black race inferior. Racism originated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. When Europeans enslaved the peoples they conquered they were strongly criticized by theologians, missionaries and the Pope. In response the slave traders adopted the doctrine of racism. A similar pattern occurred in the U.S. The national policy of military campaigns to exterminate the natives and the importation and breeding of Africans for slave labor brought sharp criticism from some Christian denominations. For instance, in 1688 Mennonites in Germantown, Pennsylvania, considered the ethics of slavery and concluded that slavery violated Christian principles. The slave traders, breeders and owners responded to this charge by adopting the concept of racism.

Prior to the Civil War most Christian churches felt obliged to take a position—one way or the other—on slavery. Congregationalists disagreed on the issue but with their practice of local autonomy some congregations were on each side. Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans avoided a public debate by shifting their focus from temporal matters to spiritual and metaphysical concerns. The Presbyterian church split into two divisions—northern, anti-slavery, and southern, pro-slavery. In 1864 the southern Presbyterians adopted a resolution that stated, “We hesitate not, to affirm that it is the peculiar mission of the Southern Church to conserve the institution of slavery, to make it a blessing to both master and slave.”

Racism was the dominant ideology governing the whites' attitude toward blacks from Reconstruction to 1964. The Supreme Court was racist in its Dred Scott decision in 1856 that declared that blacks were property. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 approved separate but “equal” facilities for blacks. All U.S. presidents from Reconstruction to 1964—except Harry Truman—acted as racists. They all failed to implement the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution that “guaranteed” equal treatment under the law and the right to vote. The U.S. Congress was dominated by racist southern senators and representatives. It rejected innumerable petitions for enactment of civil rights legislation.

During a congressional debate in 1906, Senator Benjamin R. Tillman of South Carolina made a speech that expressed the southern position on Negro rights. He gave three reasons to justify repression of Negroes: (1) the bitter memory of Reconstruction, (2) the belief that Negroes were inherently inferior and (3) a belief in the purity of the white race and the sanctity of white womanhood. Hollywood reaffirmed the belief in white supremacy in such movies as *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*.