

HUM 414 - Civil Rights Era Lecture Notes – 10/09/2009

The Top Three Myths of the Civil Rights Movement

#1: Rosa Parks and Spontaneous Combustion

Rosa Parks was a simple seamstress from Montgomery Alabama. One day during her daily bus ride home from work, she was asked to give up her seat for a white man. She was tired from a long day's work and tired of being mistreated. She refused to cooperate and was promptly arrested. As a result of this simple act of courage, thousands of African Americans from Montgomery rose up and organized a bus boycott. Ms Parks had no outside assistance or support. It was completely spontaneous.

Truth: Ms. Parks was not alone, and this bus boycott took years to plan. There were also a number of important events that precipitated the boycott.

1. WWII
2. Gandhi and Indian Independence
3. The Brown vs. the Board of Education Ruling
4. Emmett Till and television

2. There were two – and only two - paths to Freedom

By 1963 every person of color in North America was marching lock-step behind either Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X.

Truth: There was a long list of organizations that worked for Civil Rights in the fifties and sixties. Here are just a few. Sometimes they worked together on projects like Freedom Rides or Voter Registration drives, and sometimes they disagreed about goals and strategies. Within every organization there were endless debates about which goals were most pressing, which problems to tackle next, how much to risk, and how soon to risk it. There were personality conflicts and power struggles. Most importantly, as the movement progressed, the groups focus and strategy evolved. The transformers were themselves transformed.

NAACP- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909)

CORE - Congress of Racial Equality (1942) James Farmer

SCLC – Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1956) King & company

SNCC – Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1960) – John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael became the chairman of SNCC in 1966

NOI - Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad (Malcolm X was the National spokesperson.)

Muslim Mosque, Inc – Founded 1964 by Malcolm X after he split with NOI.

The Deacons of Defense – A group of war veterans who organized in 1964 to defend Civil Rights workers against the KKK.

Black Panthers – Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Stokely Carmichael

We will briefly outline the evolution of three of these groups/leaders.

1. Malcolm X
2. SNCC
3. SCLC – King

Milestones

Montgomery Bus Boycott – Dec. 1955

Birmingham - 1963

March on Washington – August 1963

Civil Rights Act – 1964

Malcolm X's Assassination - 1965

Selma (Bloody Sunday) -1965

Voting Rights Act – 1965

King's Assassination -1968

3. King was assassinated shortly after his “I Have a Dream Speech” – His dream never extended much beyond equal rights for African Americans.

Truth: One of the most significant shifts in the Civil Rights movement occurred long before long before King was shot. From 1955 to 1965 Civil rights workers focused primarily on changing laws. They believed that African Americans could not make further progress until everyone had full legal access to education, transportation, public and private facilities, and the ballot. After the Voting Rights Act was signed, the movement's goals changed. King spent the last year of his life planning a March on poverty. He and other Civil Rights workers also opposed the Vietnam War. They were interested in nothing less than a reorganization of the nation's economy and culture.