A YOUNG PEOPLE'S HISTORY of the UNITED STATES

COLUMBUS
to the
WAR ON TERROR

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS
New York

The War at Home

THE WAR YEARS WERE A PATRIOTIC TIME IN the United States. The country seemed totally dedicated to winning the war. There was no organized antiwar movement. Only one socialist group came out firmly against the war. It was the Socialist Workers Party. In 1943 eighteen of its members went to jail under a law that made it a crime to join any group that called for "the overthrow of government by force and violence."

Still, many people thought the war was wrong. About 350,000 of them avoided the draft. More than forty thousand flatly refused to fight.

The nation's two biggest groups of labor unions, the AFL and the CIO, had pledged not to go out on strike during the war. Yet there were more strikes during wartime than at any other time in American history. In 1944 alone, more than a million workers walked off their jobs in mines, steel mills, and manfuacturing plants. Many were angry that their wages stayed the same while the companies that made weapons and other war materials were earning huge profits.

By the end of the war, things seemed better to a lot of people. The war had brought big corporate

(left)
Ethel and Julius Rosenberg leaving New York City Federal Court after arraignment, 1950.

profits, but it also had brought higher prices for farm crops, wage increases for some workers, and enough prosperity for enough people to keep them from becoming rebellious. It was an old lesson learned by governments—war solves the problem of controlling the citizens. The president of the General Electric Corporation suggested that business and the military should create "a permanent wartime economy."

That's just what happened. The public was tired of war, but its new president, Harry S. Truman, built a mood of crisis that came to be called the Cold War. In the Cold War, America's enemy was the Communist country that had been its ally in World War II, the Soviet Union.

New Wars

THE RIVALRY WITH THE SOVIET UNION WAS real. The former Russia was making an amazing comeback from the war. It was rebuilding its economy and regaining military strength. But the Truman administration presented the Soviet Union as something worse than a rival. The Soviet Union, and communism itself, were seen as immediate threats.

The U.S. government encouraged fear of communism. Any communism-related revolutionary movement in Europe or Asia was made to look as if the Soviets were taking over more of the world. When Communist-led revolutionaries gained control of the Chinese government in 1949, China became the world's most populous Communist nation—and added fuel to Americans' fear.

The growing fear of Soviet power and communism in general led to a big increase in U.S. military spending. It also led to new political partnerships between conservatives and liberals.

In politics, a conservative is someone who wants to preserve the existing order of society, government, and the economy. Conservatives tend to place a high value on security, stability, and established institutions. A liberal is someone who supports progress, often through change. If the changes are extreme, a liberal may be called a radical. Liberals tend to place a high value on individual rights, civil liberties, and direct participation in government. (The liberal position has come to be called the Left, while the conservative position is the Right.)

The United States wanted to unite conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, in support of the Cold War and the fight against communism. Events in the Asian nation of Korea helped President Truman get that support.

After World War II, Korea had been freed from Japanese control and divided into two countries. North Korea was a socialist dictatorship, part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. South Korea was a conservative dictatorship in the American sphere of influence. In 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea. The United Nations—which had been created during the war and was dominated by the United States—asked its member nations to help South Korea. Truman sent U.S. forces, and the United Nations army became the American army.

When American forces pushed all the way through North Korea to the Chinese border, China entered the fighting on the side of North Korea. In three years, the war killed as many as 2 million Koreans and reduced North and South Korea to ruins. Yet when the fighting ended in 1953, the boundary between the two Koreas was where it had been before.

If the Korean War changed little in Korea, it had an effect in the United States. It caused many liberals to join with conservatives in supporting the president, the war, and the military economy. This meant trouble for radical critics who stayed outside the circle of agreement.

The Left had become a force during the Depression and the war. The Communist Party probably never had more than about a hundred thousand members, but it had influence in the labor unions, in the arts, and among Americans who had seen the failure of capitalism in the 1930s. To make capitalism more secure, to build support for an American victory over Communist foes, the nation's established powers of government and business had to weaken the Left. They did so by attacking communism. The hunt for Reds, as Communists were called, soon filled American life.

In 1947 Truman launched a program to search out "disloyal persons" in the U.S. government. In the next five years, more than 6.5 million government employees were investigated. In their book

The Fifties, historians Douglas Miller and Marion Nowack described the results:

> Not a single case of espionage was uncovered, though about 500 persons were dismissed in dubious cases of "questionable loyalty." All of this was conducted with secret evidence, secret and often paid informers, and neither judge nor jury. . . . A conservative and fearful reaction coursed the country. Americans became convinced of the need for absolute security and the preservation of the established order.

World events built support for this anti-Communist crusade. Communist parties came to power in places like Czechoslovakia and China. Revolutionary movements flared up in Asia and Africa when colonial peoples demanded independence from European powers. These events were presented to the American public as signs of a worldwide Communist plot.

Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin began his own crusade to find Communist traitors in the country's State Department and the military. He found nothing and eventually became an embarrassment to the government. Other political leaders, however, had their own ideas for crushing dissent. Liberal senators Hubert Humphrey and Herbert Lehman suggested that suspected Communists and traitors could be held without trial in concentration camps. The camps were set up, ready for use.

The government also made lists of hundreds of organizations it considered suspicious. Anyone who joined these groups, or even seemed sympathetic to them, could be investigated. Leaders of the Communist Party were jailed.

In 1950 the government charged Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, known to be connected with the Communist Party, with giving atomic secrets to the Soviets. Although the evidence against the Rosenbergs was weak, they were executed as spies. Later investigations proved that the case was deeply flawed. But at the time, everything from movies and comic strips to history lessons and newspapers urged Americans to fight communism.

By 1960, the Establishment seemed to have succeeded in weakening the Left. The Communist-radical upsurge of the New Deal and the wartime years had been broken up. The Cold War kept the country in a permanent war economy. There were big pockets of poverty, but enough people were making enough money to keep things quiet. Everything seemed under control. And then, in the 1960s, rebellions exploded in every area of American life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BLACK REVOLT AND CIVIL RIGHTS

THE BLACK REVOLT OF THE 1950S AND 1960S surprised white America, but it shouldn't have. When people are oppressed, memory is the one thing that can't be taken away from them. For people with memories of oppression, revolt is always just an inch below the surface.

Blacks in the United States had the memory of slavery. Beyond that, they lived with the daily realities of lynching, insults, and segregation. As the twentieth century went on, they found new ways to resist.

Fighting Back

In the 1920s a black poet named Claude McKay wrote these lines:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot. . . .
> Like men we'll face the murderous cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

McKay's words were entered into the *Congressional Record* as an example of the dangerous new ideas of young black men. It must have seemed dangerous to the nation's leaders that blacks spoke of fighting back.

Some blacks fought the system by joining the Communist Party. The Communists had been active in the South. They had helped defend the "Scottsboro Boys," nine young black men falsely accused of rape in Alabama. Among the well-known African Americans connected to the Communist Party were the scholar W. E. B. DuBois and the actor and singer Paul Robeson.

During the 1930s the Communists organized committees to seek help for the needy. An organizer named Angelo Herndon was arrested and charged with promoting revolution. He recalled his trial:

> They questioned me in great detail. Did I believe that the bosses and government ought to pay insurance to unemployed workers? That Negroes should have complete equality with white people? Did I feel that the working-class could run the mills and mines and government? That it wasn't necessary to have bosses at all? I told them I believed all of that—and more. . . .

Herndon spent five years in prison before the Supreme Court ruled that the law he had been arrested for breaking was unconstitutional. To the Establishment, men like Herndon were signs of a frightening new mood among blacks. That mood was militancy—a willingness to fight.

Toward Civil Rights

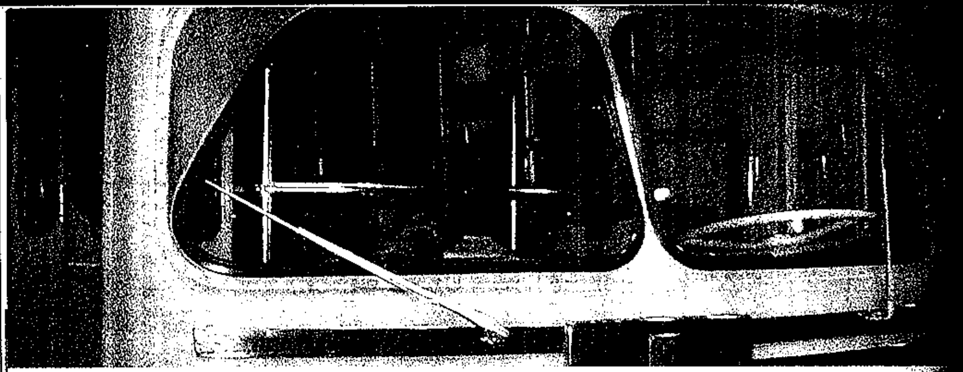
PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN KNEW THAT THE United States had to do something about race for two reasons. One reason was to calm the frustrated black people of the United States. The other reason had to do with America's image in the world.

Nonwhite people around the world were accusing the United States of being a racist society. America's Cold War with the Soviet Union was on, and each side wanted to gain influence around the globe. But the poor civil rights record of the United States could hold it back in world politics.

Truman created a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946. The committee recommended laws against lynching and against racial discrimination in jobs and voting. Congress took no action. However, Truman did order the armed forces to desegregate, or end racial separation. It took ten years, but the military was finally integrated, with blacks and whites no longer separated.

The nation's public schools remained segregated until courageous southern blacks took on the Supreme Court in a series of lawsuits. In 1954, in a decision called *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Court ordered the nation's public schools to stop the "separate but equal" treatment of children separated by race. The Court's big decision sent a message around the world—the U.S. government had outlawed segregation. But change came slowly. Ten years later, more than three-fourths of the school districts in the South were still segregated.

(left)
Rosa Parks speaks with an interviewer as she arrives at court, 1956.



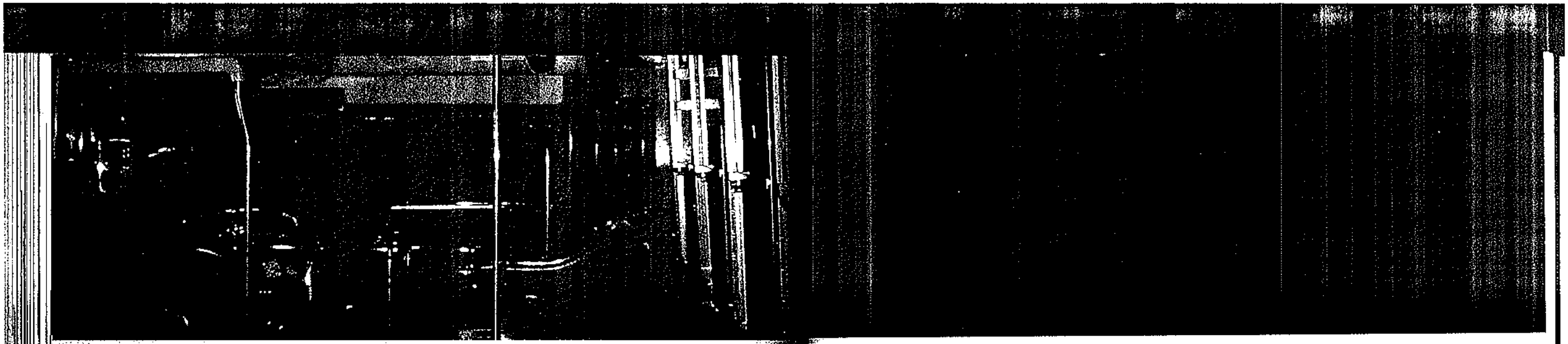
CLAUDETTE COLVIN

AROUND 4:00 P.M. ON MARCH 2, 1955—nine months before forty-two-year-old Rosa Parks did it—fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin asserted her constitutional right to her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, helping to jump-start the Civil Rights Movement. Confronting jeers, shoves, and insults from the white people around her and the two policemen who arrested her, she was charged with violating the segregation law, disorderly conduct, and "assaulting" the arresting officers.

Here she tells the story in her own words:

On March 2, 1955, I got on the bus in front of Dexter Avenue Church. I went to the middle. No white people were on the bus at that time. It was mostly schoolchildren. I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. I think I had just finished eating a candy bar. Then the bus began to fill up. White people got on and began to stare at me. The bus motorman asked me to get up. We were getting into the square where all the buses take their routes in either direction. A colored lady got on, and she was pregnant. I was sitting next to the window. The seat next to me was the only seat unoccupied. She didn't realize what was going on. She didn't know that the bus driver had asked me to get up. She just saw the empty seat and sat next to me. A white lady was sitting across the aisle from me, and it was against the law for you to sit in the same aisle with a white person.

The bus driver looked back through the rearview mirror and again told me to get up. I didn't. I knew he



was talking to me. He said, "Hey, get up!" I didn't say anything. When I didn't get up, he didn't move the bus. He said before he'd drive on, I'd have to get up. People were saying, "Why don't you get up? Why don't you get up?" One girl said, "She knows she has to get up." Then another girl said, "She doesn't have to. Only one thing you have to do is stay black and die."

The white people were complaining. The driver stopped the bus and said, "This can't go on." Then he got up and said, "I'm going to call the cops." First a traffic patrolman came on the bus and he asked, "Are any of you gentleman enough to get up and give this pregnant lady your seat?" There were two black men in the back of the bus who were sanitation workers. They got up, and the pregnant lady went and sat in the back. That left me still sitting by the window.

I remained there, and the traffic patrolman said, "Aren't you going to get up?"

I said, "No. I do not have to get up. I paid my fare, so I do not have to get up. It's my constitutional right to sit here just as much as that lady. It's my constitutional right!"

Source: Levine, Ellen. *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories.* New York: Penguin Putnam / Puffin, 1993.

For blacks, progress wasn't fast enough. In the early 1960s black people rose in rebellion all over the South. By the late 1960s there were wild uprisings in a hundred northern cities, too. What triggered this angry revolt?

A forty-three-year-old black woman named Rosa Parks sat down one day in the "white" section of a city bus. She had long been active in the NAACP, which was determined to challenge segregated seating on Montgomery buses. She was arrested.

Montgomery's blacks called a mass meeting. They boycotted the city buses, refusing to ride. Instead, they walked or organized car pools. The city was losing a lot of income from bus fares. It arrested a hundred of the boycott leaders.

White segregationists turned to violence. They exploded bombs in four black churches. They fired a shotgun through the front door of the home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a minister who helped lead the boycott. But the black people of Montgomery kept up the boycott, and in November 1956 the Supreme Court made segregation on local bus lines illegal.

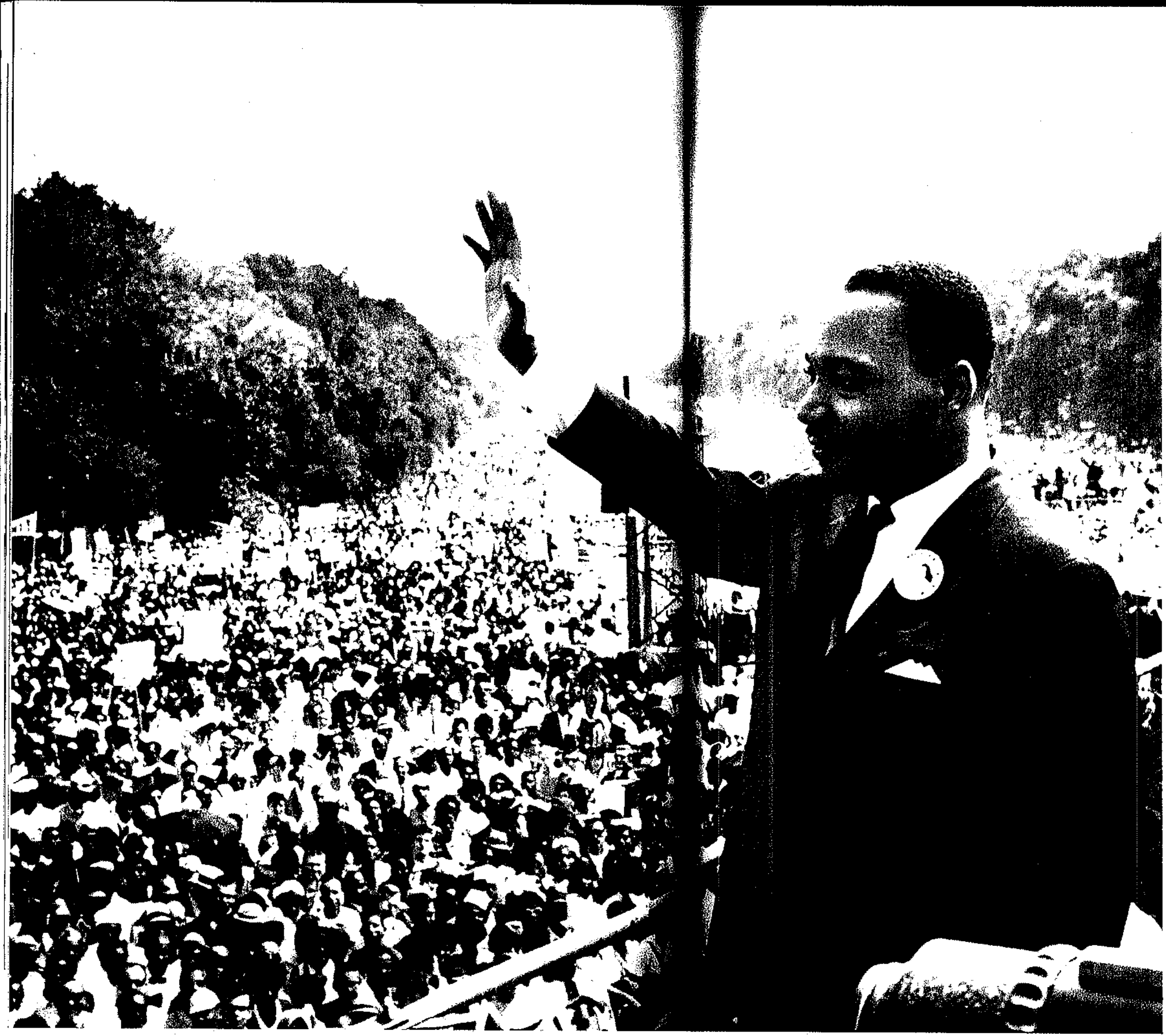
Martin Luther King Preaches Nonviolence

AT A MEETING DURING THE BOYCOTT, MARTIN Luther King showed the gift of speech making that would soon inspire millions of people to work for racial justice. He said:

> We have known humiliation, we have known abusive language, we have been plunged into the abyss of oppression. And we decided to raise up only with the weapon of protest. . . . We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us.

King called on African Americans to practice nonviolence—to seek justice without doing harm to others. This message won him followers among whites as well as blacks. Yet some blacks thought that King's message was too simple. Some of those who oppressed them, they believed, would have to be bitterly fought.

Still, in the years after the Montgomery bus boycott, southern blacks stressed nonviolence. One nonviolent movement started in 1960, when four first-year students at an African American college in North Carolina decided to sit down at a drugstore lunch counter where only whites ate. The store wouldn't serve them, but they did not



Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. waves to participants in the Civil Rights Movement's March on Washington, 1963.

leave. They came back, joined by others, day after day, to sit at the counter.

Sit-ins spread to other southern cities. The sit-inners experienced violence. But they inspired more than fifty thousand people—mostly blacks, some whites—to join demonstrations in a hundred cities. By the end of 1960, lunch counters were open to blacks in many places.

Freedom Riders and the Mississippi Summer

FOR A LONG TIME, IT HAD BEEN ILLEGAL TO segregate people by race during long-distance travel. But the federal government had never enforced the law in the South, where blacks and whites were still kept apart on interstate buses. In the spring of 1961, a group of black and white protestors set out to change that.

These Freedom Riders got on a bus in Washington, D.C., bound for New Orleans. They never reached New Orleans. Riders were beaten in South Carolina. A bus was set on fire in Alabama. Segregationists attacked the Riders with fists and iron bars. The southern police did nothing. Neither did the federal government, even though FBI agents watched the violence.

Young people who had taken part in the sit-ins formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They organized another group of Freedom Riders, who were attacked by a mob of whites and later arrested. By this time the Freedom Riders were in the news all over the world.

Young black children joined demonstrations across the South. In Albany, Georgia, a small town where the atmosphere of slavery lingered, blacks held marches and mass meetings. After arresting protestors, the police chief took their names. One protestor was a boy about nine years old. "What's your name?" the police chief asked. The boy looked straight at him and answered, "Freedom, Freedom." A new generation was learning how to demand its rights.

The SNCC and other civil rights groups worked in Mississippi to register blacks for voting and to organize protests against racial injustice. They called on young people from other parts of the country to help, to come south for a "Mississippi

Summer." Facing increasing violence and danger, in June of 1964 they asked President Lyndon B. Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy for federal protection. They got no answer.

Soon afterward, three civil rights workers, one black and two white, were arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi. After being let out of jail late at night, they were beaten with chains and shot to death. Later the sheriff, deputy sheriff, and others went to jail for the murders.

Black Power

THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT HAD REFUSED, again and again, to defend blacks against violence. Still, the uproar about civil rights, and the attention it drew around the world, made Congress pass some civil rights laws, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These laws promised much but were ignored or poorly enforced. Then, in 1965, a stronger Voting Rights Act made a difference in southern voting. In 1952, only 20 percent of blacks who could vote had registered to do so. But by 1968, 60 percent were registered—the same percentage as white voters.

The federal government was trying to control an explosive situation without making any basic changes. It wanted to channel black anger into traditional places, such as voting booths and quiet meetings with official support.

One meeting like that had taken place in 1963, when Martin Luther King led a huge march on Washington, D.C. The crowd thrilled to King's magnificent "I Have a Dream" speech, but the speech lacked the anger that many blacks felt. John Lewis was a young SNCC leader who had been arrested and beaten many times in the fight for racial equality. Lewis wanted the meeting to express some outrage, but its leaders wouldn't let him criticize the national government.

Two months later, a black militant named Malcolm X gave his view of the March on Washington:

> The Negroes were out there in the streets. They were talking about how they were going to march on Washington. . . .
>
> It was the grass roots out there in the street. It scared the

> white man to death, scared the white power structure in Washington, D.C. to death. . . .
>
> This is what they did with the March on Washington. They joined it . . . became part of it, took it over. . . . It became a picnic, a circus. Nothing but a circus, with clowns and all. . . . It was a takeover . . . they told the Negroes what time to hit town, where to stop, what signs to carry, what song to sing, what speech they could make, and what speech they couldn't make, and then told them to get out of town by sundown.

People were still exploding bombs in black churches, killing children. The new "civil rights" laws weren't changing the basic conditions of life for black people.

Nonviolence had worked in the southern civil rights movement, partly by turning the country's opinion against the segregationist South. But by 1965, half of all African Americans lived in the North. There were deep problems in the ghettos, the poor black neighborhoods, of the nation's cities.

In the summer of 1965, the ghetto of Watts, Los Angeles, erupted with rioting in the streets and with looting and firebombing of stores. Thirty-four people were killed. Most of them were black.

More outbreaks took place the next year. In 1967, the biggest urban riots in American history broke out in black ghettos across the land. Eighty-three people died of gunfire, mostly in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan.

Martin Luther King was still respected, but new heroes were replacing him. "Black Power" was their slogan. They distrusted "progress" that was given a little at a time by whites. They rejected the idea that whites knew what was best for blacks.

Malcolm X was Black Power's chief spokesman. He was assassinated in 1965, while giving a speech. After his death, millions read the book he wrote about his life. He was more influential in death than during his lifetime. Another spokesman was Huey Newton of the Black Panthers. This organization had guns and said that blacks should defend themselves.

King was growing concerned about problems that the civil rights laws didn't touch—problems of poverty. He also began speaking out against a war the United States was fighting in the Asian nation of Vietnam. King said, "We are spending all of this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development."

The FBI tapped King's private phone conversations, blackmailed him, and threatened him. A U.S. Senate report of 1976 would say that the FBI "tried to destroy Dr. Martin Luther King." But destruction came when an unseen marksman shot King to death as he stood on the balcony outside his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee.

The killing of King brought new urban violence. African Americans saw that violence and injustice against them continued. Attacks on blacks were endlessly repeated in the history of the United States, coming out of a deep well of racism in the national mind. But there was something more—now the FBI and police were targeting militant black organizers, such as the Black Panthers.

Was the government afraid that black people would turn their attention from issues such as voting to something more dangerous, such as the question of wealth and poverty? If poor whites and blacks united, large-scale class conflict could become a reality.

But if some blacks were invited into the power system, they might turn away from class conflict. So leaders of nonmilitant black groups visited the White House. White-owned banks began helping black businesses. Newspapers and televisions started showing more black faces. These changes were small, but they got a lot of publicity. They also drew some young black leaders into the mainstream.

By 1977, more than two thousand African Americans held public office in southern cities. It was a big advance—but it was still less than 3 percent of all elective offices, although blacks made up 20 percent of the total population.

More blacks could go to universities, to law and medical school. Northern cities were busing children back and forth to integrate their schools. But none of this was helping the unemployment, poverty, crime, drug addiction, and violence that were destroying the black lower class in the ghettos. At the same time, government programs to aid African Americans seemed to favor blacks over whites. When poor whites and poor blacks competed for jobs, housing, and the miserable schools that the government provided for all the poor, new racial tension grew.

No great black movement was under way in the mid-1970s. Yet a new black pride and awareness had been born, and it was still alive. What form would it take in the future?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VIETNAM

"DEAR MOM AND DAD," AN AMERICAN SOLDIER wrote home from Vietnam, "Today we went on a mission and I am not very proud of myself, my friends, or my country." What kind of war would make a soldier feel that way? It was a war that made many Americans angry and ashamed of their country.

For nearly a decade, the richest and most powerful nation in the history of the world tried to defeat a revolutionary movement in a tiny, peasant country—and failed. When the United States fought a war in the southeastern Asian nation of Vietnam, it was modern military technology against organized human beings. The human beings won.

Vietnam also created the biggest antiwar movement the United States had ever seen. Thousands