

Let Freedom Ring
by Linda Yeboah

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

Hot, black coffee trickled down the dark skin on Henry Moses' back.

...that all men are created equal...

"Get out of here, nigger! Go back to your kind!" an angry White man shouted as he continued pouring.

...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...

Moses sat silently, keeping his seat at the lunch counter in downtown Jackson.

...that among these are life...

Lunch counter stools were for White folks only. It had always been that way. Moses, just 21, knew that.

...liberty...

"It was just a part of their heritage," he says now. "They thought that Negroes were filthy... scum. Just somebody you don't associate with. You don't wait on 'em, you don't cut 'em no slack whatsoever. This is just the way that they had been taught, the way they had been trained."

...and the pursuit of happiness.

"And we were trying to change it" ("First in News").

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Since the discovery of the new world by Europeans, Blacks—with the exception of the Native American Indians—have suffered immensely more than any other group in America. From the time the first African slaves stepped on American soil, their destiny changed forever. For over four hundred years, Blacks worked on fields and in homes of their White masters with no concept of civil rights in their daily lives. It was not until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln read the Emancipation Proclamation, abolishing slavery, that civil rights and freedom became a possibility for millions of African-Americans. Soon the struggle to attain all their civil rights began as Blacks fought for "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" that had been promised when our forefathers wrote the Declaration of Independence.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he bears of a different drummer" – Henry David Thoreau.

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Between 1865 to 1890, the period known as the Reconstruction Era, Blacks gained more rights, with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment expanding the guarantees of federally protected citizenship rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment barring voting restrictions based on race (Sullivan). For a brief period, Black power and Black culture flourished. Former slaves took part in civic and political life throughout the South. African Americans served in offices at all levels of government, from local to state legislatures and the United States Congress. There was even a system of universal free public education. Although there were Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups who protested the progress of Blacks by means of governmental fraud and violence, Blacks continued to hold offices and vote for representatives in their communities (Sullivan). Not until 1896, with the Supreme Court's Plessy vs. Ferguson decision, did "separate but equal" become the law of the land.

"We have at last come to the point in our race history, where we must do something for ourselves and do it now" – Ida B. Wells-Barnett (qtd. in Gates et al. 185).

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By the dawn of the new century, government and politics had become “inaccessible and unacceptable to Americans who happened to be Black” (Sullivan). The Supreme Court’s decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson led many Southern states to develop Jim Crow Laws. Southern states forged constitutions to restrict the rights of Blacks from voting and combined those constitutions with local and state segregation laws (“First in News”). This arrangement left political power in the hands of White men. From 1900 to 1906 protests against new segregation laws erupted in organized boycotts in cities all over the Southern states. At the same time, lynching and other forms of anti-black violence and terrorism became the means by which Southern Whites supposedly reinforced their legal structures; nearly 4,500 African Americans were lynched in the United States between 1882 and early 1950s (“We Shall Overcome”). Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, and others continued to find ways to build and sustain Black communities in the midst of the crushing environment of White racism, while envisioning a way forward (Sullivan).

Georgia 1918: Eight Black people were lynched, including a pregnant woman who had cried out against the mob for lynching her husband. She and her unborn child died together. “She was slowly burned to death, and as she burned, the infant fell to the ground and was trampled under a White man’s heel” (Gates et al 186).

“Life seems to favor those in power, while it seldom rewards triumphs with good works. The righteous must rely on their faith and champion Justice even in a seemingly lost cause” (Bell xiii).

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For more effective boycotts, Black leaders and intellectuals in the communities formed organizations. One of the organizations that later became a primary force in the struggle for civil rights was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. By 1914, the entire world was at war. When the United States entered WWI, many African American men and boys joined the battle to fight for their “freedom.” Many returned in hopes of receiving their rights and respect, but returning veterans found that the freedom for which they had fought was not their own. While hundreds of Blacks fought the war overseas, those back at home were beginning to migrate from Southern cities to Northern cities. During the “Great Migration,” more than 1.5 million Blacks left the South to go North, where much more freedom existed (Sullivan). Still, in spite of the Great Migration, the majority of Blacks remained in the south.

“We want the constitution of the country enforced, we want our children educated” – DuBois (qtd. in Gates et al 85).

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In 1932, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the depths of the Great Depression, caused rapid changes in American politics. New Deal programs and legislation expanded federal power and redefined the role of government and politics in American life (Sullivan). Although Black Americans had a small number of representatives in the Republican Party, in no possible way could they influence or shape the government. The NAACP and Black press worked to get Black officials to represent their race in the Roosevelt administration. By 1935, Black advisers were serving in many cabinet offices, with Robert Weaver and William Hastie as the first African Americans to be hired (Sullivan). Also, during Roosevelt’s

presidency, many Blacks switched from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Shortly after Roosevelt's second election, WWII began. Nearly one million African Americans fought to defend the one country that refused to accept them as equal. When they returned home, they were once again denied the freedom for which they had put their lives on the line. The end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War heightened the fight for freedom, democracy and self-determination. Black leaders sought for an end to discrimination. In response to the call for civil rights reform, President Harry S. Truman called for sweeping federal action against Jim Crow Laws. He also issued an executive order desegregating the armed forces (Sullivan).

By the 1960s, 85 percent of all White people felt that the pace for Civil Rights progress was too fast. "Oh, they are so forward. If you give them your finger, they'll take your hand" – Sandra Sayle 22, Virginia. "They're asking for too much all at once. They should try installment plan. People don't adjust that quickly"—55-year-old man in Michigan. "They are trying to force themselves on us. Rome wasn't built in a day. They've come from cannibals in a short time" – housewife in California (qtd. in Brink 120-121).

"The problem of the 20th Century is the problem of the color line; the relation of the dark to lighter race of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" – DuBois (qtd. in Gates et al 185).

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In the late summer of 1955, fourteen-year old Emmett Till and his cousin Curtis Jones left their homes on Chicago's Southside to spend a two-week vacation with Till's great-uncle Moses Wright, a sharecropper and preacher who lived in a shack outside the small town of Money, Mississippi. Emmett Till never made it back. On August 24, the Black eighth-grader supposedly whistled at a local White woman named Carolyn Bryant and then said, "Bye, baby." Five days later, he was found dead in the Tallahatchie River, his body weighed down by a cotton-gin fan. He had been beaten and shot to death (Gates et al 181). The murder of this young boy marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi and increased movements already in action in the Southern states.

"If your skin is black, you are worth nothing" – Charles C. Diggs, Jr. (qtd. in Gates et al 182).

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In December of 1955, a local NAACP leader, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her bus seat for a White man in Montgomery, Alabama. This incident sparked a boycott of Montgomery buses that lasted 381 days. Martin Luther King, Jr., a local minister who later became a national leader for the Civil Rights Movement, was elected to be the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Only twenty-six years of age, King, along with other strong, educated leaders, led the MIA organization to sue to end segregation. Hundreds of African Americans walked each day to and from work. Many White community members protested against this movement through indictments, injunctions, and bombings (Sullivan). NAACP, MIA, and many other organizations fought for desegregation in schools, jobs, communities, public transportations, and so on. Just a year before, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in *Brown vs. Topeka, Kansas Board of Education* that the doctrine of "separate but equal" as applied to public education was unconstitutional (Sullivan).

In 1957, on the first day of class at Central High school in Little Rock, Arkansas, eight of the Little Rock Nine went to school together; they were turned back at the door by Arkansas National Guardsmen. Elizabeth Eckford did not get the message to travel with the others and tried to enter alone at another end of the building. A jeering White mob was on the point of attack when a White woman hastily escorted her to safety (Gates et al 194).

“Negro America must bring its power and pressure to bear upon the agencies and representatives of the Federal Government. We loyal Negro Americans demand the right to work and fight for our country” – A. Philip Randolph (qtd. in Gates et al 189).

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By 1955, only four percent of the states’ eligible Black voting-age populations were registered. Many did not attempt to vote because of fear of losing their jobs and other forms of economic intimidations. In 1957, the first Civil Rights Act was passed. Although it lacked strong enforcement provision, it created a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department authorized to prosecute registrars who hindered the rights of Blacks to vote (Sullivan). The United States Civil Rights Commission was also established. The Commission was in charge of gathering facts about voting rights violations and other civil rights infringements. It also encouraged voter registrations in many Southern states. When the sixties rolled around, new forms of actions were being taken to stop discrimination. Young college students began to hold sit-ins at restaurants and other places that discriminated against Blacks. These college students formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization involved in the moment for social changes. They sought to empower Black people at the local level (Sullivan). College students, both Blacks and Whites, participated in the “direct action” movement, which included conducting sit-ins at public facilities and becoming freedom riders on buses.

On May 2, 1963, children and young adults from age six to eighteen gathered at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and marched to downtown Birmingham. The police arrested more than nine hundred of them and carried them to jail. The second day, more than a thousand young people stayed out of school and assembled at the church to march. Someone threw a rock, and immediately the police turned dogs and hoses on the demonstrators as they left the church. The pressure of the hoses, which was strong enough to strip the bark off trees, slammed children to the ground and sent others, sailing over parked cars (Gates et al 186).

“If Negroes could vote, there would be no more oppressive poverty directed against Negroes, our children could not be crippled by segregated schools, and the whole community might live together in harmony” – Martin Luther King Jr. (qtd. in Button 3).

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Turning fire hoses on children shocked the nation and the world. It marked a turning point for the Kennedy Administration and its relationship to the movement. A month after the event, on June 12, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation and told Americans that they could no longer ask Black citizens to “be content with the counsels of patience and delay.” He pledged that he would urge Congress to act on “the proposition that race [discrimination] has no place in American life and law.” Just two days after his address, he requested legislation from Congress that could ban segregation in public facilities,

broaden the powers of the Justice Department to enforce school integration, and extend federal protection of voting rights (Sullivan). In response to Kennedy's action, Civil Rights leaders planned a march on the nation's capital for jobs and equal opportunity. On August 28, an estimated quarter of a million people, Blacks and Whites, from all parts of the nation assembled in front of the Lincoln Memorial in what was, at the time, the largest peacetime gathering in America. The day culminated with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, "I Have a Dream" (Sullivan).

Mississippi, 1963—Price of Freedom: Reverend George Lee of Belzoni, was murdered when he refused to remove his name from a list of registered voters, and farmer Herbert Lee of Liberty, was killed for having attended voter education classes. Michael Schwerner, James Chancy, and Andrew Goodman—three "Freedom Summer"—were shot down for their part in helping Mississippi Blacks register and organize ("We Shall Overcome").

"There comes a time that people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired—tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. When the history books are written in the future generation, the historians will pause and say, 'There lived a great people—a Black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization' – Martin Luther King Jr. (qtd. in Gates et al 196).

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On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a new bill into law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in public facilities and employment; it authorized lawsuits to enforce school integration; and it slowed the withholding of federal funds to noncomplying schools (Sullivan). It soon expanded to include the protection of the rights of women and other minority groups who experienced discriminations. A year after the Civil Rights Act in August 6, 1965, President Johnson also signed the Voting Rights Act. It provided federal supervision of voter registration practices and opened polls to African Americans throughout the South for the first time since the end of Reconstruction Era (Sullivan). These laws guaranteed full citizenships for Blacks and brought an end to Jim Crow Laws in the South. The numbers of Black voters grew rapidly, and desegregation of public facilities was accomplished quickly. The desegregation of public schools also gradually took place with the help of the federal government.

"We went up to the registrar and [the elderly man] began to write in a very unsteady way--- the registrar said, "Now you're going across the line old man. You failed already, you can't register, you can't vote. You just get out of line." The old man looked at him and said, "I own a hundred and forty acres of land. I've got ten children who are grown and many of them are in a field where they can help other people. I've got a man who's a preacher and a man who's a teacher---and I took these hands that I have and made crops to put them through school. If I am not worthy of being a registered voter, then God have mercy on this city" – eyewitness in Selma, Alabama (qtd. in Adams, February 1).

"The forward movement of a social group is not the compact march of any army, where the distance covered is practically the same for all, but is rather the struggling of a crowd, where some of whom hasten, some linger, some turn back, some reach far off goals before others even start, and yet the crowd move on" – DuBois (qtd. in Gates et al 201).

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When most people hear about the Civil Rights Movement, non-violent acts such as boycotts, sit-ins, and marches come to mind, as do great leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and numerous others. Although the changes in the status of Black Americans occurred in the late fifties through the sixties, Blacks have been fighting civil rights from the time they first stepped on American soil. For centuries, African Americans placed themselves and their families on the front line in the struggle for freedom. Harriet Tubman, Idea B. Wells-Barnett, Roy Wilkins, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Jesse Jackson—all these great people fought for justice and led the way for Blacks today and for the generations to come. It is because of these people and their courage and will to fight for what they believed in that my family, and myself, and all Blacks in the United States today are able to attend a public facility freely. It's because of them that I am able to use public transportation without having to give up my front seat, go to a school filled with other races and most importantly, be able to live freely and pursue happiness. The Civil Rights Movement was the catalyst, the march that ignited the flame of justice in the twentieth century. It coerced America as a nation to reevaluate itself, to reevaluate what it stood for, to reprioritize, and rid itself of racial injustice. It got America to look at itself and admit how inhumane and ruthless it had been to its own children.

“Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it’s not just Negroes, but it’s really all of us who must overcome the Crippling legacy of [prejudice] and injustice. And we shall overcome” – President Johnson.

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