
Causes And Effects Of The Montgomery Bus Boycott

A U.S. Supreme Court case in 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson is considered a landmark decision that upheld the legitimacy of racial segregation laws in public facilities in the U.S. emphasizing support on a legal constitutional doctrine known as "separate but equal." This decision not only supported the idea of separate but equal but it also condoned many states in the American South to pass laws re-establishing racial segregation these laws became what was known as Jim Crow laws. There were many varieties of activism that sought to secure social, political, and economic rights for African Americans, activism involved many approaches, from lawsuits in court, lobbying the federal government, to mass direct action. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 was a form of activism that successfully desegregated the public transportation system of Montgomery, Alabama it is considered to be one of the key events in the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. Its occurrence came from African Americans seeking equality and social justice there were many factors coming into play for its success: organization, community solidarity, and nonviolence to name a few.

There were many contributions leading to the occurrence of the bus boycott other than the fact that African Americans were tired of being oppressed and treated unequal to that of a white man what drew the very last straw for many was the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. In 1955, two white men from Money, Mississippi brutally beat and murdered an African American teenager from Chicago for allegedly flirting with the wife of one of the murderers. The mother of Emmett Till went on to hold an open-casket funeral as a way to show the world what violent racists did to her little boy because of this 100,000 mourners came to attend, the largest in attendance of any civil rights protest at the time. Calls for justice across the country led to the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam a month later, the case was the first major media covered event drawing in reporters, politicians and news networks from all over the U.S. Since courts were heavily segregated at this time neither African Americans or women could participate in a jury meaning the defendants were prosecuted in front of an all white male jury. The defendants then were found not guilty of murdering fourteen-year-old Emmett Till leaving many feeling infuriated and disappointed with the decision, such was the case with African American politician Charles Diggs stating, "I am disappointed. I went to Sumner with the hope that the Till trial would result in a conviction." This trial also posed a question for many, "How long must we wait for the Federal Government to act? Whenever a crisis arises involving our lives or rights we look to Washington hopefully for help. It seldom comes." (Eyes on the Prize, 39) The call to action after the case for the federal government to intervene with racial tension going on in the South did not come immediately. The murder of Till and the justice-mocking trial that took place showed the world the gruesome savagery of racism in the United States it did however make a dramatic impact on an entire generation of civil rights activists. Rosa Parks a forty-two year old,

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married, regular church goer, seamstress for a downtown department store in Montgomery, Alabama, and civil rights activist under the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) for more than a decade was arrested in December of 1955 for failing to comply with the driver of a bus who instructed her to give up her seat, so that it could be made available for a white passenger and as she would recall the situation, “When the driver saw that I was still sitting there, he asked if I was going to stand up. I told him, no, I wasn’t... A few minutes later, two policemen got on the bus, and they approached me and asked if the driver had asked me to stand up, and I said yes, and they wanted to know why I didn’t. I told them I didn’t think I should have to stand up... I was taken to jail and booked on suspicion...”. Later she would recall that Emmett Till was on her mind during the time she got arrested. These unjust series of events sparked what became known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott it was a form of nonviolent protest where the black citizens, women along with children and men, of Montgomery refused to board the city’s buses in response to the bus system’s policy regarding racial segregation. This would go on to be the first ever form of mass direct action of the civil rights era.

The leaders of the boycott brought the bus system’s policy regarding racial segregation to the attention of the Supreme Court and demanded that it put a stop to segregation on public transportation in Montgomery. The case took some time to reach the Supreme Court but in November of 1956 the court decided that segregated public buses were unconstitutional on the basis of the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection under the law. The boycott was a success. There were many contributing factors coming into play for the success of the boycott: organization, community solidarity, and nonviolence to name a few. The Montgomery Improvement Association is considered an important organization that helped bring down the entire public transit system of the city down in such a short span of time with so much determination and sheer organization. The MIA established an effective and elaborate system of carpools for African Americans. Over two-hundred people volunteered their car for a car pool and roughly one-hundred pickup stations operated within the city. To help fund the car pool, the MIA held mass gatherings at various African American churches where donations were collected and people could hear about their ongoing success with the boycott. Most civil rights battles played out through civil rights organizations whether that be directly or indirectly. King who was a new face then to all, proposed his civil rights agendas as well which would help him start his rise to national relevance in the civil rights movement through his series of articulate and powerful speeches that assisted in delivering a message of nonviolent protest against racial injustice. Martin Luther King would go on to state, “We must love our white brothers, I said, no matter what they do to us... In mass meeting after mass meeting we stressed nonviolence.” His emphasis on nonviolent civil disobedience through the teachings of Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi is essentially what convinced to have fellow black citizens boycott the city’s bus system.

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The Montgomery Bus Boycott proved to all African Americans living in the U.S. what could be accomplished through direct action protest. This would prove to be the first victory of many, although small nonetheless would be enough to spark inspiration for many movements and protest to come. Many people had noticed that the civil rights movement had started to gain some momentum after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This is what essentially drove the sit-in movement a series of sit-ins driven by marginally African-American college students attending historically black colleges and universities across the country. It was a tactic that implemented and utilized nonviolent direct action. This form of direct action gave college students a powerful tool to attract mass attention its aim was to peacefully desegregate department stores, libraries, and even restaurants. Ella J. Baker activist for the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) at the time would go on to state, "The Student Leadership Conference made it crystal clear that sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke. Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life." It was what every African American sought at this time to be treated not as inferior to anybody based on the color of their skin but to be considered equal to any person. Ella Baker also expresses, "We want the world to know that we no longer accept the inferior position of second-class citizenship. We are willing to go to jail, be ridiculed, spat upon and even suffer physical violence to obtain First Class Citizenship." This inclination of obtaining the rights anyone should naturally have is what made a shift more toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader-centered group pattern of organization, it's what made civil rights protests later even more effective than ever before.

All in all, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56 was a form of activism that successfully desegregated the public transportation system of Montgomery, Alabama it is considered to be a key major focal point for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. Its occurrence came from African Americans seeking equality and social justice the factors that came into play for its success proved to be: organization, community solidarity, and an emphasis on nonviolence to name some of the more major contributions that would go on and be the basis for the rest of the Civil Rights Movement.

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