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## The Contribution Of Local Grass-roots Activists To The Civil Rights Movement

The American Civil Rights movement is considered the most influential and significant movements in our history. Through the history of America, African American people were severely discriminated against, but it was a long chain of events which spurred on the entire black population of America to demand change. America was founded based on freedom, and this spoke to a lot of the population. The main reason for change, however, came after World War Two, as the African American population believed that they should share the same rights as the white people, since they all fought alongside each other. Although there were many reasons which kick-started this movement, it is the wide variety of activities which occurred after this that all significantly contributed to the civil rights movement. When discussing the effectiveness of the contributions made by local grass-roots activists, we must also mention the other substantial influences of Malcom X; the wide-spread media coverage of the activists and of course, the involvement of the American government at the time.

When we think of the civil rights movement in America, two of the names which everyone seems to remember are Martin Luther King Junior, and Rosa Parks. Both of these incredibly influential people fought for the same idea, equality regardless of race. The relationships which they formed with grass-roots activists meant that they quickly became very deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement. Rosa Parks is famous for the story of not giving up her seat, and it can be said that her getting arrested was the key event which triggered the start of the movement. This also led to many other grass-roots activists utilising these peaceful, yet effective methods in their own campaigning.

Martin Luther King Junior planned some of the movements largest scale events, through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington. These were some of the main reasons why the local grass-root activists' actions were so effective. One such example of this can be seen in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, "...working-class blacks walked miles to their jobs... Black taxis lowered rates to the same dime fare that buses charged and crammed riders in". This quote proves the unique bond that the African American community shared at this time, and supports the argument that everyone was willing to partake in a struggle for the long term outcome. This resulted in a 13 month long successful boycott, "As the bus company, downtown businessmen, and city lost \$1 million, local authorities tried to destroy the boycott". This was considered a huge step forward in the movement, it was a victory. And not just a victory because companies lost millions of dollars, but because the African American people felt like they were finally getting somewhere.

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Their protesting was working, and they felt like their voices were finally being heard; “We felt that we were somebody. That somebody listened to us, that we had forced the white man to give what we knew [was] our own citizenship...”.

Additionally, the horrible attacks on the peaceful protests gained a lot of media attention due to the public nature of them. This also helped the movement to gain a lot of sympathy from white people across America. It is very clear, and pretty irrefutable that Martin Luther King Junior’s tactics were not unlike Ghandi’s, so it is understandable that he was popular with the whole nation. He was smart, and he used all of the media attention to his benefit, showing the peacefulness of the protests which were taking place. This aided the grass-root activists’ efforts in spreading the word about the movements; and their commitment to the cause- through boycotts, protests and sit ins- is one of the reasons why the movement was as successful as it was. One such example of this success is in the Washington riots. The activists had hoped they would have 100,000 protesters, however; “Rustin was worried about falling short of the goal of 100,000 marchers... 28 August 1963, 21 special trains, 1,514 buses and countless carpools brought 250,000 marchers to Washington.” This emphasizes the growth in popularity of the movement. Protesters were travelling from all over America to join these marches, which again proves just how quickly the grass-roots activists had managed to spread the word about the events. It was not just black people marching either, there were hundreds of white people attending these protests also. This shows how successful this part of the plan was, they had gotten the message out.

Another prime example of the success of grass-roots activists can be shown through the numerous ride-ins by both black and white people, as it showed their belief in their cause and how courageous they were. Arguably, the most effective ride-in was when the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) enlisted around thirteen people of colour who did not have any previous harmful reputations- meaning that the media had no reason to attack or criticize the freedom riders- to ride into New Orleans, through multiple other incredibly racist and segregated states. The reason there were so successful was more because of the wide media coverage that it received, not that they had actually been through all these states. Their courage and willingness to die for their cause; “I think all of us were prepared for as much violence as could be thrown at us. We were prepared for the possibility of death” showed that they were a force to be reckoned with. This demonstrated to the entire black nation that there was a fight to be won, it gave them a purpose and proved what they could achieve if they united; and they did. The media interceded when one of their busses finally landed in Birmingham and was set alight which allowed them to reveal America for its prejudice and racism, which is something that the Kennedy’s did not want to happen. This media coverage angered the south and its people even more so, and more significantly, it generated a lot of awareness of the movement and why they were fighting. It was the support and drive of the grass-roots activists, combined with the highly skilled public speakers (like MLK Jr) it was clear that they were finally getting the message

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across. And it was not just one voice that the world was hearing; but millions of voices of black people across America that were being heard.

Most people remember the main faces of the civil rights movement as MLK Junior and Miss Rosa Parks; however, there were many other contributing factors which also aided in the success of the movement. One notable case during the Civil Rights Movement was one which was made up of five similar cases which were combined to form the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which were ultimately challenging the segregation of African Americans in schools. The main reason that this particular case made such a significant impact was that it forced political figures that black people deserved equal opportunities, "We must consider public education in the light of its full development and its present place in American life... in the field of public education the doctrine 'separate but equal' has no place". This, again, proves how quickly and successfully the message was being spread. The outcome of this case was better: "On 31 May 1955, the supreme court ordered boards of education to draw up desegregation plans. Within the next twelve months 350 school boards representing nine southern states had desegregated... by 1956-57 school year 723 southern school districts had been desegregated, and 300,000 black children were attending formerly white schools." This shows the extent to which this message had been spread, and it caused people and politicians across America to see these changes which eventually caused a nation-wide change. This was a huge step forward for the movement and shows just how important the grass-roots activists and their leaders' roles were in the fight for equality.

Another influential figure in the Civil Rights Movement was Malcolm X. He was a black supremacist, and although his methods and ideologies were extremely different from Martin Luther King's, he too wanted to fight against inequality. He was successful in putting his own message across, albeit it being very radical. His message was this: "Yes, I'm an extremist. The black race in the United States is in extremely bad shape. You show me a black man who isn't an extremist." Even though Malcolm X has been shown as 'too radical' (similar to the Suffragettes with their fight for equality), he spoke to and radicalised the people who were suffering the most. The people in the ghettos, who most felt the neglect from their communities, were the ones he helped to fight back and riot, to spread the message this way as he strongly believed that they would not be taken seriously otherwise. "Summer months of 1954, 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1968, massive black rebellions swept across America... The Watts rebellion left \$40 million in private property damage... fourteen square miles of Detroit's inner city were torched. The ghetto rebellions from 1964 to 1972 led to 250 deaths, 10,000 serious injuries and 60,000 arrests...". Although these statistics are not solely down to Malcolm X, it was his fresh emotional speaking and persistence which spoke to the poor African American communities to fight against inequality through these race riots, ultimately resulting in a spike in media attention, both nasty and nice, and still throwing the message out there that they would not stop fighting until their arguments were listened to. The media and the role it played was so important as

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without it, the actions of the movement and the ability to spread their message would have been restricted. Looking back on photographs of these riots we can see, to an extent, how vicious and ruthless the opposition were, as well as how resilient the grass-roots activists were in their fight against discrimination. If the media hadn't been involved, people across America (both white and black) would not have known about the movement, they would not have heard MLK's infamous 'I have a dream' speech, and wouldn't have seen the brutality that black people had to endure.

Looking at all of these facts, it is clear that all of these factors combined significantly influenced the fight against segregation, inequality, and racism through the Civil Rights Movement. This being said, we cannot downplay the considerable influence that Martin Luther King and the grass-roots activists had on the movement. MLK's approach surrounding using his words to expose the violent nature of the racism in America, rather than physically fighting against their oppressors, worked so well at putting the message out. The key message was covered by the media, and proved that white people were not having trouble, and it was black people that needed help at this particular time. In addition to the efforts by the local grass root activists, we cannot downplay the influence on the movement by Malcolm X. Despite his radical actions, it is clear that these actions had a significant impact on the African American population of America and spurred them to continue fighting for change regardless of what was thrown at them. To say that the success of the civil rights movement was down to one particular influence would be extremely unethical and unfair, however, we can see that Martin Luther King Junior and the grass roots activists were highly notorious in their influence for change. It can be argued this is due to being able to spur white people to fight against the inequality that they could clearly see was happening throughout America. To be able to bring folk of all colour together, on such a large scale (250,000 people) to peacefully protest in silence whilst he gave his most famous speech (even today). He was so influential to the movement that even after his death, America continued to push in their fight and spread their message for equality. The valiant efforts from each and every individual who fought for their rights will never be forgotten.

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