

## CHAPTER II

### AFRICAN-AMERICAN'S LONG QUEST FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

*“Thomas Jefferson didn’t proclaim that all white,  
or black, or red, yellowmen are equal:  
that all Christian or Jewish men are equal,  
that all Protestant and Catholic men are equal,  
that all rich or poor men are equal;  
and the equality which he proclaimed was equality in the right  
to enjoy the blessings of free government  
in which they may participate  
and to which they have given their consent.  
Hubert Humphrey (1948)<sup>1</sup>*

The Montgomery Bus Boycott marked the rise of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. as the leader of a massive Black Protest Movement throughout the South, pursuing the end of the Jim Crow Laws and the acceptance of a Civil Rights Act. In this chapter, we will take a deeper look into the situation that Black Americans lived in, especially in the South, from slavery until the end of racial desegregation, examining the different Black groups and associations that existed before and contemporary to King’s movement, and the responses of federal administrations in King’s era.

African-Americans came to the new continent almost at the same time as the pilgrims, and despite the longing for freedom that invoked this pilgrimage to a vast, abundant land, black slaves were totally excluded from the dream of being part of America. Even more, their natural rights of freedom and equality, as well as their dignity and ability to pursue happiness and prosperity, were taken away from them. Any possible sharing of the American Dream was denied to them, first in the form of slavery, and later with the introduction of the Jim Crow laws and segregation in the Southern states. There had been an opposition to slavery by white and black abolitionists before the Civil War and later to segregation by some Northern white liberals and many black intellectuals. Despite the increasing disgust with such unbearable situations, African-Americans had to wait until the emergence of Martin Luther King for their full claims to be integrated into the American Dream were truly heard.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory R. Suriano, *Great American Speeches* (NY: Random House, 1993), 181.

## 2.2 FROM SLAVERY TO RACIAL SEGREGATION

From the XVIth century on, Europeans turned their attention to slavery and the slave trade as a substitute for free labour, especially in the New World. In the first European travels to the new continent, blacks were used not only as slaves, but also as explorers and servants. Due to the great possibilities of soil exploitation in those territories, there was a great need for labour. Indians became the first ones to be enslaved throughout the continent, but their weak physical constitution succumbed to maladies, and it soon became clear that this enslaved labour force was unsuitable and not profitable for the plantation system. The Spanish crown was the first power to introduce African slaves to the American continent, which it did in order to replace the weaker natives in the plantation fields. Bishop Bartholomew de las Casas, who was an advocate of the Indian cause, encouraged the importation of slaves for the sake of the Indians. For the coming decades, the slave trade became one of the most profitable businesses between the New and the Old World. The mass migration of Africans to North American shores began 1619 – just 12 years after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent British colony.<sup>2</sup> In the colonies of Virginia and Maryland indentured servants and natives were very soon replaced by African slaves. By the end of the XVIIth century slavery became an integral part of the colonial economic system and the pillar of the Southern plantations labor system. According to Edward E. Dunbar, 887,500 Africans were imported in the XVIth century, 2,750,000 in the XVIIth century, 7,000,000 in the XVIIIth century, and 3,250,000 in the XIXth century to all the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

The draft of the Declaration of Independence is one of the most important statements on democracy with universal validity. When the new American republic was launched in 1776, the Founding Fathers believed that there could exist a free and democratic society in which no individual could claim inherent rights over another. In the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, written by Jefferson, there was a condemnation of King George's participation in the slave trade:

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<sup>2</sup>-----, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery*, Available in <http://www.usia.gov/usa/blackhis.html>, Accessed 10 October, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>-----, *We Shall Overcome*, Available in <http://www.usia.gov/usa/blackhis/kingpan/dream.html>, Accessed 10 October, 2002.

he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This practical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative [veto] for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting these very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase liberty of which he deprived them, by murdering people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.<sup>4</sup>

After a bitter debate, this clause was taken out of the Declaration at the insistence of the Southern states, where slavery was a leading institution, almost as important as the Church, and of some Northern states whose merchant ships carried slaves from Africa to the colonies of the New World. Even though the US Constitution granted equality and freedom for all citizens, the Founding Fathers' refusal to use the word slavery in the Constitution of 1787 reveals that they didn't want to acknowledge to the world their legitimization of slavery and their persistent efforts to legitimize the precept of black inferiority.<sup>5</sup> From the very creation of the nation until the Civil War, the North was deeply influenced by a more liberal and protestant ideology which led people to believe that slavery was against divine law. For example, there were many German Mennonites and Quaker groups in the Philadelphia area who passed a resolution in 1688 declaring slavery immoral.<sup>6</sup> Based on their religious, political and ideological orientation, many Northern white and black liberals and some former slaves opposed slavery and pursued its abolition. As Frederick Douglass wrote,

...it is that slavery is not divine; that God didn't establish it; that our doctors of divinity are mistaken.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, until the end of the Civil War, blacks were considered in the South to be inferior human beings who couldn't be granted their freedom and any kind of political participation. Chief Justice Taney of the US Supreme Court affirmed that Blacks

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<sup>4</sup> John H. Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African – Americans* (NY: McGraw Hill, 1994), 71.

<sup>5</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*; (NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Suriano, *Great American Speeches*, 59.

had for more than a century before the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the US been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics, which no one thought of disputing, or supposed to be open to dispute; and men in very grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern, without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion.<sup>8</sup>

Even though there had been many in the North who opposed the slave system, there had also been a great political acceptance and tolerance of the system during several decades after the Declaration of Independence. According to Franklin Frazier, “*despite the growth in democracy during the three decades prior to the Civil War, the Negro outside of New England didn’t live under the same laws as the whites.*”<sup>9</sup> It was only after the political stability of the Union was in danger of being destroyed by the acquisition of new proslavery territories that more people in the North became aware of the necessity to stop the expansion of slavery. Many working-class whites in the North deeply opposed the expansion of slavery because they wanted to stop the advantages of slave labor in the free market. The slavery controversy became even more acute after the *Dread Scott* decision of 1857<sup>10</sup>, and during the presidential campaign of 1860, in which Abraham Lincoln was elected president. Soon enough, Lincoln had to face the danger of the dissolution of the Union, due to the political opposition of the Northern states to the introduction of slavery in the new territories, as well as the complaint of Southern States of the disregard of the Fugitive Slave Act and the possible abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. The moment Lincoln got into office, he had to face the fact that seven Southern states had already seceded and that many other proslavery states intended to follow this action. It was clear to him that federal authority had to prevail in the fragmented Union and that federal government shouldn’t be surrendered to state government, even if it caused a devastating civil war.

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<sup>8</sup> Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (NY: The MacMillan Company, 1966), 105.

<sup>10</sup> The Supreme Court ruled that blacks were non-citizens, without constitutional rights associated with citizenship. The decision and its aftermath contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War; it was overturned by the ratification of the XIVth Amendment. For more information see <http://laws.findlaw.com/US/60/393.html>

It took the president nearly two years [1861-1863] to acknowledge that the Negro emancipation was necessary for the sake of the Union and of the nation. Finally, Lincoln declared the *Emancipation Proclamation*,<sup>11</sup> giving freedom to four million black slaves, on New Year's Day 1863.<sup>12</sup> This notice prompted complaint throughout the North, because most whites wanted their war to be one for the sake of the Union, and not primarily for the freedom of the black slave. In an attempt to regain the confidence of the Northerners, Lincoln wrote his immortal Gettysburg address, in which he promoted the ideals of the Founding Fathers in order to create a deeper sense of patriotism and nationalism, stating that "*fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*"<sup>13</sup> The moment the slaves knew about their freedom, they left the plantations and many of them migrated to the North. As the Confederate forces finally surrendered in 1865, it was perhaps a new beginning for America. Lincoln had said at Gettysburg "... *that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this earth.*"<sup>14</sup> The Union was saved, the emancipation was proclaimed and blacks were for the very first time free, at least constitutionally.

Soon after the end of the Civil War, President Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was killed, before he was even able to create a program for the integration of the free Negro into society. The *Reconstruction Era* brought a new kind of fragmentation of the Union, an economic one. The North had become a place of industrialization and modernization, while the South, destroyed by the struggle, remained predominantly rural. The vast production of steel and the introduction of the railroad permitted the unification of the North with the West. The political agenda of president Andrew Johnson was overloaded, mainly due to the necessity to move the nation toward greater economic and political democracy, and by efforts to transform the agrarian South into a modern society with a renewed economic life on the basis of free labour and the integration of four million poorly educated blacks into the American economic system.

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<sup>11</sup> for more information see <http://www.nara.gov/exhall/featured-document/eman/emanproc.html>

<sup>12</sup> -----;,,Generation of Change: The Civil Rights Movement in America" *Topic Magazine*, 1989, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Suriano, *Great American Speeches*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

Perhaps the most important achievement of the Reconstruction Era was the rise of America as a leading country in the world economy. During most of this period, blacks were legally free in the South and had already taken part in Southern state politics and even held office in states such as Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, among others. Unfortunately, in most cases they hadn't been able to secure and retain their seats in state Congress. The XIIIth Amendment of 1865 stated that "*neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*"<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the XIV Amendment<sup>16</sup> gave Americans their first clear-cut definition of citizenship and strengthened Blacks' position as individuals and citizens in a complex social order, and the XV Amendment<sup>17</sup> guaranteed a wider exercise of the franchise with the removal of race as a disability.<sup>18</sup>

The Reconstruction Era was considered by many former slaves as a redemptive time of change and of freedom, but they realized very soon that the failure of the federal government in providing them with an adequate economic security forced them to submit to the old master's white supremacy. The constitutional freedom granted to blacks didn't overcome the fact that in the South the great majority of white people weren't willing to consider the Negro as a free man. During the presidential campaign of 1876, candidate Rutherford B. Hayes promised the removal of Union troops from Southern soil in order to gain more Southerner votes, which can today be considered one of the greatest betrayals to the Negroes' civil rights. After he became president, the South finally could rule itself without Northerner or black interference in state affairs. President Hayes was totally aware of the consequence of his political decisions and of the end of the freedom given to former slaves. He wrote, "*I do care for the poor colored men of the South.... The result will be that the Southern people will practically treat the constitutional amendments as nullities, and then the colored man's fate will be worse than when he was in slavery.*"<sup>19</sup> According to John Hope Franklin, "*the Democrats in the South found ways either to nullify the political strength of blacks or to disfranchise them altogether.*"<sup>20</sup> In order to keep

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.usia.gov/blackhis/kingpam/dream.htm>

<sup>16</sup> The XIVth Amendment was passed in 1868 and it guaranteed equal protection under law

<sup>17</sup> The XVth Amendment was passed in 1870 and it laid out voting rights

<sup>18</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African – Americans*, 246.

<sup>19</sup> Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African – Americans*, 254.

control and racial supremacy over the Negro, the Southern state legislatures created a series of codes, called the *Black Codes* or *Jim Crow Laws*,<sup>21</sup> to practically re-enslave the Negro.

Most white Southerners were nearly obsessed with the redemption of the South, which should be understood as the restoration of white supremacy by any possible legal and illegal means. Southern politicians, supported by a racist Supreme Court, believed that blacks should be forbidden the suffrage, due to their intellectual inferiority and lack of economic prosperity. By the end of the XIXth century several Southern states had disfranchised blacks, because they were considered as aliens whose ignorance, poverty and racial inferiority were incompatible with a logical and orderly process of government. By 1890, blacks had been denied political rights so successfully that it was commonly affirmed in different Southern newspapers that “*the Negro as a political force has dropped out of serious consideration.*”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, while the white supremacist Democratic Party reigned throughout the South, Black subordination was reinforced by the laws of racial segregation. In order to get more support from the white population, the Democratic Party started a campaign to convince poor whites that the Negro inhibited progress and that there was a real necessity to separate him from a prospering society. The Jim Crow laws were meant to exclude all Negroes from participation in the political life of the South and to reduce them to a subordinate status.<sup>23</sup> In segregating blacks from whites, these laws reinforced belief in their inferiority and incapability of adjustment to a modern civilized society, and effectively prevented their intellectual and political advancement and participation in American politics.

The first state to adopt a Jim Crow law was Tennessee, in 1875, by which blacks and whites were separated on trains, in depots and on wharves. Later on, the Supreme Court outlawed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which was designed to ensure black citizens equal access to public accommodations. As this bill was passed in 1875, there had been a harsh debate on the subject. Most Southern congressmen opposed it, in terms as represented by the words of Missouri’s representative John M. Glover:

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<sup>21</sup> First the Southern states pressured the federal government not to enforce civil rights laws. The next step was a series of laws named Jim Crow, which were supposed to define the rights of blacks but in practice limited them.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.usia.gov/usa/blackhis/kingpam/dream.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, 157.

... the bill implies the hopeless inferiority of the Negro race, and proposes to cure this inferiority by an act of Congress. If this inferiority exists, Congress cannot change it by a statute. It may repeal its own laws, but cannot repeal the laws of God. If this inferiority does not exist... there is no need of the bill. Sir, any legislation to counteract natural principles or to repeal natural laws or to obliterate natural distinctions, is impotent for good.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, most Northern congressmen faithfully expected a change in the life of Southern blacks by the passing of this bill. One of the most eloquent comments on these congressional debates was the one made by the African - American congressman and lawyer from Mississippi, John R. Lynch:

Mr. Speaker, if this unjust discrimination is to be longer tolerated by the American people, which I do not, cannot, and will not believe until I am forced to do so, then I can only say with sorrow and regret that our boasted civilization is a fraud; our republican institutions a failure; our social system a disgrace; and our religion a complete hypocrisy. But I have an abiding confidence... in the patriotism of this people, in their devotion to the cause of human rights, and in the stability of our republican institutions. I hope that I will not be deceived. I love that land that gave me birth; I love the Stars and the Stripes. This country is where I intend to live, where I expect to die. To preserve the honor of the national flag and to maintain perpetually the Union of the States hundreds, and I may say thousands, of noble, brave, and true-hearted colored men have fought, bled, and died. And now, Mr. Speaker, I ask, can it be possible that that flag under which they fought is to be a shield and a protection to all races and classes of persons except the colored race? God forbid.<sup>25</sup>

With the outlawing of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, Southern blacks were banned from public accommodations such as hotels, barber shops, restaurants and theatres. Only ten years later, most Southern states had already instituted separate schools. Despite the opposition of Northern politicians to it, little could be done by the federal government, because from the second half of the XIXth century until the 1950s the federal government had no great influence on state affairs. Thereafter, it was the state and local government which determined the rights of blacks. In Donald G. Nieman's opinion, "*blacks were seen by most Southern whites as pariahs, and therefore had to be excluded from every public place.*"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> Donald G. Nieman, *Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order: 1776 to the Present* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9.



Even though state governments were the ultimate rule in the South, they needed legal and unquestionable support from the federal judiciary system in order to keep the federal government out of their internal affairs. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court's decision in the case *Plessy vs. Ferguson*,<sup>27</sup> best known as the "separate but equal" doctrine, became the justification for racial segregation and the violation of civil rights. The Plessy case challenged not only the Louisiana statute but also the entire American judicial system on the grounds that it was violating both the XIIIth and the XIVth Amendments. Associate Justice John Marshall Harlan<sup>28</sup> wrote of his deep belief that

in view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved.<sup>29</sup>

The rest of the Court, however, accepted the idea of segregated facilities. Harlan concluded that the decision was going to poison the already deteriorated relation between blacks and whites, asking

what can more certainly arouse race hate, what can more certainly create and perpetuate a feeling of distrust between these races, than state enactments, which, in fact, proceed on the ground that colored citizens are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches occupied by white citizens? That, as all will admit, is the real meaning of such legislation...<sup>30</sup>

Finally, while the Court concluded that the separation of races didn't suggest the inferiority of African-Americans, its decision definitely marked the most devastating step toward the legitimization of racism under state law. The age of segregation, which lasted more than half a century, was marked by disfranchisement of blacks, their exclusion from local government jobs, their relegation to inferior public accommodations, mismanagement of their educational budgets, their exclusion from much employment in the private sector, and by favouritism for

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<sup>27</sup> Homer A. Plessy was a seven eighths Caucasian and one eight African - American citizen who took a seat on a white railway car. He was fully aware that by doing so, he was violating the 1890 Louisiana statute that required segregated facilities on trains. For more information see <http://laws.findlaw.com/US/163/537.html>

<sup>28</sup> Justice John Marshall Harlan was one of the 10 or 12 truly great justices to have ever served on the Court. He served on the Supreme Court from 1877 to 1911.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Thompson, Harlan's Great Dissent, Available in <http://www.uofl.edu/library/law/harlan/harlthom.html>, Accessed 21 December, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem

whites in the local and state judiciary system.<sup>31</sup> After the introduction of “separate but equal”, the Southern law system became even more separate and more unequal until the emergence of a black leader who was determined to challenge and destroy a 300 year-old racist legal system based on the myth of race, which Ashley Montagu called “*the witchcraft of our time.*”<sup>32</sup> This man was Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

### 2.3 THE BLACK TRADITION OF PROTEST

Ever since the first black slaves were brought to American shores, there has been a great tradition of protest against their social and legal condition in different levels of American life. Black protest has involved a collection of ideologies, sometimes mutually supportive and other times totally contradictory, as were King’s ideal of integration and Malcolm X’s separatism. According to James Cone, “*no black thinker has been a pure integrationist or a pure nationalist, but rather all black intellectuals have represented aspects of each with emphasis moving in one direction or the other, usually at different periods of their life.*”<sup>33</sup> Despite their differences, all black Americans who have opposed the social and legal American system through almost four centuries had only one hope, one dream and one demand, best expressed by King’s words: “*...free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.*”<sup>34</sup> Black protest has provided great thinkers and philosophers as well as an active clerical participation. The beginning of a new phase of this protest took place in Montgomery, Alabama, as one black woman refused to be considered as a second-class citizen and started the Second American Revolution.

Black protest has its beginning when black slaves were transported to the New World from Africa. Many of them committed suicide, but some others revolted against the crew, as the South Carolina Gazette of July 7, 1759 reported:

a sloop commanded by a brother of ... Capt. Ingledieu, slaving up the River Gambia, was attacked by a Number of the Natives, about the 27<sup>th</sup> of February last, and made a good defence; but the Captain finding himself desperately wounded, and likely to be

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<sup>31</sup> Nieman, *Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order: 1776 to the Present*, 121.

<sup>32</sup> Montagu, *Man’s most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 106.

overcome, rather than to fall in the hands of such merciless wretches, when about 80 Negroes had boarded his Vessel, discharged a pistol into his magazine, and blew her up; himself and every soul on board perished.<sup>35</sup>

Once on the mainland, blacks from the very beginning were considered as inferior beings who shouldn't dare to consider themselves as Americans. Actually, by the end of the war for independence, several states granted freedom to slaves who served the cause. Unfortunately, the strong political influence of the Southern states, willing to maintain the status quo of slavery and the plantation system, and of some Northern merchants, whose greatest profits came out of slave trade, shot down all aspirations for a possible end of slavery.

During the plantation system period, black slaves, tired of the atrocities they were exposed to, led several uprisings. The desire for freedom increased among young black slaves, who often preferred to be hunted or lynched rather than to spend the rest of their lives in slavery. Flight was considered a form of individual protest against enslavement. According to Burns, "*during the years of American Negro slavery, there is a record of over 200 slave plots and revolts*"<sup>36</sup>, of which three in particular show the influence of religion and the principles of the French and American Revolutions. The first great insurrection took place in 1800 on a plantation near Richmond, Virginia. One slave convinced others by using the Bible that "*they as the Israelites could throw off the yoke of slavery and that God would come to their aid.*"<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, this slave was betrayed by two others and the insurrection was soon stopped. A second uprising took place in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, led by Denmark Vesey, a free black who deeply admired the Haitian black leaders and was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution. Finally, the third great insurrection occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Although the last outbreak wasn't as well planned as the former ones, the important fact is that it was led by a Baptist exhorter, who saw the Bible as the solution to all problems of the black slaves. Nat Turner considered himself a prophet and the chosen one to achieve an end to slavery. There were many others, but according to Ulrich B. Phillips, all of them failed for the following reasons: the Negro's submissiveness; harsh punishments; coercion and constant surveillance by the master; the paternalistic relationship of many slaves with their masters; the

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<sup>35</sup> Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Haywood Burns, *The Voices of Negro Protest in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, 87.

lack of a common medium of communication; and the cultural destruction of the black man's heritage.<sup>38</sup>

A leading abolitionist who constantly expressed himself against slavery since he escaped from Southern oppression was Frederick Douglass, who used his newspaper<sup>39</sup> to condemn the plantation system and the enslavement of the blacks. In his Independence Day Address of 1852, Douglass severely criticized and questioned the legitimacy of the American Creed:

America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds her to be false to the future. Standing with the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery- the great sin and shame of America.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation couldn't assure blacks the freedom and equality they longed for. The substitution of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 by the Jim Crow Laws in the South, which justified belief in the innate inferiority of blacks based on the ideologies of *Social Darwinism racism*,<sup>41</sup> buried the almost vanished hopes of blacks for constitutional respect. Fortunately, a new kind of black leader emerged to fight against segregation and to give blacks a sense of self-respect and self-consciousness. Among them we can find Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, James Farmer, Whitney M. Young, Benjamin Hooks, Ralph Abernathy and Malcolm X.

An important black Jamaican leader was Marcus Garvey, who founded the *Universal Negro Improvement Association* (UNIA) after World War I.<sup>42</sup> Despite his radical suggestion that blacks should move back to Africa, black Americans soon became very fond of Garvey's position because he gave them a new sense of racial pride and the recovery of their lost dignity. According to Gunnar Myrdal, "*the UNIA was the first organized black protest movement that*

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<sup>38</sup> Ulrich Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933), 342.

<sup>39</sup> His newspaper was the North Star, founded in 1847, whose masthead read: "RIGHT IS OF NO SEX- TRUTH OF NO COLOR- GOD IS THE FATHER OF US ALL, AND WE ARE ALL BRETHEN."

<sup>40</sup> Suriano, *Great American Speeches*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> The central aim of this organization was to urge blacks everywhere in the world to take Africa, organize it, develop it, arm it, and make it the defender of the Negroes all over the world.

really gripped the imagination and enthusiasm of the black American masses.”<sup>43</sup> For many, Garvey was only a charlatan and a buffoon, but it is a fact that Garvey definitely had a great impact not only on African-Americans but also on the entire colonial world. He was inspiration to several movements within the US, such as the *Black Muslims*, *Black Power* and the *Black Panthers* throughout the sixties and the seventies, and he still is considered by many African - American and international black leaders as the man who gave the mass of blacks everywhere a sense of racial pride and self-respect.

Black sociologist William DuBois<sup>44</sup> challenged Jim Crow laws<sup>45</sup> and founded, with a group of Northern black intellectuals and some concerned white liberals,<sup>46</sup> the *Niagara Movement* in 1906, which soon turned into the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*(NAACP). The organization’s main purposes were to abolish segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, transportation and voting; to oppose racism; to destroy the excessive degree of assimilation to the Jim Crow system in the South by blacks, especially by middle-class blacks; to ensure blacks their constitutional rights; and to help blacks to overcome the identity crisis that segregation had bequeathed them. The organization was a multiracial one, with a high level of organization and legal advisors, and it quickly achieved representation throughout the country. The NAACP became the head and heart of the movement, mostly because of its *high level of organization*.<sup>47</sup>

According to Myrdal, DuBois always gave a tone to the movement and portrayed the organization’s main objective nationwide: “*full equality for the Negro as an American citizen.*”<sup>48</sup> Langston Hughes wrote in his book *Fight for Freedom: the Story of the NAACP* that other objectives of the association were: 1) to secure equal enforcement of the law for all; 2) to clarify the laws when muddled by false interpretations or distorted for purposes of discrimination; 3) to

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<sup>43</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol. II (NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), 806.

<sup>44</sup> DuBois was one of the best educated black leaders America has ever had. He was a sociology professor who had deep study and understanding of the following theories: Social Democracy, Pan-Africanism, Economic and Cultural Self-Improvement and Determination, Marxism and Socialism.

<sup>45</sup> DuBois was tired of the acceptance and assimilation of blacks to the segregation and he was one of the first African-Americans to speak clearly about blacks’ demands for total integration.

<sup>46</sup> Actually, white liberals were the ones who started the campaign to abolish racism and Jim Crow in the South and got together with several black intellectuals in order to create an organisation for this purpose.

<sup>47</sup> Doug Mcadam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 128.

<sup>48</sup> Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol II, 820.

change the laws when they promote segregation; and 4) to obtain the enactment of new laws as needed to make democracy a reality for Negroes.<sup>49</sup> The headquarters were in New York, but the success of the organization depended on the effective organization of its branches. The NAACP's main battlefield was the legal one, but it was also involved in political action to secure enactment of civil rights laws, programs of education, and direct action in support of specific goals. Being a Northern interracial organization, it received great opposition from Southern conservatives and many upper and middle class Negroes who shared the white man's opinion that "*the organization was a foreign or radical organization, that its policy was tactless and that it tended to stir up undue hostility between the races.*"<sup>50</sup> Regardless of the lack of support coming from the South, NAACP members launched an attack in federal courts, because black intellectuals finally understood that change could only happen with the support and protection of a strong federal government that was willing to challenge the state laws.

The first area to be secured was the education, because the leaders of the NAACP believed, like Booker T. Washington, that education was a principal avenue for the advancement of African-Americans. Segregation left Southern blacks with great losses in the federal support of education, despite improvement in black institutions. Farley Reynolds and Walter Allen found that in 1880 only 20% of the black population could read and write; by 1930 it was almost 84%. In 1860 only 2% of black children attended elementary school; by 1880 that figure was already 33%, and by 1930 it was almost 60%.<sup>51</sup> Despite the progress, the NAACP wasn't sure that there was a real improvement, because black schools didn't receive the same financial support from the state and federal government as the white ones. One example of these differences was the average annual salary of principals, supervisors and teachers in schools throughout the Deep South. While a white teacher got \$3530 in Florida, a black teacher got only \$ 970.<sup>52</sup>

Education had always been a major issue for black intellectuals. DuBois linked education directly to leadership. He believed that education cultivates a sane self-interest that seeks to find

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<sup>49</sup> Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (NY: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1962), 75.

<sup>50</sup> Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol. II, 824.

<sup>51</sup> Farley Reynolds and Walter Allen, *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 190.

<sup>52</sup> Marcel Goldschmied, *Black Americans and White Racism: Theory and Research* (NY: Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 189.

the rights of all as a way of avoiding national decadence.<sup>53</sup> With the federal government on their side, the NAACP, with the support of their legal representative Thurgood Marshall,<sup>54</sup> presented the Supreme Court five cases in hopes of achieving the end of educational segregation. One of these cases was *Sweatt vs. Painter* in 1953, which argued that educational segregation entailed great differences in the quality of the education.<sup>55</sup> This case was a great catalyst for educational desegregation because it openly presented the disparities in state financial aid between schools in white and in black areas.

But it was the next case that definitely overturned the legal argument of *separate but equal*. Marshall got his great opportunity in *Brown vs. the School Board of Topeka* in 1954, as he challenged the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, on the basis of its conflict with the XIIIth and XIVth Amendments. In James Button's opinion, the civil rights movement, born in the aftermath of the Brown decision, represented "a potent challenge to white hegemony and signalled the beginning of a long, intense struggle to allow blacks to participate more fully in all aspects of American life."<sup>56</sup> It was proved that the Louisiana state legislation stood in contraposition to the Constitution of the Union. Thereafter, Chief justice Earl Warren decided that

... in the field of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate education facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated... are... deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the XIVth Amendment.<sup>57</sup>

For the first time since the outlawing of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, Southern white racists lost the support of the federal legal system. They soon made a declaration, called "*Brown vs. Topeka is a naked exercise of Judicial Power*",<sup>58</sup> in which they accused the Supreme Court of violating the state constitutions and invited all other states to disobey it, as well as to resist with all possible means. In NAACP's member Jack Greenberg's opinion, the principle

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<sup>53</sup> Charles V. Willie, "A Theory of Liberation Leadership" *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. LXVIII, No. 1 (Winter 1983): 2.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall was the first African - American judge in the Supreme Court. As NAACP's legal representative, he won an excellent reputation as lawyer because he won about 32 cases.

<sup>55</sup> Nieman, *Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order, 1776 to the Present*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> James Bulton, *Blacks and Social Change: Impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern Communities* NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 124.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.usia.gov/usa/blackhis/kingpam/dream.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Henry Steele Commanger, *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record 1776 to the Present* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1970), 55.

established by *Brown vs. Board of Education* became a higher law that would change the perception of equality for all blacks.<sup>59</sup> Southern states complained that the 1954 decision diminished cooperation between the different levels of government, arguing that the federal government had constantly abused its power.<sup>60</sup> Fortunately, the introduction of a racial agenda also empowered blacks to take an active part in the decision making process in state and federal government from the fifties on.<sup>61</sup> *Brown vs. School Board of Topeka* not only changed the rules at all levels of the government, but it also marked the birth of a revolution.

A further important figure in the black struggle was Malcolm X, whose separatist position helped King to be supported by many white liberals, as they saw the former as a danger to the nation's unity. Many Americans thought that King and Malcolm X were bitter rivals, but others believed that they were really fond of each other, because they represented two of the most important black ideologies of the XXth century, as well as they fought for a joint aim: to give African-Americans the freedom and respect that they deserved. Malcolm was considered by all white conservatives and most liberals as the American nightmare, and indeed he saw his life as a real nightmare. He was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925 and early came under the influence of Garvey's nationalistic ideology. His father was a Baptist preacher and active member of UNIA. His family has suffered personally from racial segregation and the abuses of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members had killed some of his relatives and had attacked his house. After his parents died, Malcolm spent most of his childhood and early youth moving to different foster homes, where he experienced the reality of segregation and white supremacy. An increasing feeling of "niggerdom" within a white environment pushed him to live in New York black society.

Living among blacks in some Northern cities made Malcolm aware of the pauperous conditions under which blacks had been forced to live, as well as the institutional discrimination and segregation that dominated the North at that time. After moving to Detroit, he got into

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<sup>59</sup> Killian Lewis, *The Impossible Revolution?: Black Power and the American Dream* (NY: Random House and New York Times, 1964), 50.

<sup>60</sup> Governor Stanley from Virginia commented shortly after the decision of the Supreme Court that "*the unwarranted decision of the Supreme Court in the public school cases is now bearing the fruit always produced when men substitute naked power for established law. It is a clear abuse of judicial power.*" Cited in <http://www.uofl.edu/library/law/harlan/harithom.html>

<sup>61</sup> James Jennings, *The Politics of Black Empowerment: The Transformation of Black Activism in Urban America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 16 .



contact with Elijah Muhammed,<sup>62</sup> who reminded Malcolm of his father's admiration for Garvey. Muhammed fiercely believed that "*the Negro wants to lose his identity because he doesn't know his identity.*"<sup>63</sup> After having spent some time in jail, Malcolm converted to Islam and changed his name, becoming Malcolm X. The X represented his unknown original African name. Malcolm's hate for the white race was so great that he spent all his time trying to convert more African-Americans in Northern cities. His efforts made him the dynamo of the Nation of Islam and he became the leading minister of Temple Seven in New York. Malcolm never stopped criticizing the NAACP's policies and achievements, claiming that as in "*most organizations that represent the so-called Negro usually we find when we study them that though they are supposed to be for us, the leadership or the brain power or the political power or whatever power that runs it usually is a white man.*"<sup>64</sup> It was King's sanctification that enabled whites to portray Malcolm as "*a messiah of hate and a violence-preaching black Muslim racial agitator.*"<sup>65</sup> He confronted that and many other accusations by constantly repeating that the white man, due to his colonial past, was in no condition to speak about hate.

From 1952 to 1963 he was the most important member of the Nation of Islam, but his increasing popularity and forceful personality led to disputes with Elijah Muhammed, which ended with his expulsion from the movement. As he founded his own organization, Malcolm became the most radical of all black radicals, somehow enhancing King's image within the white community. King was first seen as a dangerous radical, but Malcolm and the Black Muslims made him look more harmless and therefore more acceptable to the liberal establishment in the North.<sup>66</sup> Few black leaders could understand the situation of the Northern black ghettos<sup>67</sup> as Malcolm did. In addition to this, he was a black leader who exclusively directed his messages to blacks.

In order to keep Garvey's dream of blackness and black consciousness and pride alive, as well as to promote the Pan-Africanism movement from Africa to the world, Malcolm made

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<sup>62</sup> Elijah Muhammed was the founder of the Nation of Islam, whose philosophy was the separation of races.

<sup>63</sup> Jules Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle* (NY: Puffin Books, 1993), 193.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>65</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> -----, *USIA-King Pamphlet – Biographical Sketches*, Available in <http://www.usia.gov/usa/blackhis/kingpan/sketches.htm>, Accessed 22 December, 2002.

<sup>67</sup> Malcolm was considered by most Northern blacks the militant champion of their cause

several trips to Africa and Middle East. In 1964 he participated in the major pilgrimage to Mecca. The color-blindness of the Muslim world wounded him deeply and challenged his nationalist and hate-oriented philosophy. He suffered such a deep change because this contact with Islam made him feel for the first time a real human being. As he returned to the US, he once commented that *“America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem....”* Later he continued, *“I am not anti-American, and I didn’t come here to condemn America- I want to make that very clear! I came here to tell the truth – and if the truth condemns America, there she stands condemned.”* Finally, he affirmed that *“I am black first. My sympathies are black, my allegiance is black, and my whole objectives are black... I am not interested in being American, because America has never been interested in me.”*<sup>68</sup>

The universality of Islam changed his position toward whites, and he declared that he didn’t hate all whites, but only white racists, and he even invited everyone to attend service at his Muslim Mosque, regardless of religion or color. Unfortunately, this metamorphosis couldn’t separate him from his violent rally to obtain civil rights for his people, and while riots spread all over Northern black ghettos, he justified violence:

If it must take violence to get the black man his human rights in this country, I am for violence exactly as you know the Irish, the Poles or Jews would be if they were flagrantly discriminated against... no matter what the consequences, no matter who was hurt by the violence... why was it that when Negroes did start revolting across America, virtually all of white America was caught up in surprise and even shock?... We are non-violent with people who are non-violent with us. But we are not non-violent with anyone who is violent with us.<sup>69</sup>

Pursuing a fragmentation of black strength, many Southern newspapers and politicians declared a war between Malcolm and King. Malcolm, however, advocated for King, when the latter was in a Selma jail in 1965. As a proof of his support, Malcolm said to the media that “I want Dr. King to know that I didn’t come to Selma to make his life difficult. I really did come thinking that I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King.”<sup>70</sup> Malcolm was perhaps one of the most feared black leaders of his time. He was deeply admired by some and hated by many, but without any

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<sup>68</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 208.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>70</sup> James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 120.

doubt he accomplished for ghetto blacks in the North what King did for poor black Christians in the South: “*both gave them dignity and a sense of self-respect.*”<sup>71</sup>

Malcolm X’s assassination by people within the Black Muslim Movement set the Northern black ghettos into chaos and brought America close to a bloody war. Novelist James Baldwin called his assassination “*a major setback for the Negro movement.*” CORE’s James Farmer said “*Malcolm’s murder was calculated to produce more violence and murder and vengeance killings*”. NAACP’s Roy Wilkins declared “*Master spell-binder that he was, Malcolm X in death cast a spell more far-flung and more disturbing than any he cast in life.*” A Nigerian paper wrote that “*he will have a place in the palace of martyrs.*” Finally, Ghana’s president cabled “*the death of Malcolm X shall not have been in vain.*”<sup>72</sup> Despite his constant opposition to other black militant groups, most of them defined him as a man fighting for a just cause, even if his methods weren’t the best ones.

Malcolm and King were perhaps the most important black leaders in XXth century America. Malcolm not only challenged white America, but he also challenged African-Americans to become aware of their destiny. In Cone’s words, Malcolm was the towering figure of a Black Cultural Revolution, the progenitor of Black Consciousness, Black Art and Black Power. The latter can be defined “*as a movement to create among Negroes enough personal self-esteem and group consciousness to build a truly democratic political power bloc which can take its rightful share of our nation’s economic abundance.*”<sup>73</sup> Neither King nor he were elitist leaders, and somehow they were complementary parts of the Black Revolution, for “*Malcolm keeps King from being turned into a harmless American hero, while Martin keeps Malcolm from being an ostracized black hero.*”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 251.

<sup>72</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 218.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Matthews, “Don’t Fight Racism by Hurting American Principles” *The Atlanta Journal*, 11 June 1987, 18A.

<sup>74</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 316.

## 2.4 THE ADMINISTRATIONS THAT ENDED THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

The federal government paid little attention to the segregation problem from the Restoration Era until World War II. The XIIth and XIVth Constitutional Amendments as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1875 granted freedom, equality and franchisement to blacks. Unfortunately, they were very soon made ineffective by the Jim Crow laws. Despite the constant claims of the anti-segregationist organizations and other pressure groups, the federal government forgot America's blacks and spent much of its energy in the conquest of the world. The economic crisis of the thirties and the incorporation of the US into World War II contributed to confront the federal government with the unpleasant American Dilemma.

Since the creation of the United States, there has been a strong emphasis on the independence given to state governments, but also on the subordination of all state laws to federal law, because the latter is derived from America's highest law, the Constitution. Despite this undeniable fact, the federal government had taken the posture of *laissez faire* in most legal controversies related to the segregation that dominated not only politics in the Southern states, but the lives of their black inhabitants. African-Americans had to wait almost 100 years until the federal government realized that it was high time to intervene in favour of equality and justice, in order to maintain its promise of democracy.

### 2.4.1 THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION

Even if Eisenhower left office in 1961, his contribution to the race issue, in terms of federal intervention in state affairs, was critical in the eventual passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Under the *laissez faire system*, the federal government respected all decisions made by state governments, despite the constant violation of the US Constitution. Until the 1920s that the federal government pursued a *cooperative federalism*, which had as major goal to reach a greater cooperation and collaboration among the diverse levels of government.<sup>75</sup> From the 1940s on, the

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<sup>75</sup> -----, *The American Promise*, Available in <http://www.usia.gov/usa/infousa/facts/crsrepor/federal.htm>, Accessed 11 October, 2002.

federal government regained power and control over state and local government, especially in the education issue, due to the economic dependence of state government on federal financial aid. This regained empowerment enabled the federal government to exert more pressure on the way state public policy was defined on race issues.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka* in 1954 in part challenged this cooperative system, because the states accused the federal government of abuse of power. Anthony Lewis commented on his book *Portrait of a Decade: the Second American Revolution* that several Southern governors and congressmen declared that “*the Supreme Court had acted according to sociology and not to the law, because they had ignored the doctrine of segregation.*”<sup>76</sup> Refusing to submit themselves to federal law, several state governments proclaimed the doctrine of interposition, which says that “*a state government is allowed to interpose itself between an improper national act and its citizens.*”<sup>77</sup> Not only had the Supreme Court's decision roiled the most segregationist states, but they felt especially attacked by the fact that educational desegregation had to be done “*with all deliberate speed.*”<sup>78</sup>

Two years after this challenging decision, some states had already made great steps toward desegregation, but many others remained in a legal battle with the Court decision. Despite the fierce conflict between the state governments and the Supreme Court, the federal government decided not to get involved. Neither blacks, anti-segregationist organizations nor Southern white racists wanted to wait any longer. Their direct political pressure urged President Eisenhower to make one of the most controversial decisions of his term, as the federal government was challenged by Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who refused to desegregate schools immediately.

Governor Faubus wasn't considered a radical racist because he had accepted the gradual desegregation proposal, quite opposite to Georgia's Governor Marvin Griffin, who once affirmed “*...negroes don't want any kind of integration...my maid told me so.*”<sup>79</sup> But Arkansas's state government wasn't willing to have total school integration by the beginning of the 1957

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<sup>76</sup> Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.usia.gov/usa/infousa/facts/crsrepor/federal.html>

<sup>78</sup> Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution*, 30.

<sup>79</sup> Harry Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes* (Cleveland and NY: The World Publishing Company, 1964), 22.

school term. Therefore, the access of some black students to Central High was denied by local authorities and citizens. Faubus, confronting a mass mobilization against integration, had no other alternative than to send 274 national guards to maintain order. Both national guards and citizens denied nine black students access to the school, and the federal government made no comment on this issue.

The press intensively covered the issue, presenting the events and the abuses of the local and state authorities, and having a great impact on the American and foreign public opinion. In less than three weeks, news broadcasts attained what African-Americans had been fighting for over three centuries: gaining the sympathy and comprehension of the American population in favour of desegregation. According to Little Rock editor Bill Shelton, even local opinion in Little Rock, which was initially in favour of segregation, was by the mid-1960s 85% in support of desegregation, mainly because the citizens wanted their children to attend public school again.<sup>80</sup> Howard Zinn observes that the federal government had been accused more than once of following “*a policy of minimum interference*” in all event related to the race issue.<sup>81</sup> Fortunately, the intense media coverage and public opinion’s increasing rejection of segregation forced Eisenhower to act directly on behalf of the constitutional rights of the executive power, as he declared, “... *a federal court’s order cannot be flouted with impunity by any individual or mob of extremists.*”<sup>82</sup>

Unwilling to negotiate with state governments any longer, Eisenhower sent federal troops to protect the rights of those nine children on September 24th, because “*the Constitution is the fundamental and paramount law of the nation... it is true that the responsibility for public education is the concern of the states, but is equally true that such responsibilities, like other state activities, must be exercised consistently with federal constitutional requirements as they apply to state action.*”<sup>83</sup> Federal troops remained in Little Rock until the end of November 1957, when federal agents of the National Guard took over the task of protecting those children for the rest of the school term. As direct action didn’t meet expectations, the state government went back

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<sup>80</sup> David Pitts, *Free Independent Media Had Key Role in 1957 Integration Crisis*, Available in <http://www.usia.gov/usa/race/pitts923.htm>, Accessed 11 October, 2002.

<sup>81</sup> Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 190.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution*, 55.

<sup>83</sup> Commanger, *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record 1776 to the Present*, 92.

to indirect action and appealed to the Supreme Court. But in the *Cooper vs. Aaron* case<sup>84</sup> the Supreme Court denied the appeal under the principle that:

... the basic principle that the federal judiciary is supreme in exposition of the law of the Constitution, and that principle has ever since been respected by this Court and the country as a permanent and indispensable feature of our constitutional system. It follows that the interpretation of the XIVth Amendment enunciated by this Court in the *Brown* case is the supreme law of the land... No state legislator or executive or judicial officer can war against the Constitution without violating his undertaking to support it...<sup>85</sup>

Having lost at federal courts, Faubus ordered the closing of all high schools in Little Rock to avoid violence during the school year of 1958-59, while the state legislature supported him by passing the *School Closing Law* in 1958. Several parents who couldn't afford to send their children to private school demanded the reopening of schools a year later, finally accepting school desegregation. Ernest Green, the only black to graduate that first spring, said with pride, "*I knew I was walking for the other eight students... I had cracked the wall.*"<sup>86</sup>

Eisenhower's second term ended the laissez faire position of the federal government. His decisions not only empowered federal government, but also questioned the nation about its meaning and its creed. The Eisenhower administration witnessed an enlightened Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka* modify the tragic error that was made in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and overturn the Southern myth of separate but equal; it also saw the rise of America's greatest prophet: Martin Luther King.

## 2.4.2 THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

The presidential campaign of 1960 confronted long-term vice-president Richard M. Nixon with the newcomer Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts. The role of the media was important because of the campaign's presidential debates. According to Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, the growing independence of the white lower middle class along with the new

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<sup>84</sup> William G. Cooper was a member of the School Board in Little Rock, while John Aaron was one of the nine black children.

<sup>85</sup> Commanger, *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record: 1776 to the Present*, 92.

<sup>86</sup> -----; "Generation of Change: The Civil Rights Movement in America", 5.

important black vote were the principal factors that had altered the structure of municipal, state and federal politics in that decade.<sup>87</sup> During his campaign, Kennedy was aware of the importance of assuring the black vote in order to defeat favourite Nixon. While King was in jail during the campaign, Kennedy undertook all possible measures to get him out, because he knew that “*every move the American Negro made had its effect throughout the world.*”<sup>88</sup> He decided to commit to the cause of the Negro Civil Rights even before he was elected. A Washington Post article proposed in October 1988 that King’s imprisonment was “*the determinant factor that put Kennedy in the White House*”,<sup>89</sup> because he was able to assure the Negro vote, which had been divided and volatile.

Kennedy was one of the youngest men and the first Roman Catholic that the United States had ever elected president. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy had to send federal troops to assure the admission of black students to educational institutions - the University of Mississippi in 1962 and later the University of Alabama in 1963. Despite his constant pressure on Congress, a dominating coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats consistently rejected the bill for the strengthening of the civil rights legislation. Nevertheless, Kennedy was able to establish the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity in 1961, as well as to order an end to discrimination in public housing built with federal funds.

Kennedy was aware that the US couldn’t maintain the hegemony he wanted unless there was a real change in domestic policy on the race issue. He declared,

this nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened... We are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free... It has to be possible for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to race or color... Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence... The Negro community has the right to expect the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color-blind, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, *From Civil War to Civil Rights Alabama 1860-1960* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 470.

<sup>88</sup> Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor Branch, “The Arrest that Changed the World” *The Washington Post Magazine*; 23 October 1988, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Commanger; *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record 1776 to the Present*, 168.



According to Lewis M. Killian, “*Little Rock marked the beginning of a new phase of the resistance, such as sit-ins, boycotting, voting reprisals, etc...*”<sup>91</sup> During Kennedy’s administration several anti-segregationist organizations increased their power and underwent ideological transformations. CORE changed from a small, pacifist, predominantly white intellectual group to a more militant, more pragmatic and less philosophical mass organization in which middle class Negroes and Negro students were replacing whites in positions of influence. According to Inge Powell Bell, this movement made no attempt to substitute another world view or a new utopian vision.<sup>92</sup> The federal government was now perceived as an ally of the Negro protest movement, especially after King affirmed his own confidence in it, “... *it is the obligation of government to move resolutely to the side of the freedom movement.*”<sup>93</sup>

Unfortunately, Kennedy’s image as an ally was shadowed by the fact that during his entire administration, his brother Robert Kennedy ordered FBI’s chief J. Edgar Hoover to follow and wiretap King at every moment. According to Victor S. Navasky, the official version was that the real reason Kennedy went along with the surveillance was that the Civil Rights bill hung in the balance, that Southerners in Congress would stop at nothing to defeat it, that its passage was critical to the nation, not to mention to the re-election of his brother.<sup>94</sup> We will never know the real reasons why Robert Kennedy gave that order, but it is a fact that Hoover was obsessed with King. He even characterized King as either “*the most dangerous Negro in America or an action-oriented Marxist.*”<sup>95</sup> Robert Kennedy’s image as a civil rights advocate has been damaged by this episode, and he has even been presented by his enemies as cynical, ruthless and hypocritical, embracing Dr. King in public, wiretapping him in private, listening on Dr. King’s bedroom at night in order to use it against him in the morning.<sup>96</sup> Many years later, a Congressional investigation found that Hoover was obsessed with destroying King and the SCLC. He allocated enormous amounts of FBI resources to that effort during the 1950s and 1960s. Hoover’s

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<sup>91</sup> Lewis, *The Impossible Revolution?: Black Power and the American Dream*, 72.

<sup>92</sup> Inge Bell Powell, *CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence* (NY: Random House, 1968), 31.

<sup>93</sup> Lewis, *The Impossible Revolution?: Black Power and the American Dream*, 81.

<sup>94</sup> Victor S. Navasky, “The Government and Martin Luther King” *The Atlantic* CCXXVI, November 1970, 50.

<sup>95</sup> Dyson, *I May not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 80.

<sup>96</sup> Navasky, “The Government and Martin Luther King”, 51.

personal hatred toward King even enabled the agency to conduct illegal break-ins and electronic surveillance of King in a campaign to discredit him as a civil rights leader.<sup>97</sup>

Kennedy's administration was the first administration to be voluntarily involved in the race issue, without assuming a totally passive and observing role. According to Taylor Branch, Kennedy believed that "*segregation like colonialism was an anachronistic addiction curable by the steady advance of modern attitudes.*"<sup>98</sup> His attitude on the race issue was determined by "*the acceptance of the law as the beginning of change and knowledge that the law is going to be enforced is vital.*"<sup>99</sup> Even though his assassination set back the Civil Rights Bill, it definitely imposed several parallels between him and King, after the death of the latter. King was considered the movement's spiritual leader, while "*the Kennedys were political leaders closely identified with and sympathetic to the cause of Negro equality.*"<sup>100</sup> Kennedy's New Frontier Plan became a symbol for African-Americans, because the new frontier, the ongoing and unfinished revolution, was the civil rights movement, and King has become *the new frontiersman*.<sup>101</sup>

### 2.4.3 THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION

Vice president Lyndon B. Johnson took office the moment one of the greatest American political leaders was assassinated. Being totally supportive of Kennedy's political goals, Johnson assured that he would continue his domestic policy, thus reviving "*hopes among black Americans for a new birth of freedom*".<sup>102</sup> During his first term, Johnson became the best political ally blacks had ever had, as he told Congress that he desired "*the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill.*"<sup>103</sup> It was even considered that "*no president in our recent history is in a better position to make the big break with the past than is Lyndon Johnson, who can talk to the South as a Southerner, who has declared fervently many times his beliefs that*

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<sup>97</sup> Nicholas von Hoffman, "Ten August Have Come and Gone Since We Had a Dream" *The Washington Post*, 6 August 1973, without page.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1988), 398.

<sup>99</sup> Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, 85.

<sup>100</sup> Sidney M. Willhelm, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Experience in America" *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 10, No. 1 (September 1979): 35.

<sup>101</sup> William Robert Miller, "The New Frontiersman" *Gandhi Marg* (4 October 1961): 3.

<sup>102</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Militant Nonviolence*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African – Americans*, 507.

racism should disappear from American life.”<sup>104</sup> King, as well, supported Johnson, commenting to a newspaper that

one of the ironies of the assassination was that it put a Southerner in the White House, who might do more than any other president before him to pass a strong civil rights bill. I am not going to vote against Lyndon B. Johnson because he is a Southerner. I am proud to have a fellow Southerner in the White House.<sup>105</sup>

Verbal and physical confrontations between Southern segregationists, best represented by the Ku Klux Klan, and black organizations and gangs left a number of deaths, as well as created a state of tension and constant fear throughout the country. The confrontations got out of control, mainly in Northern cities, during the so-called long, hot summer of 1964. Despite the nation’s getting out of control, Johnson’s re-election was possible due in part to the vote of blacks, who still saw in him a great soldier of their cause, and who supported his vice president, Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, who had always been actively involved in the desegregation quest.

The Civil Rights Act reflected concern about three different ways in which the law had touched on issues of race. Those areas were: 1) civil rights (rights exercised by citizens of a society), 2) discrimination, and 3) equal protection. Unfortunately, the Civil Rights Act only ended segregation on a legal basis, and most black leaders, especially King, then expected the federal government to force Congress to pass a right-to-vote law for African-Americans. The Selma March supported the right to vote that black Americans were looking for after the end of segregation. According to James A. Colaiaco, this march had a strong impact on the president, who addressed a joint session of Congress on national television and called for a speedy passage of the Voting Rights Bill, summoning the nation to fulfil its promise that all men, regardless of race or color, shall live together in freedom and dignity.<sup>106</sup> Finally, the Voting Rights Act<sup>107</sup> was passed in 1965, but it soon became clear to African-Americans that they needed much more than desegregation and enfranchisement in order to be able to access true equality. Now, with the legal weapons and a more supportive federal government on their side, they had the access to local, state and federal politics.

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<sup>104</sup> Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 215.

<sup>105</sup> -----; “Dr. King Speaks Here: Negroes May Bring Pressure for Rights” *The Savannah Morning News*, 17 January 1964, without page.

<sup>106</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Militant Nonviolence*, 131.

<sup>107</sup> Voting Rights Act permits federal examiners to supersede local officials and register black voters in certain circumstances. By 1967, more than half of the eligible blacks are registered in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina, enabling more black candidates than before to be elected to office.

Johnson's 1964 state-of-the-union message was the federal government's declaration of a war on poverty, which was welcomed and cheered not only by black leaders, who wanted an improvement in the living and economic conditions of all blacks, but also by poor whites. King was one of the first to give his support to this new program, but he also was among the first national leaders to perceive that Johnson's involvement in the Vietnam War would sabotage his administration's much heralded anti-poverty program.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, King and Johnson, who at the beginning were fond of each other's political attitudes, soon became distanced by King's constant criticism and radical opposition to the Vietnam War.

Johnson's administration was marked by great victories as well as by flaws. The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were his major achievements in the domestic arena, while the nation's fateful involvement in the Vietnam War fragmented the civil rights movement, destroyed Johnson's Great Society Program, and undermined King's leadership.<sup>109</sup> Despite all riots and confrontation between segregationists and integrationists, this administration represented a great victory for African-Americans and their new participation in the American policy-making process. As James W. Bulton mentioned, "... *this transformation of political power relations was perhaps the most important contribution of the civil rights movement.*"<sup>110</sup> At the time Johnson left office, he wasn't a popular president any longer, mainly due to his political decisions in foreign policy, but in his last address to the nation, he left Americans a vision of what it should become:

... through all time to come, I think America will be a stronger nation, a more just society, and a land of great opportunity and fulfillment because of what we have all done together in these years of unparalleled achievement. Our reward will come in the life of freedom, peace, and hope that our children will enjoy through ages ahead. What we won when all of our people united must not now be lost in suspicion, distrust, selfishness, and politics among any of our people.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> It demanded funds for vocational training at schools and colleges, establishment of work-training camps and centres for underprivileged youths, aid to various types of community-action programs to combat poverty, loans to small businessmen and small farmers and related projects.

<sup>109</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Militant Nonviolence*, 202.

<sup>110</sup> Bulton, *Blacks and Social Change : Impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern Communities*, 213.

<sup>111</sup> Suriano, *Great American Speeches*, 253.