

The American black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s made history because of crucial contributions from scores and scores of heroines and heroes. Some of those individuals, such as Martin Luther King Jr., and Thurgood Marshall, are known and celebrated by millions around the world. Others, like Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, unfortunately are remembered only by smaller numbers of activists and scholars.

But the civil rights movement was, in fact, made up of thousands upon thousands of active participants, most of whose names never made it into either newspapers or history books. The movement succeeded to the degree that it did because of the broad base of support it had in black communities all across America, and because the best activists within that movement—people like Miss Baker and Mississippi organizer Medgar W. Evers—never forgot that their role was to encourage and mobilize others rather than claim credit or seek glory for themselves.

The “movement” that sprang to national and international attention in the mid-1950s with the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision (*Brown v. Board of Education*) and the 1955–1956 boycott of segregated city buses in Montgomery, Alabama, drew from two distinct but allied political traditions. The first tradition, exemplified by Thurgood Marshall, had worked assiduously for two decades to force the federal courts to apply the protections of the U.S. Constitution to the rights of black Americans. The second tradition, personified by the long-time black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, insisted that mass action by ordinary citizens could also bring about political change.

The Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision was a landmark vindication of the courtroom litigation strategy that Marshall and fellow attorneys had championed. Similarly, the remarkable success of the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott validated Mr. Randolph’s contention that the black “masses,” acting for themselves at the grassroots, could likewise achieve crucial political breakthroughs.

The Montgomery effort also illuminated another sometimes unappreciated aspect of the civil rights struggle: black women often were the real catalysts of change, even if they weren’t occupying formal positions of institutional leadership. In Montgomery, the best-known such catalyst was Mrs. Rosa Parks, whose arrest on December 1, 1955, for refusing to surrender her seat on a bus to a newly-boarded white rider, led the city’s black activists to call for a boycott of Montgomery’s buses.

On the first day of the boycott, a twenty-six-year-old clergyman, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., was chosen as the primary spokesman. During the ensuing twelve-month boycott, he gradually emerged as a symbol for black southern activism. Thurgood Marshall and NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins underscored how it was a federal court suit extending the *Brown* decision to public transit, rather than the remarkable, year-long, community-wide bus boycott, that finally brought victory to Montgomery. But for many civil rights supporters, the Montgomery boycott most exemplified the real potential of nonviolent mass action.

Among those who sought to capitalize on that victory by persuading King to form a new group that could pursue mass action all across the South was Ella Jo Baker, a former NAACP national staffer who believed that black southerners ought to take the lead in improving their own lives. Once King’s new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), began functioning, Miss Baker became its most important staff member.

Soon after the SCLC was founded, the spotlight returned to school integration. The 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, represented one of the earliest applications of *Brown*’s mandate. It was accomplished only after federal troops were deployed to protect the nine black students whom local NAACP leader Daisy Bates had helped inspire. Little Rock, like Montgomery, demonstrated the remarkable courage of those black southerners who were on the cutting edge of change, but the South’s greatest leap forward in civil rights took place three years later, when the black students themselves jumped to the forefront.

The lunch counter “sit-ins” protesting white-only restaurant services began spontaneously in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, but from there they spread rapidly, encouraged by both NAACP and SCLC supporters and by staff members from the biracial Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Ella Baker encouraged the students to come together in an activist network of their own. The creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as an autonomous organization separate from the NAACP, SCLC, and CORE, marked a crucial stage in the movement’s development.

CORE executive director James Farmer, like Baker a former NAACP staffer, played a leading role in the movement’s next direct action initiative, the 1961 “Freedom Ride” that challenged segregated interstate bus stations. In Alabama, the “Freedom Riders” were assaulted by white thugs in Anniston, in Birmingham, and then in Montgomery. While they succeeded in winning both federal intervention and widespread national attention, their success again demonstrated the physical courage that activism required. Medgar Evers, Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP, exhibited such courage in helping lead the movement in the South’s most dangerous state. He was assassinated outside his Jackson home in June 1963.

Beyond the national media spotlight, much of the movement’s most important organizing work was done by the young people of SNCC. In Mississippi, Georgia, and then in Alabama, SNCC workers recruited local supporters throughout black communities. They enlisted such impressive grassroots activists as Mississippi’s Fannie Lou Hamer, a



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By 1965, a growing number of SNCC members were openly questioning the integrationist ideal that older leaders like Marshall and King fervently embraced. When the Nation of Islam's (NOI) number two spokesman, Malcolm X, broke with the Nation in early 1964 and set out on an independent journey toward a black nationalism that would not be anti-white, many in SNCC were interested. But Malcolm's 1965 assassination at the hands of NOI gunmen ended that potential.

A year later, the public expression of the phrase "Black Power" by Stokely Carmichael, John Lewis's successor as SNCC chairman, drew extensive media attention and Black Power became a new rallying cry. But underlying that slogan's popular appeal was an understandable belief that black freedom and equality required something more than just the attainment of simple integration.

Nevertheless, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s opened the door to true political equality and brought about the greatest domestic social reform America has ever seen. It was black America's finest hour.

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