[redacted]
American History II
Honor's Paper

The Lives of African and Mexican Americans During the 50's and 60's

The 1950's and 1960's was a time of prejudice and commonality towards your average African and Mexican American. Even after a century of slavery being abolished, equal amendment rights, and birthright citizenry, discrimination was still prevalent in America especially in the South. Undeterred by others, Hispanic and Black ethnic groups received equal rights only to be excoriated for the color of their skin for many more decades. The real question is what allows for such chauvinistic actions to occur? The answer to that question is society's idea of what is acceptable behavior. Callous behavior is typically learned from a very young age, so the progeny was taught to act a certain way towards these communities, and the cycle further advanced.

Delving into more of the challenges faced by African Americans and Mexican Americans comes from a comparison of their very unfortunate lives. Emerging from the African American community were leaders like Martin L. King, Malcom X, and Rosa Parks. *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*, *I Have a Dream Speech*, and other important documents give us a taste of the issues that many of these ethnic groups dealt with. Even after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court case ruled the "separate but equal" clause as fair, the *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned it later by declaring it unconstitutional. "In reality 'separate-but-equal' meant that African Americans were always separated but never treated as equals. Segregation was a regime of systematic degradation and oppression that was all encompassing. Southern schools, restaurants, hotels, theaters, public transportation, and waiting rooms were segregated, as were elevators, parks, public restrooms, hospitals, drinking fountains, prisons, and places of worship. Segregation was cradle to grave. Whites and blacks were born in separate hospitals, educated in separate schools, and buried in segregated graveyards. The system was codified in state and local laws and enforced by intimidation and violence" (Ware 1087).

Even with protectionist measures enforced, racial slurs were still directed at African Americans. They were cornered and isolated just like Jews were by anti-Semitists. That may be a little far-fetched, but the derogatory comments geared towards African Americans were completely inappropriate, but for the time period, it was considered normal. It took leaders such as Malcom X, Rosa Parks and Martin L. King to change these biased views. King was a man of great tenacity and dignity in times of foreseen vicious activity. He sought out peaceful campaigns despite barbaric police practices. His people or race took multiple beatings, but he never gave up on peaceful protesting.

> In King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, he describes "in any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There

> have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation" (*The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

King's people were victims of a broken promise made by Birmingham's authorities, and they were set up with disappointment in the end. Nonviolent direct action was their most successful strategy since it creates such chaos and fosters a direct spotlight on an issue and forces stubborn individuals into confrontation. "The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*). King's main purpose in Birmingham was to combat social injustice, and he writes "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tide in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

> The African American community "has waited for more than 340 years for their constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'white' and 'colored'; when your first name becomes 'nigger,' your middle name becomes 'boy' (however old you are) and your last name becomes 'John,' and your wife and mother are never given the respected title 'Mrs.'; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs

> over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

Black Americans had suffered and endured pain for long enough, but the white man failed to put himself in the black man's shoes, so instead he shut them out and dubbed them as social outcasts. White's at the time did not see the value of human life let alone the inculpating scrutiny they were wreaking. Black Americans underwent harsh assault and tolerated hate crimes for what probably felt like an eternity, but they never gave up, which is admirable. They kept persevering despite the stifling augmentations of their circumstances inflicted by many Caucasians.

> King even "had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

Oppression may bog a person down for a short while, but it grows tiresome, and a spark is ignited just like a riveting spirit was reasserted in African Americans. "The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So, let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides-and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

King's main proclamation was to channel pent up anger through non-violent retaliation. Today, we are even suppressed by racial lines whether we care to admit it or not. We let society tear us down and confine us to social norms, but it takes one beacon of light such as King to make a change, and the rest will usually follow. Not all whites were repulsive in their behavior because there is always a select few who willingly commit to a revolution. They have wallowed far too long in their white emulation and repudiated acceptation of equality. Although the ordeal was

looking unhopeful, King was still sanguine and stated that "we will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away, and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty" (King, *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

Another advocate for racial justice was Malcom X, who after involving himself in the art of street life, was condemned to prison for 10 years for burglary in 1946. It was in prison where he found his true calling through the ideas of the Nation of Islam. Beginning in 1952, Malcolm X became a national minister in the Nation of Islam. He directed the black community to demand their rights as citizens and to view the white man as iniquitous. Malcolm X didn't have a filter on this topic, and his powerful messages made him widely known. Malcolm X actively fought for the rights of blacks and even granted interviews to national publications if the Honorable Elijah Muhammed sanctioned the meetings. Malcolm X's national attention created some problems within the Nation of Islam but kept the issue of racism at the forefront of American debates. Malcolm was selfless and very keen on his perspectives to empower the black man and placed the blame on whites and racist ideology. Once he found out that his mentor and idol Elijah Muhammad had been committing adultery while judging and teaching others to be faithful, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam. He was embarking on a new endeavor to find some new purpose. He worked with the Organization of Afro-American Unity and eventually traveled to Mecca in 1964. He returned to the states a changed man by comprehending the need for racial justice and not the elimination of one certain race. He formed partnerships with grass-roots agencies and other civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. (Bracks pp. 272-273).

"But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land" (King, *I Have a Dream Speech*).

Sadly, the Black American had been failed during this time. In King's words "when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice" (King, *I Have a Dream Speech*).

The nation was in for a rude awakening if they thought matters would die down since King was a persistent man who would not quit until he accomplished his goals. It took King and a whole

community to achieve sensibility, and that is exactly what Rosa Parks did by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, and her fellow companions boycotted busses, therefore, making segregation on public transportation unconstitutional. In other areas similar events occurred, such as ones in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the integration of schools, and the North Carolina A&T State University staged sit in at Woolworth's lunch counter.

"In 1963, Martin Luther King launched the Birmingham campaign. The effort started with a boycott and switched to marches and sit-ins. The extreme brutality inflicted on protestors was featured on nightly newscasts. King was arrested, and during his incarceration, he wrote the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in which he argued that individuals have 'a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.' After weeks of tense negotiations, an agreement was reached that provided for the desegregation of Birmingham's stores, restaurants, and schools" (King pp. 1090-1091). King kept going with other large attention driven marches, such as the March on Washington. The perseverance shown by African Americans despite the lynching's and attacks is remarkable, and in the summer of 1964, the Civil Rights Act was enacted. "The major provisions of this landmark legislation are Title II, which out- lawed discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and other public accommodations; Title VI, which authorized the withdrawal of federal funds from programs, including public schools, which practiced discrimination, and Title VII, which prohibits discrimination in employment and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to review and investigate complaints" (King pp.1091-1092). This piece of legislation made a huge leap in the new era of rightful ethical treatment. "The denial of access to places of public accommodations stigmatized and demeaned African Americans. The threat of the loss of federal funding made discrimination in schools, colleges, and universities too costly to continue. The Civil Rights Act dramatically expanded the educational opportunities available to blacks" (King 1092). Discrimination was dissipating, and many whites were not too fond of it.

"Martin Luther King's nonviolent protests were premised on an integrationist ideology in which African Americans would 'not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character'" (King 1093). But, tensions were not dying down because during the mid-1960s a different philosophy surfaced. "In 1967, the frustrations and impatience of African Americans erupted in 159 race riots in cities across the United States. The riots reflected the anger and frustration that had been building for decades. Blacks had been exploited, oppressed, and subjected to daily indignities. Government policies and private practices in the real estate industry confined them to substandard housing in undesirable neighborhoods. Blacks were routinely harassed by police officers. Northern ghettoes had long been tinderboxes waiting to explode. Demands for equal treatment were made by thousands of ordinary individuals who participated in meetings, boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and other forms of mass demonstrations" (King pp.1093-1095.) Peaceful non-violent protests shook the rocky foundations of the brutal sadistic attacks on the subjected yet calm protestors who had to remain sedative for fear of being prosecuted. It was a cruel world to live in if your skin was not the right color.

On the other side of the spectrum were Mexican Americans. "In 1953, the U.S. Government launched 'Operation Wetback,' a program to send people of Mexican descent to Mexico. More than 3.8 million people were deported through the operation, many of them, American citizens" (Faville, "A Civil Rights History: Latino/Hispanic Americans"). In the 1960s, Latinos and Hispanics put up more of a fight for their equality by piggy backing off of the African

Americans struggle for civil rights. In particular, the maltreatment of Mexican Americans by Anglo-American Western settlers was indescribable. "It is important to take note that the treaties after the Mexican-American war were often violated; such was the 'Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.' The discrimination, abuse, and violence of the Mexican population after the war continued and became a heartbreaking experience for those who sought opportunities in the new U.S. territory after the treaty took power" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement"). Mexican Americans often faced similar challenges to those of African Americans, but they had more of a difficult time in relation to decent educations.

> "Mexican immigrants and Chicanos were often subjected to unequal treatment, they were seen as non-equal citizens and denied citizenship often and ongoing discrimination. The clashes between the Anglo-American settlers moving westward and the Mexican-Americans in the U.S. occurred in many levels, among which the 'hunger' for land was one of many conflicts the native Californians of Mexican heritage experienced. Pillage, property robbing, and squatting in vacant lands by the Anglos were considered racist acts and were not dealt properly in the court of law or the appropriate legal system at that time. The one-sided Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was never honored, and it only served the purpose of expanding the southern borders without respecting the rights of the Mexican nationals on the newly acquired lands of California, New Mexico, and Arizona" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement").

The Civil Rights Movement was the new transitioning point since the issue of inequality was obvious in public policies. Martin Luther King paved the way for civil unrest, so many efforts overlapped when "the Chicano Movement began to identify itself as a quest for social equity, equal opportunities to education, especially higher education for the Mexican-American population" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement"). "The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement for the Mexican-American population emerged as a necessity for the Mexican-American middle class fighting for issues of inequality and the lack of opportunities. Unlike the unions, whose primary goal was to reassure that the Mexican American workers held on to their jobs, the beginning of the Civil Rights era marked a series of efforts to change the racist and prejudice practices, especially in the workplace and not as much as the 'bread and butter' objectives held by the unions" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement").

The Mexican children received a great deal of mistreatment in schools because they were behind linguistically compared to other students. The language barrier acted as a stump or stopping point. "Often, the harsh conditions and the need to survive economically forced families to depend on child labor. Many Mexican children dropped out of school after third or fourth grades to help support their families. In addition, issues of racism were inevitable and anti-Mexican feelings were some of the major problems Mexican youth were facing regardless of what was taught in schools as the 'American Democracy.' From the Mexican perspective, the efforts of assimilation were seen as hegemonic efforts dominating over other 'competing' ideologies; the dominant ideology to become a 'Good American,' otherwise known as the process of the Americanization, overpowered the efforts to maintain a cultural identity" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement"). The difference in educational opportunities for Mexican Americans became more evident, and so, "The Civil Rights Act in 1964 opened the doors for changes in legislation:

to end discrimination based on race or ethnicity, but the right to an equal education was far from reality when it came to language minority students" (Karanxha, "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement"). The quest for social justice was on the rise and no eternal force could stop it.

The 1960s proved to be a decade unlike any other. "It was an intense time consumed by rapidly unfolding developments. The decade began with institutionalized segregation still in- tact and massive resistance to school integration in the South. After ten years and hundreds of boycotts, demonstrations, and protests, federal laws were enacted that prohibited discrimination" (Ware 1087). Complete freedom was achieved for both races, but it came at high-cost and took many years.

Bibliography

Bracks, Lean'tin L. "Malcolm X (1925-1965)." *Freedom Facts & Firsts: 400 Years of the African American Civil Rights Experience*, 2009, pp. 271-273.

Dauphine, Nicholas. "Hispanics Are Forgotten in Civil Rights History." *Education Week*, Editorial Projects in Education, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/14/31dauphine.h33.html. Accessed 31 March 2018.

Faville, Andrea. "A Civil Rights History: Latino/Hispanic Americans." *The Knight Chair in Political Reporting*, Newhouse, http://knightpoliticalreporting.syr.edu/?civilhistoryessays=a-civil-rights-history-latinohispanic-americans. Accessed 31 March 2018.

History.com Staff. "Civil Rights Movement." *History.com*, A+E Networks, https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement. Accessed 31 March 2018.

Karanxha, Valbona. "Latino Identity in the Civil Rights Movement." *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/2015/2/15.02.06.x.html. Accessed 31 March 2018.

King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, 2017, pp. 1-12.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "I Have a Dream Speech." *I Have a Dream (Primary Source Document)*, 2017, pp. 1-3.

Krieg, Robert A. "Malcom X--Myth and Truthfulness." *Journal of Religious Thought*, vol. 36, no. 2, Fall79/Winter80, p. 37.

Lott, Martha. "The Relationship Between the 'Invisibility' of African American Women in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and Their Portrayal in Modern Film." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0021934717696758. Accessed 31 March 2018.

Ware, Leland. "Civil Rights and the 1960s: A Decade of Unparalleled Progress." *Maryland Law Review*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2013, http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3567&context=mlr. Accessed 31 March 2018.