**AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES FOR OPPORTUNITY AND EQUAL PROTECTION**

By Aaron Jura

The 31 years spanning the early 1930’s through the mid 1960’s represent a time of great challenge and change within the African American community. Leaders within the black community often differed in tone and approach on critical areas of concern during the fight for civil rights locally, regionally, and ultimately nationally. While leaders varied in their rhetoric and at times goals, there were a variety of issues that did remain constant. Leaders differed on the various approaches to ultimately accomplishing gains in the critical areas of greater access to opportunity and to protections provided under the law. The fight that African Americans waged, against the system that had held them back, represents a pivotal period in the establishment of civil rights for the greater black community.

The Great Depression was a time of great hardship and change for Americans at large, but African Americans were especially hard hit by the massive impact the Great Depression had on their communities. African Americans increasingly were migrating to the large urban centers during this period as the rural south became even more difficult for the black community (Trotter, 2000, p. 132). In particular the access of black workers to opportunities in employment were especially contentious. With so many Americans out of work African American leaders were fighting hard to get members of the community work. The Communist party took up the fight for African Americans on many issues during this period of great distress in America. With so many African Americans out of work and without appropriate relief the fight for opportunity remained constant throughout the depression period. In 1933, Communist organizer Angelo Herndon stated in his speech to the jury that it was so bad that both white and black unemployed workers alike were demonstrating together over the need for aid to support their households (Herndon, p. 281). By 1949 the issue of access to opportunity remained a concern for Communist party leaders. Claudia Jones highlighted many of the hardships faced by blacks during the depression era. In 1940, 40% of black women were unemployed compared with 25% for white women. The disparity in opportunity between the black and white communities was a large concern for leaders within the Communist party who tied the disenfranchisement to the bourgeoisie and the capitalist class (Jones, p. 316).

Opportunity and access to employment was a prime concern of African Americans during the Depression era. Communist leaders like Herndon and Jones decried the system of injustice that they assert is built into the capitalist economic system and subsequently American society at large. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the early 1930’s came with a New Deal that was mainly exclusionary for members of the greater African American community (Trotter, 2000, p. 135). New Deal programs, intended to offer relief to Americans, were structured and administered in a way that disenfranchised members of the black community. The programs that offered relief under the New Deal “failed to safeguard African Americans against racial discrimination” (Trotter, 2000, p. 135). Financial relief provided through welfare agencies often administered payments to blacks at a reduced rate to that paid to whites (Trotter, 2000, p. 136). Injustice in opportunity and access to relief were major concerns that went seemingly unaddressed by the Roosevelt administration until the mid 1930’s.

By the mid 1930’s the importance of securing the black vote helped to mobilize support for changes in the treatment of African Americans under Roosevelt’s New Deal. Prominent African American figures, like Mary McLeod Bethune, took up the arguments for greater access to opportunity and aid under the New Deal’s relief programs. Bethune, speaking to the NAACP convention in 1935 says, “Equality of opportunity is necessary to brotherhood,” arguing that this issue is of prime concern to the larger African American community (Bethune, p. 297). During the same period racial attitudes in America also began to shift. Partially due to the fact that the bourgeoisies elites, previously attacked by Communist Party members, had become less popular within American society. The idealization of the wealthy fell out of vogue due to the consequences of the Great Depression on Americans at large (Trotter, 2000, p. 141). Political leaders in the establishment parties became increasingly aware of the impact an organized black community would have on future elections and therefore power in America.

Following the strike on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 leaders within the African American community continued to seek access to opportunity. Black labor leader A. Phillip Randolph made an impassioned plea in support of equal access to defense jobs for African Americans in this new wartime period. Randolph says, “Negroes can kill the deadly serpent of race hatred in the Army, Navy, Air, and Marine Corps” (Randolph, p. 309). The sudden shift to a wartime economy resulted in another challenge to access to opportunity for African Americans during this period. Randolph states, “It consists of jobs, thousands of jobs. It may represent millions, yes, hundreds of millions of dollars in wages”(Randolph, p. 309). The shifting of jobs and therefore money to defense resulted in the heightened need for access to these opportunities within the African American community. Ultimately, the argument that dying for democracy abroad when you don’t have democracy back at home was a powerful one that offered opportunities in employment that allowed African Americans to access the non-skilled labor market (Trotter, 2000, p. 162).

The NAACP also highlighted the issues of injustice in this new wartime period with a logical appeal centered on the idea that while blacks were excluded from the opportunities in the defense industry they were still expected to pay for the war efforts (Trotter, 2000, p. 164). A. Phillip Randolph’s activism surrounding a proposed march on Washington leads to Executive Order 8802, which opens employment in defense to African Americans (Trotter, 2000, p. 165). The successful Double V campaign launched during this period positioned the African American community in the fight for a victory for liberty both at home and abroad. The Double V campaign advocated that blacks should use their loyalty to the country to assist in fighting at home for equal rights. The comparison of the treatment of blacks under discriminatory policies in the United States to the oppressive nature of totalitarian Axis powers was a successful argument at home in society at large and within the greater labor organizer community (Trotter, 2000, p. 166).

The greater opportunities within the defense sector provided another opportunity for African Americans to migrate from the rural south (Joseph, 2016). This migration was primarily, as it had been previously in history, a direct result of African Americans seeking greater access to opportunity in employment. Opportunities in industrial roles in defense offered an opportunity following the successful Double V campaign launch and the successful March on Washington activism allowed for greater access to the opportunities that America was offering during World War II (Trotter, 2000, p. 166). The increasing organization of the black community was seen as increasingly influential to national political leaders as they began courting the black vote for national electoral success.

The limitations on opportunity did not only exist within the confines of employment. As African Americans get more organized, the calls for opportunity begin to shift focus in an attempt realize the original intent of the Double V campaign of the World War II years. By the early 1950’s calls to end segregation began to get clearer. Specifically, equal access to educational opportunities was extremely important to members of the African American community during this period. Winning equal treatment at home required that separate but equal be abolished. The NAACP’s campaign and ultimate victory in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case opened greater opportunity and access to education to members of the African American community. Continuing on the Double V’s goals black veterans and civilians alike became more mobilized and organized in the south demanding that segregation finally is laid to rest.

The events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott follows the theme of access to opportunity by leveraging the political organizational structure established in the African American community since the early 1930’s. Following the conclusion of World War II African American churches and politically influential organizations became more intent on breaking the barriers that existed toward future opportunity by increasing access to political legitimacy as an organized voting bloc (Trotter, 2000, p. 180). As attitudes had shifted within the greater American population, the political power structure and societal norms in the Southern United States still remained extremely resistant to equal rights for African Americans. The Montgomery Bus Boycott helped to end segregation in the south, but the political victory was the increased legitimacy of the political will and organizing ability of leaders within the black community.

Jo Ann Robinson’s letter to Montgomery Mayor W.J. Gayle from May of 1954 calls for the desegregation of transportation in the city of Montgomery and an end to racially discriminatory layouts to routes and stops offered in black neighborhood (Robinson, p. 353). The grassroots political organizations that existed in Montgomery and the African American church communities of the south were able to be leveraged a year later during the bus boycott in Montgomery. Prior to the ultimately successful bus boycott in Montgomery, the greater white community of the south appeared to be unaware of the black communities ability to organize (Robinson, p. 356-357). Rosa Park’s arrest and the ultimate mobilization of 45,000 black citizens of Montgomery represented another opportunity for the political power structure to observe the ability of the black community to organize and sustain a protest movement over a long period of time and at great hardship (Robinson, p. 358).

By the early 1960’s the political organizational structure within the African American community increased in efficacy and influence on a national level. The March on Washington in the 1960’s illustrates the ability of leaders to organize, but it also highlights the somewhat divergent views on the approaches to greater equality and opportunity. John R. Lewis’ speech at the March on Washington dissents from the popular national voices, popularized through southern political movements and backed up by powerful players like the NAACP, arguing that the proposed civil rights bills did not go far enough. In the original and uncensored version of the speech Lewis makes the argument that the proposed legislation by Kennedy was “too little too late” and should be rejected by the African American community at large (Lewis, 2009, p. 384). Shifts such as this were present in the rhetoric of leaders throughout these pivotal years in the fights for greater access to opportunity and protection under the law.

The changes within the American population and the increased legitimacy of the political will and organizational structure within the African American community during this 31-year period represents a time of great change and challenge. While the political organizations that ultimately led the call for legal protections and an end to segregation in the United States were strong the grassroots organizing capabilities throughout the north and south remained key to the eventual success of the equal rights movement. The arguments for increased access to opportunity heralded by leaders in the African American community helped to pave the way for greater advancements in the area of protections provided under the law. While the tone and rhetorical style of leaders might have, at times, differed or diverged the themes of equal opportunity remained the same throughout this wide ranging and important period in American and African American history.

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