**WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #9 – Montgomery Bus Boycott**

 In a landmark decision in Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court had put the nation’s stamp of approval on racial discrimination. The Court, with only two Southerners on the bench, had ruled that segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment under the “separate but equal” doctrine. As long as blacks had access to accommodations equal to those of whites, separate facilities did not imply that blacks were inferior. Thus, the Supreme Court sanctioned segregation by declaring “separate but equal” facilities constitutional. This decision validated state legislation that discriminated against blacks and freed the states from the ban of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed equal protection under the law for all citizens.

Segregated facilities in the South and elsewhere, however, were flagrantly unequal. The Plessy decision had a powerful and long-lasting impact on the United States. It opened the way for a deluge of “Jim Crow laws” that soon separated the races in many areas of life in states in the South and elsewhere. The Plessy decision remained in place until 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Topeka Board of Education finally struck down segregation in the public schools.

In the South, however, half a million people joined White Citizens’ Councils dedicated to blocking school integration. Some whites revived the old tactics of violence and intimidation, swelling the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan to levels not seen since the 1920s. The “Southern Manifesto,” signed in 1956 by 101 members of Congress, denounced the Brown decision as “a clear abuse of judicial power” and encouraged local officials to defy it. The white South had declared an all-out war on the Brown ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. Declaring racial segregation integral to the “habits, traditions, and way of life” of the

South, the “Southern Manifesto” signaled that many whites would not readily accept African American equality. The unwillingness of local officials to enforce Brown could render the decision invalid in practice. If legal victories would not be enough, citizens themselves, blacks and whites, would have to take to the streets and demand justice. Following the Brown decision, they did just that, forging a protest movement unique to the history of the United States.

Southern black leaders embraced an old tactic put to new ends – nonviolent protest. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. She was arrested and charged with violating a local segregation ordinance. Her act was not the spur-of-the-moment decision that it seemed. A woman of sterling reputation and a longtime NAACP member, she had been contemplating such an act for some time. Middle-aged and unassuming, she fit the bill perfectly for the challenge of the NAACP against segregated buses.

About the same time, African-Americans turned for leadership to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the recently appointed pastor of Montgomery’s Dexter Street Baptist Church. The son of a prominent Atlanta minister, King embraced the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Working closely, but behind the scenes, with Bayard Rustin, King studied nonviolent philosophy, which Rustin and others in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a nonviolent peace organization, had first used in the 1940s.

After the arrest of Rosa Parks, King, at the age of 26, endorsed a plan proposed by a local black women’s organization to boycott Montgomery’s bus system. They were inspired by similar boycotts that had occurred in Harlem, New York, in 1941 and in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1953.

For the next 381 days, African Americans in Montgomery formed car pools or walked to work. Buses normally filled with black riders rolled empty down the streets. The transit company neared bankruptcy, and downtown stores complained about the loss of business. Only after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in November 1956 that bus segregation was unconstitutional did the city of Montgomery finally comply. One woman boycotter said, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.”

The Montgomery bus boycott catapulted King to national prominence. In 1957, along with the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, King founded the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The black church, long the center of African American social and cultural life, now lent its moral and organizational strength to the civil rights movement. Black churchwomen were a tower of strength, transferring the skills they had honed during years of church work to the fight for civil rights. The SCLC quickly joined the NAACP in the vanguard of the movement for racial justice.

During the ensuing decade, President Lyndon Johnson put forth his domestic policy for the Great Society. Among the few successes of that program were several landmark pieces of civil rights legislation. After the assassination of President John Kennedy, Johnson, his successor called for passage of a new civil rights bill as a memorial to the fallen leader. A Southerner from Texas and the former Senate majority leader, Johnson was renowned for his fierce persuasive style and tough political bargaining. He had already maneuvered through the Senate the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. On assuming the presidency, Johnson made passing a civil rights bill a priority. Using moral leverage, the memory of the slain JFK, his own brand of hardball politics, as well as bipartisan support, he now finally broke the Senate filibuster mounted by a diminishing band of bitter opponents of civil rights for all citizens. Everett Dirksen, the Republican Senate leader from Illinois, quoted the French writer Victor Hugo, when he said: “Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come.”

In June 1964, Congress approved the most far-reaching civil rights law since Reconstruction. The keystone of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was Title VII, which outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, national origin, and gender. Another section of the act banned discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and other public accommodations and guaranteed equal access to schools. The bill required that literacy tests for voting be administered in writing and defined as literate anyone who had finished the sixth grade. Congress granted new enforcement powers to the U.S. attorney general, who could now bring lawsuits for school desegregation, relieving parents of a painful necessity. Federally assisted programs and private employers alike were required to eliminate discrimination. The bill established an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which was a rebirth of the old Fair Employment Practices Committee, to administer and implement the prohibition against job discrimination. On July 2nd LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This date contained a high degree of historical symbolism, because he knew that the Second Continental Congress had voted to declare independence on the same date in 1776 prior to its announcement two days later.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a law with real teeth, but it left untouched the obstacles to black voting rights. So protesters went back into the streets. In 1964, during the period that came to be known as “Freedom Summer,” black organizations mounted a major campaign in Mississippi. The effort drew several thousand volunteers from across the country, including nearly one thousand white college students from the North. Led by Robert Moses, a charismatic activist leader connected with SNCC – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the four major civil rights organizations (SNCC, CORE – the Congress of Racial Equality, the NAACP – the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the SCLC – the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) spread out across the state. They established freedom schools for black children and conducted a major voter registration drive. So determined was the opposition that only about 1,200 African American voters were registered that summer – at a cost of four murdered civil rights workers and thirty-seven churches bombed or burned.

The murders strengthened the resolve of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which had been founded during “Freedom Summer.” Banned from the “whites only” Mississippi Democrat Party, MFDP leaders were determined to attend the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, as the legitimate representatives of their state. Inspired by Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper turned civil rights activist, the MFDP challenged the most powerful figures in the Democrat party, including President Johnson, the presidential nominee of the Democrats. Hamer asked bluntly, “Is this America?” When party officials seated the white Mississippi delegation and refused to recognize the MFDP, civil rights activists left, convinced that the Democrat party would not change. Demoralized, Robert Moses told reporters, “I will have nothing to do with the political system any longer.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, however, did not share the skepticism of Robert Moses. They believed that another confrontation with Southern injustice could provoke further congressional action. Early in 1965, King announced a drive to enroll the 3 million blacks in the South who had not registered to vote. In March 1965, James Bevel of the SCLC called for a march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital, Montgomery, to protest the murder of a voting rights activist. In Selma, the focus at the outset, King found in Jim Clark, Jr., sheriff of Dallas County, a perfect foil. On March 7, six hundred civil rights marchers left Selma, the county seat, for the 50-mile journey to Montgomery. King was not present in this march. As they began to cross over the Edmund Pettis Bridge, the protesters encountered Clark’s officers, state troopers, and a mounted posse, who attacked them with tear gas and clubs. Over sixty protesters were hospitalized. The scene was shown on national television by ABC that night, and the day became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Up to that time, this event was the clearest demonstration of the effectiveness of the dramatic potential of King’s non-violent strategy. A federal judge agreed to allow the march to continue, and President Johnson provided protection with National Guardsmen and army military police. By March 25, when the demonstrators reached Montgomery, about 35,000 people had joined them, and King delivered a rousing address from the steps of the state capitol.

Several days before the march Johnson had gone before Congress with a moving plea that reached its climax when he slowly intoned the words of the movement’s hymn: “And we shall overcome.” After the march the President returned to Congress and called the episode in Selma “an American tragedy.”

The resulting Voting Rights Act, which passed both houses of Congress with significant and crucial bi-partisan support on August 6, 1965, guaranteed all citizens the right to vote, rejected the old case-by-case procedures, and authorized the U.S. attorney general to dispatch federal examiners to register voters. In states or counties where fewer than half the adults had voted in 1964, this law suspended literacy tests and other devices commonly used to defraud citizens of the vote. Together with the 24th Amendment, ratified in 1964, which outlawed the poll tax in federal elections, the Voting Rights Act produced stunning results in the South. These laws enabled millions of African Americans to vote for the first time since the Reconstruction era ended in 1877.

By the end of 1965 almost 250,000 African Americans were newly registered. In 1960, only 20% of blacks had been registered to vote. By 1971 registration reached 62%. Moreover, across the nation the number of African American officials began to climb, quadrupling from 1,400 to 4,900 between 1970 and 1980 and then doubling again by the early 1990s. Most of those elected held local offices – from sheriff to county commissioner. Nonetheless, they embodied a shift in political representation nearly unimaginable a generation earlier. Hartman Turnbow, a Mississippi farmer, who risked his life to register in 1964, later declared, “It won’t never go back where it was.”

Something else would never go back either – the liberal New Deal coalition. By the second half of the 1960s, the liberal wing of the Democrat party had won its battle with the conservative, segregationist wing. Democrats had embraced the civil rights movement and made African American equality a cornerstone of a new “rights” liberalism. Over the next generation between the 1960s and the 1980s, Southern whites and many conservative Northern whites responded by switching to the Republican Party. The New Deal coalition – which had joined working-class whites, African Americans from the North, urban professionals, and white Southern segregationists in a fragile political alliance since the 1930s – was beginning to crumble.