

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #9

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 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 in 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.

The black community 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 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 feet 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.**