

★★★ CHAPTER 14: ★★★

Let Freedom Ring

Slavery ended in America with the Civil War. But racist local governments (and a generally racist American population) worked hard during Reconstruction to prevent blacks from achieving real freedom, let alone any kind of equality.

In 1896 the Supreme Court decision in **Plessy v. Ferguson** made

“separate but equal” the law of the land, and soon the South passed hundreds of local **Jim Crow** laws to keep blacks out of white restaurants, factories, train cars, and schools. Jim Crow laws also kept blacks away from the ballot through ballot taxes, literacy requirements, and violent intimidation. Lynching, usually on the pretext that a black man had raped a white woman (one of the biggest Southern fears) occurred throughout the South. As **Billie Holiday** would sing in her 1940's hit “**Strange Fruit**,” “black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

For African-Americans, freedom was a dream deferred. It took a large number of people willing to fight for their rights to change the racist status quo in America.

Martin Luther King



Let Freedom Ring

LYRICS

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out

the true meaning of its creed:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. I have a dream . . .

It would take a nation of millions to hold us back.

Brown v. Board opened some doors.

Back then they called all blacks

Negroes,

we kick it off the top sort of like cerebrals.

Separate isn't equal, when in practice.

My school's a shack. *Mine is a palace!*

Do I have to sit in the back of the bus?

That's wackness.

Second-class citizen on account of my blackness.

They say to change the world, you've got to take a stand.

Rosa Parks took a seat, changed the face of the land.

Martin had a plan that even if you want to change the world

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Brown v. Board opened some doors . . .

The first big victory for Civil Rights came in 1954 when the Supreme Court decided that “separate but equal” in schools was unconstitutional. The case was

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.

Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in the unanimous decision that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” because the system “generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect [the minority students’] hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”

In overturning Plessy v. Ferguson, the court had made a bold statement against racial discrimination. Most Southern states balked at the decision and changed nothing. Resistance was so aggressive in Little Rock, Arkansas, that Eisenhower sent federal troops to force the schools to desegregate in 1957.

Separate isn't equal, when in practice . . .

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that even when the schools were physically identical, separation causes inequality. But the schools for whites and the schools for blacks (or “coloreds” as they were called) were very rarely identical. White schools often received ten times the funding that black schools received.

Rosa Parks took a seat, changed the face of the land . . .

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision didn't end segregation in the South. It just ended segregation in schools. Blacks still had to drink from separate water fountains, go to different movie theaters, go to different restaurants, and

sit in the back of buses and give up their seats when white people got on.

On a December day in 1955, a forty-three-year-old seamstress named Rosa Parks boarded a bus after a long day at work in

Montgomery, Alabama. Parks looked for a seat in the “colored” section at the back of the bus. Not finding one, she took a seat in the middle. When a group of white people got on the bus, the operator yelled out “niggers move back,” but Parks didn’t move.

Parks was quickly arrested and within hours the African-American community in Montgomery was uniting. They were led by the young minister at Rosa Parks’s church, twenty-seven-year-old **Martin Luther King Jr.** King organized a powerful and effective **bus boycott** in Montgomery. In 1956 the Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s decision outlawing segregation on buses.

Inspired by the people like Thoreau and Gandhi . . .

King believed that the best way to bring about equality was through nonviolent civil disobedience. King was inspired by **Henry David Thoreau**, who had written about the moral obligation to break immoral laws and had refused to pay taxes for the Mexican-American War. King was also inspired by **Mahatma Gandhi**, who had led India in a tremendously successful, nonviolent overthrow of British colonial rule.

King was a religious man who believed deeply in the Christian teachings of hope, forgiveness, love, and acceptance. These ideals directly influenced his strategies for achieving civil rights.

A pacifist in the war without an army . . .

Martin Luther King might not have had an army, but he did have followers. In 1957 he went to

Atlanta to form the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**, which organized sit-ins at businesses that discriminated against blacks.

MLK had a dream, took it mainstream . . .

By advocating nonviolence and tolerance, King was able to sell his message to blacks and whites alike. Unlike more radical civil rights leaders like Malcolm X, King met with presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson to discuss policy. Before the **March on Washington** in 1963, when King delivered his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, President Kennedy spoke with King and told him to make sure the tone of the march wasn’t too violent, otherwise Congress might not pass the Civil Rights Act.

Civil Rights Bill, Voting Rights Act, they passed . . .

The powerful March on Washington drew 250,000 civil rights supporters to the Capitol’s steps, but Republicans in Congress still refused to pass a civil rights bill. After Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson became president and outlined a **Great Society** program for America, part of which was to achieve racial equality. Johnson pushed the **Civil Rights Act**, which outlawed racial discrimination in public facilities, through Congress in 1964. This was the same year that Dr. King was awarded the **Nobel Peace Prize**. A year later Congress passed the **Voting Rights Act**, which encouraged black enfranchisement and protected black voters. It was a major victory for civil rights.

Malcolm picked up X and dropped his slave name . . .

Not everyone was happy with King’s **Soul Power** movement, though. Some African-Americans felt that King’s nonviolent, turn-the-

Let Freedom Ring LYRICS.

continued

that don’t mean you’ve got to kill another man.

Inspired by the people like **Thoreau** and **Gandhi**,

a **pacifist** in the war without an army. ‘Cause they can’t harm me, no matter how the end seems.

I wonder if Mr. King is still having dreams . . .

Let freedom ring . . .

I have a dream . . .

This must become true.

So let freedom ring . . .

MLK had a dream, took it mainstream.

Civil Rights Bill, Voting Rights Act, they passed.

A modern-day Jesus, turning the other cheek,

some blacks like “dawg, that’s weak.”

I’m not looking to get beat deep into next week,

“my everyday life is police brutality.”

Malcolm picked up X and dropped his slave name,

radical change, “defense by any means.”

Went on hajj to **Mecca**, said “let God protect ya.

Whites and blacks, yeah, we’re in this together.”

But there are **race riots**, people are dying,

other-cheek mentality was too weak to effectively deal with racial discrimination and violence. One of the first leaders of this **Black Power** movement was Malcolm X.

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm escaped a fire set to his house by white men when he was four. Later in Boston, he was arrested for burglary. While in jail he decided to drop his “slave name” and adopted “X” instead, arguing that his true, African last name had been lost on the slave ships.

He soon became the most prominent minister for the **Nation of Islam**, a religious and political institution under the leadership of **Elijah Muhammad**.

Radical change, “defense by any means” . . .

Malcolm X believed that blacks could only achieve equality and freedom through radical change. He called Martin Luther King’s March on Washington a “Farce on Washington.”

He also famously said, “We declare our right on this earth. . . to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence *by any means necessary*.”

Went on hajj to Mecca, said “let God protect ya. Whites and blacks, yeah, we’re in this together” . . .

In 1964 Malcolm broke with the Nation of Islam. A few months later he took a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, a religious journey known as the **hajj**. In Mecca he experienced a kind of spiritual rebirth that caused him to reconsider many of his views toward white people. He came back to the United States with a much softer message, still advocating for civil rights, but offering a more conciliatory view toward whites.

★ PERSPECTIVES ★

Unfortunately, Malcolm X, JFK, and MLK weren't the only prominent Americans to be assassinated during the 1960s.

- Medgar Evers, an African-American civil rights activist from Mississippi was assassinated by a white racist in 1963.
- Robert Kennedy was one of John F. Kennedy's two younger brothers (Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy is the other). He served as the attorney general during his brother's administration and used his position to fight corruption, racism, and organized crime. After JFK's assassination, Robert became a senator from New York and began voicing his opposition to the Vietnam War. He decided to run for president in 1968, and many Democrats were ecstatic about electing him. But just after the California primary, and just two months after the death of King, Robert Kennedy was shot and killed. The killer, Sirhan B. Sirhan, claimed he had killed him because Kennedy had supported Israel's Six-Day War.

But there are race riots, people are dying, warfare in Watts . . .

Meanwhile blood was being spilled all over the country. In 1963 a Birmingham church was bombed, killing three African-American girls. Three civil rights advocates were murdered in

Mississippi in 1964 (*Mississippi Burning*). In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated.

It was in the summer of 1965 when a white police officer pulled over a young black driver to check him for drunk driving. This was in **Watts**, an all-black, run-down neighborhood in Los Angeles. The officer arrested the young man, but a crowd had gathered. By the time the officer called for backup, the crowd had grown larger and angrier. They began hurtling rocks and bottles at the officers. The next day, the hot Los Angeles sun brought no respite: the protest had grown into a full-scale riot with thousands of angry African-Americans marching through the streets with guns and Molotov cocktails. They set Watts on fire.

Thousands of national guardsmen were called in, and a battle raged for six days. The riot killed thirty-four people, injured more than 1,000, and caused \$50 to \$100 million in damage. The following hot summers brought more race riots, most notably in Detroit, Michigan, and Newark, New Jersey.

So JFK? He got assassinated . . .

The sixties were an amazingly turbulent time in America. While civil rights battles were being fought in legislatures and on the streets, a series of presidents, fearful of Soviet domination, brought the nation further and further into a war in Vietnam, a small country on the other side of the world. America was then rocked by the assassinations of many important figures (and heroes to many) within the course of just a few years.

John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. He had gone to Texas to drum up support for his reelection campaign and was traveling in a parade route through Dallas when he was shot by **Lee Harvey Oswald** from the sixth story of a nearby building. A tremendous amount of controversy

Would You Drop It? LYRICS.

continued

warfare in **Watts**, tear gas, bullets are flying.

So **JFK?**

He got assassinated.

MLK?

He got assassinated.

Malcolm X?

He got assassinated.

So it's up to us to keep that dream alive . . .

Let freedom ring . . .

I have a dream . . .

This must become true

So let freedom ring . . .

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom,

by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

surrounds Kennedy's assassination, with conspiracy theorists arguing that the government's official story (that Oswald acted alone) doesn't make sense. Oswald himself couldn't be questioned because he was shot and killed two days later by an angry nightclub owner, Jack Ruby.

The charismatic president who had captured America's heart was dead.

MLK? He got assassinated . . .

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. He was shot and killed while speaking on a balcony at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was killed by James Earl Ray, a white racist.

The country fell into chaos. In more than one hundred cities, blacks took to the streets in anger. The riots led to forty-six deaths and 27,000 arrests. The immediate and lasting effects of the death of Martin Luther King on America are impossible to quantify.

Malcolm X? He got assassinated . . .

Malcolm X was shot and killed in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on February 21, 1965. Unlike JFK and MLK, Malcolm was living in a state of panic. Two weeks earlier, his house had been firebombed. The men arrested for his death were three members of the Nation of Islam, though the truth behind the assassination (as with many others) remains mysterious.

AMERICA SPEAKS

“I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

—Martin Luther King, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize (1964)