

Indirect action: The Century and civil rights

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

During the early 1950s, the *Century's* editors could hardly be classified as strategists in the war for civil rights, but they tried their hand at analysis and expressed sympathetic support for both the commanders and the ground troops. As Supreme Court decisions moved toward desegregation, editors urged "Christian forces" to assume their responsibility in assuring a peaceful transition toward compliance. They noted that "the court wisely postponed" any directive as to how and when segregation must be completely ended in the southern states. Editors conjectured that this postponement would give Christian forces in the south an "opportunity to calm any storm which may blow, and to lead toward acceptance and implementation of the court's verdict" (May 26, 1954). They were optimistic that southern leaders would ensure a calm reception of the desegregation order (June 2, 1954).

The *Century* supported the proposal made by Tennessee officials that "integration be started in the first grade and move gradually, a year at a time, through the upper grades" (September 1, 1954). Editors also believed in educational programs, church activities, and the law's power to effect change. They expressed the conviction that "the silent public opinion of the South has already marked off segregation as a doomed and dying social arrangement" (June 2, 1954). Therefore, editors counseled patience. "To plead for time for white Americans' education and conversion is at the same time to ask Negro Americans for more patience with the insufferable . . . Yet it is the stitch in time that saves nine. . . . And consistency is a small sacrifice if it avoid fresh rents, if it speed a whole fabric" (February 26, 1958). Before long, they realized just how naïve such sentiments were.

The *Century* moved toward a more insistent posture in the wake of the nonviolent resistance in Montgomery during most of 1956. An editorial in January 1957 hypothesized that the Christian influence in those demonstrations "may in the long run be seen to constitute the most important Christian achievement of 1956 in this country" (January 9, 1957). The next week, the editors issued a call to church leaders to become more active in supporting the court's decisions (January 16, 1957).

A few months after Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat in the “white” section of the bus, editor Harold Fey traveled to Nashville, Jackson and Tuscaloosa, where he encountered firsthand the emerging White Citizens Councils, and then reached Montgomery, where he provided an account of the bus boycott for *Century* readers. Fey met and prayed with a few of the leaders, including Martin Luther King and Ralph D. Abernathy (“quite, cultured Christian leaders”) shortly before their arrests (March 7, 1956). This reference to King marked the first time his name appeared in *Century* pages. King contributed a couple of essays the next year (February 6 and June 5, 1957). In 1958, Fey proudly announced his appointment as an editor-at-large, and a few of King’s essays appeared annually. In 1960, King wrote for the “How My Mind has Changed” series (April 13, 1960). Later, the *Century* had the distinction of offering the first national publication of King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in its entirety (June 12, 1963). In these ways, the *Century* promoted King’s role as a teacher of the whole church. (By way of contrast, *Christianity Today* did not even mention King by name until early 1964, when two sentences announced he had been named *Time’s* “Man of the Year.”)

“Race relations” as a category in the magazine’s indexes grew larger and larger. From 1963 to 1965, it contained more entries than any other subject, rivaled only in 1965 by “Catholicism.” Profoundly moved by the wisdom of nonviolent resistance, editors reported on, analyzed and theologized about all the events of these years, from Montgomery to Little Rock to the sit-ins to the freedom riders, with considerable interest and always accompanied by profound expressions of respect and human sympathy.

By 1963 calls for patience had disappeared from the *Century*. Instead, editorials asked “How long, O Lord, how long!” (March 20, 1963). Events in Birmingham, and the imminent threat of violence associated with them, appear to have acted as a turning point. A court injunction had tried to end peaceful demonstrations there. Editors supported King’s decision to ignore the court order (April 24, 1963) and chastised Billy Graham for advising King “to put the brakes on a little bit”(May 8, 1963). But they also objected when King decided to use children on the frontlines of the march (May 22, 1963). King’s use of children actually helped create the atmosphere that made possible a tangible agreement with city officials.

Century editors feared the eruption of black violence in response to the intransigence and stupidity represented in the actions of Birmingham’s Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. Some of their increasing impatience also grew

from fears that the Black Muslim extremists, and other blacks who felt differently than King, might gain the upper hand if solutions to the crisis were not forthcoming (April 24, 1963; April 1, 1964). White liberals felt a new sense of urgency to get things done in order to avoid the growing potential for violent actions. Whether the issue was civil rights, Vietnam or urban renewal, the *Century* always feared the activities of the radical element, and abhorred the use of violence to gain power in public life.

Fey participated in, and wrote about, the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in the summer of 1964 buoyed the *Century's* optimism that the goals of the movement might finally be achievable (June 24, 1964). Editors endorsed King for the Nobel Peace Prize and celebrated when he received it (October 28, 1964). Dean Peerman and Martin E. Marty made their way to Selma in March of 1965, joined by some 400 other white clergy, to march with King on behalf of voting rights. Kyle Haselden, who became editor when Fey retired in September 1964, had spent years of active advocacy on civil rights matters. When Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the *Century* concluded the battle for civil rights had finally been won. "The war is over," declared a lead editorial; "the sooner the south accepts this fact and loses itself in the nation the better for it and for the nation" (April 21, 1965).

Then came the summer of 1965. Watts and other riots turned optimism to pessimism once again. As the struggle for civil rights moved to the North, from a skirmish for liberty to a full-scale conflict seeking equality and self-sufficiency, the *Century* found itself bewildered. By 1966, the editors divided good black organizations from bad black organizations. Mainstream Protestants assessed emerging diversity within black life by whether or not what it had to offer was compatible with American life as they hoped it would be.

The *Century* supported the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the NAACP and the Urban League, but warned against the "personal empire-building" of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (July 20, 1966). Editorials rarely revealed an appreciation for, or understanding of, the contribution of the black power movement to the ultimate success of the civil rights movement. Generally, it took outside authors to note that articulate "Negroes" like James Baldwin, Dick Gregory and James Foreman "do not share every value of white bourgeois culture," and that black power must be seen as "a reaction to inaction"

rather than “reverse racism or some ugly form of nationalism” (C. Lawson Crowe, November 4, 1964, and Margaret Halsey, December 28, 1966).

Showing perhaps too much confidence in nonviolence, education, legislation and litigation as the only appropriate means to eliminate cultural prejudice, the editors never wavered in their support for civil rights in general. They spoke frankly on the issue and usually girded their comments with both theological concern and some measure of action. But editors were not sure what to do when the term “black” became, as a *Century* editorial phrased it at the time, “the ‘in’ word among many Negroes, a symbol of their new deepening negritude” (October 25, 1967). The civil rights movement’s national cohesiveness seemed to die with King in 1968.

Demonstration tactics no longer seemed to work. The word “charisma” so rightfully used to describe King now “applied to men who exercise theirs negatively, and call for destruction and revenge.”

The editors recognized that new tactics were needed, but they had no idea what would serve the need. About all they could do was reach into their hearts and acknowledge the whole people’s need for repentance, “even though only symbolic persons enact their crimes” (April 17, 1968).

Editorials anguished over Protestantism’s defection from the cities and deplored the expansion of “racial ghettos.” They urged Protestantism to develop “an inner city program consistent with its gospel” (April 3, 1963). The pro and con arguments related to urban renewal found regular expression in *Century* pages during these years, demonstrating that the mainstream had some difficulty determining what to think about these government-funded programs. Editors supported urban renewal, but lamented the presence of governmental “red tape” and criticized those who saw a way to make a quick dollar at the expense of the poor. Observers like Fey felt urban renewal represented the best hope for the “frightened, disadvantaged people” in the cities, but they possessed a limited vision for how it might be accomplished. They depicted leaders like Saul Alinsky as the enemy. Through the Industrial Areas Foundation, Alinsky organized uneducated urban dwellers in order to give them a voice in their own affairs. Once organized, these impoverished people sought self-serving power, often through questionable means. Fey and others reasoned that these power-seekers were unable to see what was good for them (February 12, 1964).

Though these editors were largely unable to understand the perspectives of the blacks in the inner cities, they did seek to address the racism that affected them. They recognized the terrible truth that racism still prevailed. Even a traditionally liberal enterprise like labor had failed to address the issue. By the late '60s, labor had "made it" and, as a result, had no real desire to disrupt its own enjoyment of things as they were. The *Century's* recognition in 1968 that labor unions were no longer "dependable partners in a liberal coalition" indicates that powerful changes in labor and society had not escaped editorial notice (October 2, 1968).

The earlier optimism among liberals gave way, but left in its wake a deeper appreciation for the depth of the sin, and of their own involvement in it. This realization helped them to focus attention on problems closer to home. Millions of blacks had moved into the cities, where Catholics met their needs better than Protestants, who had spent the latter portion of the decade leaving the cities for the suburbs. Black power soon turned into black theology, a distinctive and mature voice all its own, and confronted Protestants with new challenges deserving of response. Protestant energy over the next decade had to be spent attempting to deal with problems related to racism in church life; to mainstream white leaders, at least, that problem seemed more immediately approachable than the problem of racism in society as a whole.