



1994

What Does It Take?

Joshua Yount '95

Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

Recommended Citation

Yount '95, Joshua (1994) "What Does It Take?," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol7/iss1/5>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

What Does It Take?

Joshua Yount

How many years must a mountain exist, before it is washed to the sea?

How many years can some people exist, before they're allowed to be free?

How many times can a man turn his head, and pretend he just doesn't see?

(R. Zimmerman)

In the ten years between the Baton Rouge bus boycotts and the march on Washington victories were won and losses were recorded, but throughout the difficult struggle each battle strengthened succeeding movement centers by teaching important lessons, necessary to wash the mountain of segregation to the sea. The first and most subtle lesson passed on by the early movement was their absolute rejection of inferiority, which in turn registered in the collective and individual psyches of black Americans. In addition, the discovery and dissemination of the specific methods and conditions essential for blacks to gain the freedom they desperately sought provided later organizers with the second and most important lesson the early movement centers had to offer. Armed with ever increasing confidence that they would be free and knowledge of what is would achieve that goal, blacks struggled forward, assured that ain't nobody gonna turn them 'round.

Perhaps the most debilitating aspect of segregation and the "tripartite system of domination" that maintained it was the personal oppression of blacks. Furthering the denial of "... human dignity and self respect" (Morris 2), inherent in segregation was its long history of institutionalization. Psychological effects springing from 350 years of this racist ideology are, "the rationalization that is necessary in order that the oppressed and oppressor may live with a system of slavery and human abasement" (Levy 68). Early on local movement centers learned that before any advances could be made against the political and economic forces that held segregation in place, a change in thinking needed to occur amongst blacks, both as individuals and collectively as a race.

Recognition that segregation meant that "each time [a Negro] uses a "colored" facility, he testifies to his own inferiority . . ." (Levy 68) was the first step necessary to psychological change. Many blacks recognized their position, but were unable to take the important second step, changing their position. Bernice Reagan spoke of her situation, "... I struggled within a certain context but recognized lines. across those lines were the powers that could do you in, so you just respected them

and don't cross them" (Levy 99). the second step was dramatic for blacks, involving a completely altered sense of self; no longer a "boy", but a man; no longer an accepter of back door meals, but a demander of front door service, and by whites no less. "[Robert Moses] found on [the Greensboro protesters'] faces a certain look—'sullen, angry, determined'— that was light years away from the 'defensive, cringing' expression that had marked the Southern Negro" (Weisbrot 19). dignity courage, and the refusal to accept injustice characterized blacks with this new mindset. Without this psychological change many attempts by early movements to marshal the masses would have been impossible. fortunately for civil rights leaders, just as the courage of the four freshman at North Carolina A&T sparked sit-ins across the South, psychological change fed on itself. More and more blacks began to throw off the psychological chains of segregation after seeing their brothers and sister do the same. Now the collective psyche of the black American began to change, to one where ninety-nine and a half percent wouldn't do and risking everything wasn't too much. Reverend Billups articulated this feeling, "Turn on your water hoses, turn loose your dogs, we will stand here till we die'" (Morris 268). the attitude of these protesters, so different from the acquiescent old man who lined the hat before he tried it on, represents how essential it was to have learned that a psychological change needs to occur before oppressed people will resist their oppressors.

Beyond psychological change, early movements taught the black community about pragmatic methods and conditions that enabled later movements to defeat the tripartite system of domination. The methods and conditions fall into five categories: enthusiasm, organization, specific methods, widespread attention, and outside support. the first of these is the least concrete, but the most integral in fostering the mindset of the determined black. Generating enthusiasm was a n essential lesson taught early in the movement in places like Baton Rouge and Montgomery. Two devices served that purpose, the charismatic leader, and the mass meeting. Leaders such as T.J. jemison, Martin Luther King, and Fred Shuttlesworth, aided by their independence from the white power structure, needed to "... personify, symbolize, and articulate the goals aspirations, and strivings of the group..." and be "... able to instill in the people a sense of mission and commitment to social change" (Morris 5-6). charismatic leadership was not enough though, the people needed to have a sense of ownership that had been lacking in previous movements led by organizations like the NAACP. The mess meeting provided this essential element. It enabled the charismatic leader to articulate the movement's goals directly to the people, who through singing freedom songs and discovering their own power were invigorated to a point where they felt a sense of the zeitgeist. when

combined with the faith of the church culture, charismatic leadership and mass meetings engendered the hope and enthusiasm that fueled the fires of protest.

The second category of conditions and methods is also deeply rooted in the church culture. the development of a strong organizational base, similar to that of the church, served the essential function of channeling the enthusiasm of the masses. This lesson was first taught by the UDL in Baton Rouge, but the specifics continued to be refined over the following ten years. Three essential organizational characteristics existed: unity, planning, and a mass base. Unity was fundamental in attempting a mass movement because fissures within the community would over time make a collective action impossible and prove to be distracting. This was recognized by the early movement centers in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, and Tallahassee who each formed an organization of organizations, headed by a leader not previously identified with community divisions, and which met at various sites around town so as to pre-empt any resentment and maintain wide support. A contrast of the Albany and Birmingham protests clearly shows the necessity of cooperation. One of the Albany movement's major flaws was the rivalry that formed between the younger, initial movement organizers, SNCC, and the better known, late comers, SCLC. To SNCC it seemed that SCLC was usurping their position, and thus they became resentful of SCLC's tactics and leaders. The divisiveness this produced contributed to the movement's failure, but SCLC learned the important part unity play in success. they applied this lesson in Birmingham by working closely with Fred Shuttlesworth's ACMHR, the pre-existing movement organization, and hiring James Bevel away from SNCC to internalize the power of the youth SNCC had learned to harness. The unity of the Birmingham movement in many ways was responsible for the successful attack on the city's power structure. the Albany- Birmingham contrast also sheds light on the important role planning plays in engineering victory. IN Albany, when the leaders went to jail they "left no instructions, . . . left nobody in charge, . . . had no plans" (Morris 249). Even SNCC was under prepared in Albany. Charles Sherrod said "We just started stomping around and waiting for someone to scream" (Eyes on the Prize). Contrasting that with the elaborate information gathering and site selections of SCLC's Wyatt Walkerm, who counted seats, entrances, exits, and found the best targets in Birmingham before any protests began, evidences how necessary planning is in a successful protest. Another aspect of planning was financing. The lesson that no organization can run on enthusiasm alone was proven most conclusively in Montgomery, when the MIA's collection efforts were so ample that it was possible for the largely carless black community to stay off the buses indefinitely if necessary.

Likewise without money to bail protesters out of jail or support various boycotts, many movements wouldn't have gotten out of the church door. The third essential organizational characteristic presupposes the other two, because without the mass base, no amount of unity and planning will bring success. the fact that the local mass movements of the late fifties accomplished more in real terms in breaking down Jim Crow in five years than the NAACP did in the previous fifty years is the most convincing evidence that having a mass base is an important lesson about successful organization. A mass base is superior for two reasons. First, there is no way Southerners to claim " the outside agitator is riling up our niggers". Second, mass based movements are local, thus are more responsive t local needs and situations. Movements that had learned the necessity of unity, planning, and a mass base were guaranteed that the right ingredients existed for a successful fight against segregation.

having the ingredients was not enough though, it was also essential to learn what the best specific methods were for employing those ingredients. Emerging from the first ten years of the modern civil rights movement were three complimentary methods: nonviolence, direct action, and goal achievement. The importance of nonviolence was twofold. On one hand, because success was defined as the "beloved community" in which peace and justice reigned, nonviolence insured that means and ends were consistent. How can violence bring about peace? On the other hand nonviolence also made it possible of segregation to continue to be a moral issue as long as protesters stayed above the fray. to compliment this peaceful tactic, direct action was used to force the situation. Direct action stressed one thing, confrontation, challenging unjust laws by systematically breaking them. This dimension, added by the sit-ins, changed nonviolent protests lie Montgomery, which represented a black withdrawal from society, into protests like the freedom rides, which represented a forceful, yet nonviolent entrance into society. the third essential method, goal achievement, is the most overlooked, and probably the most important to success. By the time of the Birmingham movement, three aspects of goal achievement had been learned b the black community. First, goals had to be set and they had to be specific. this provided leaders with something concrete to point at and say, "this is what we want". It also focused demonstrations and demonstrators on specific targets. When blacks wanted lunch counters desegregated they would sit-in at them, and when blacks wanted fair hiring practices they would picket stores and /or boycott them. the first aspect led to the second, negotiations, where the specific demands were given to the white power structure and attempts were made to work out a solution. Negotiating was essential because it let both sides look for common ground. The final

aspect, the splitting of power elites, most often caused the collapse of segregation. Protesters attempted to divide and conquer the political, economic, and individual elites by appealing to each's weakness. For politicians, blacks pointed to the support they could give or the disruption they could cause. For business men, blacks bargained with their spending power. for individuals, blacks appealed to justice, and American ideals. the Birmingham protests applied all the goal achievement aspects, publishing a specific list of goals, negotiating with the power structure, and through boycott splitting off the economic elites, and thus were able to break the segregationist stranglehold on Birmingham. Incorporating nonviolent direct action and goal achievement enabled civil rights leaders to successfully fight the oppressive segregation prevalent in America.

The fourth category of methods and conditions learned by early movement leaders, was without attention from the media, the outside black and white communities, and nations around the world, segregation and attempts to overcome it could be hidden and would be forgotten. Martin Luther King eloquently described the method in his "letter from Birmingham Jail". "We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that s already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. . . [I]njustice must be exposed. . . to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured:" (Weisbrot 70). King touches on two important aspects of attention, human conscience and national opinion. Dramatizing segregationist brutality marshaled both of these powers behind the black community. Emmet Till's open casket funeral and the police of dog attack on Birmingham's black children are prime examples of this method. another sign of the importance of attention was the number of movements that asked Dr. King to take part because of the attention he brought. In addition, the media brought not only national, but also international attention to the civil rights movement. this attention compelled previously indifferent people, black and white, to step forward, whether out of indignation that this could happen, or embarrassment that American image was being tarnished. In turn the ranks of civil rights volunteers swelled and members of the power structure acted to re-establish America as the bastion of liberty, either way attention proved to be a valuable asset for the civil rights movement.

Closely related to the attention necessary for success, is the fifth category, the outside support that was generated. This support from outside the black community fell into two categories. first, white liberal support from the likes of Virginia Durr, and the many volunteers that joined blacks in protests like the freedom rides provided blacks with hope that white America could accept them and also served as a bridge

to white leaders. In addition whites contributed money that helped keep protest alive. Still the most essential outside support came from the federal government. Without the Supreme Court and two administrations supporting their rights, at least from time to time, the 1950s could have been the 1890's. the evidence to support this is crystal clear. When Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy went in the army to desegregate schools in Arkansas and Mississippi, federal intervention ended state refusals to recognize the law. Coretta Scott King articulated the situation perfectly when she told how prior to Albany, her husband had always been able to fall back on the federal government when he broke unjust local laws, but when the federal injunction against protesting in Albany was handed down, Dr. King had nothing, and the movement fell apart. Likewise when President Kennedy gave Mississippi a free hand in 'arresting freedom riders, that movement suffered a devastating setback. Outside support of the civil rights movement was learned to be a necessary element without which even the perfect organization could wilt before the heat of Southern injustice.

In many cases, the important contribution of early movement centers was not the limited victories that were won, but instead the fact that they had proven that certain attitudes, methods, and conditions were essential in achieving success. Baton Rouge began a learning process that continued through the Birmingham protest, which exemplified the black community's accumulated knowledge of how to work toward the "beloved community" they sought. The "beloved community" did not come about in 1963, but the lessons the black community had learned provided them with the tools to break the chains of oppression that had held them in the prisons of despair.