CHAPTER 29

AFFLUENCE AND ANXIETY

SUMMARY
In postwar America, new affluence replaced the poverty and hunger of the Great Depression, and people flocked to suburbs like Levittown to escape the city and to raise their growing families. International events and the possibility of nuclear war contributed to increasing feelings of anxiety among the populace. The 1950s also saw the beginning of African Americans’ push for equality in the face of the nation’s growing affluence.

THE POSTWAR BOOM
An intensified demand for consumer goods and heavy government spending stimulated economic growth from the late 1940s through the 1950s. Although the rate of economic growth slowed in the second half of the 1950s, most Americans had far more real income during this era than ever before.

Postwar Prosperity
By 1950 production caught up with demand and the gross national product reached a point 50 percent higher than in 1940. The baby boom and expanding suburbia stimulated consumerism as fear of another depression dissipated. In the American workplace, higher pay and shorter hours remained as permanent standards. Slowdowns in economic growth occurred in the second half of the decade and older manufacturing regions like New England suffered a degree of decline, but the expansion of the Cold War and the growth of the military-industrial complex in the South and West provided sufficient economic stimuli to make the American standard of living the highest in the world.

Life in the Suburbs
The newly affluent postwar generation shed their identities to live in look-alike homes and embrace the new culture of the suburbs. Life in these communities depended on the automobile as people commuted to work and school and shopped in shopping centers and malls that popped up across the country. The home and nuclear family became the focus of American activity and aspiration as homemaking and child rearing became primary vocations for suburban women. Nonetheless, the number of wives working outside of the home doubled between 1940 and 1960 as women strove to contribute necessary funds to the maintenance of the suburban household.

The Good Life?
Despite an abundance of material goods and increased leisure time, many Americans questioned the quality of their lives.

Areas of Greatest Growth
One of the institutions that flourished in the postwar years was organized religion as Americans became divided into three segments—Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. The tremendous increase in the number of school-aged children created enormous growth and
an overwhelming strain on local school districts. The number of young adults attending college increased precipitously. The greatest growth came in the medium of television, which became the most popular entertainment source. Though at first it was a source of artistic innovation, it quickly became a safe conveyor of the consumer culture.

**Critics of the Consumer Society**
With affluence and prosperity came an abundance of introspection and self-criticism. Critics like David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Jack Kerouac found fault with the blandness, conformity, corporate dehumanization, and loss of individuality of the 1950s. The disenchantment with consumer culture was epitomized by the emergence of the beats in literary circles and abstract expressionism in art.

**The Reaction to Sputnik**
The Soviet launching of an orbiting satellite caused panic among Americans in 1957 and heightened concern and self-assessment that the nation had lost its unquestioned supremacy in the world. The nation reacted by renewing its commitment to national greatness, as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was established and the National Defense Education Act was instituted.

**Farewell to Reform**
Growing affluence removed the urgency for social and economic change.

**Truman and the Fair Deal**
In the wake of his 1948 electoral victory, President Truman tried to push for too many reforms too soon. Although he failed to get congressional and public support for the “Fair Deal,” Truman’s spirited efforts did prevent Republicans from repealing New Deal social legislation.

**Eisenhower’s Modern Republicanism**
When Dwight Eisenhower was elected in 1952, moderation based upon fiscal conservatism, encouragement of private initiative, and reduction of federal programs became the theme. His administration’s legislative record (which consisted of extending Social Security benefits and creating the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) was relatively modest. One significant accomplishment, the Highway Act of 1956, created the modern interstate system. Continued prosperity allowed Americans to accept increasing governmental spending and larger federal deficits.

**The Struggle Over Civil Rights**
The Cold War helped to arouse the national conscience in favor of civil rights for African Americans. Although benefiting economically from World War II, Blacks continued to live in blighted neighborhoods and to be segregated from White society. The denunciation of Soviet human rights abuses while African Americans were kept in a state of second-class citizenship sparked calls for change.
Civil Rights as a Political Issue
Although President Truman had failed to push his civil rights package through Congress over southern opposition, he did succeed in adding civil rights to the liberal agenda. Additionally, he strengthened the civil rights division of the Justice Department, making legal attempts to challenge Jim Crow laws more likely to succeed. Most importantly, Truman desegregated the armed forces.

Desegregating the Schools
The Supreme Court took the lead in reversing the late nineteenth century’s “separate but equal” decisions. In Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, the Court ordered the nation’s public schools to admit African-American students for the first time. Though President Eisenhower sent troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the ruling, on the whole the lack of presidential support weakened the desegregation process. A permanent Commission for Civil Rights was established to protect voting rights, however. Though southern “massive resistance” made these efforts largely ineffective, the actions of the Supreme Court and Congress marked a turning point in national policy toward racial justice.

The Beginnings of Black Activism
More dynamic than the Supreme Court and Congress were the actions of African Americans themselves. In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a successful boycott against the city’s segregated bus system. Drawing from sources such as Gandhi, King developed the concept of passive resistance. In 1960 “sit-ins” and other direct but peaceful demonstrations led by SCLC and SNCC succeeded in desegregating many public facilities.

Conclusion: Restoring National Confidence
Though the 1950s ended with a national mood that was less troubled than when the decade began, the United States was neither as tranquil or confident as it could have been. Though Americans no longer feared a reoccurrence of the Great Depression, new fears emerged about the hollowness of the new abundance and the contradiction that American race relations posed for national promises of equality, democracy, and freedom.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After mastering this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Explain how Levittown was symptomatic of American conformity and consumerism of the postwar years.

2. Describe the problems of reconverting to a peacetime economy and the reasons for the surge of the economy after 1946.

3. Analyze the components of Truman’s Fair Deal and establish the reasons why most of his package was not enacted.

4. Using specific references, explain how Eisenhower’s administration marked an era of moderation and define “modern Republicanism” as developed during the Eisenhower administration.

5. Discuss the objectives, victories, and failures of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.

6. Summarize the contributions of Martin Luther King Jr. to the civil rights movement during the 1950s.

7. Explain the effects of suburban life on American families and American women in particular.

8. Explain the effects of suburban life on the landscape of the nation.

9. What was the baby boom and how did it impact the nation?

10. Determine why America said farewell to the New Deal spirit and the effect this had on Truman’s presidency.

11. Describe the critics that emerged to the consumer culture that dominated the nation.

12. Identify the reasons why the pace of desegregation of the schools was slow.
GLOSSARY

To build your social science vocabulary, familiarize yourself with the following terms:

1. **conformity** the tendency to correspond or behave alike. “They condemned the conformity, charging the newly affluent with forsaking traditional American individualism . . .”

2. **affluence** material abundance or comfort. “. . . the American people had achieved an affluence that finally erased the lingering memories of the Great Depression.”

3. **gross national product** the total sum of goods and services produced in a nation during a year. “. . . and the gross national product (GNP) reached $318 billion . . .”

4. **real income** income after accounting for inflation. “. . . the average American family had twice as much real income to spend . . .”

5. **disposable income** remaining income after taxes. “. . . per-capita disposable income rose by $500 . . .”

6. **feminism** organized movement for political, economic, and social equality for women. “The nuclear family, typical of the suburb, did nothing to encourage the development of feminism.”

7. **fiscal conservative** one who believes in minimal governmental interference with economic performance and limited government spending. “Ike was a fiscal conservative who was intent on balancing the budget.”

8. **desegregation** the process of removing the characteristics of segregation, that is, of integrating or assimilating. “The process of desegregating the schools proved to be agonizingly slow.”

9. **passive resistance** a posture or attitude of peaceful opposition or unwillingness to cooperate with authority. “Drawing on sources as diverse as Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau, King came out of the bus boycott with the concept of passive resistance.”

10. **disfranchised** having been deprived of the franchise, that is, the right to vote. “To register previously disfranchised citizens . . .”

11. **automation** technological system or apparatus that operates automatically “. . . industry installed electronic sensors and processors as it underwent extensive automation.”
12. neo-orthodoxy a movement after World War II that affirmed the absolute sovereignty of God and challenged liberal theology. “. . . the emergence of neo-orthodoxy in Protestant seminaries . . .”

13. suburbia the social customs of suburban life. “A number of widely read books explored the flaws in the new suburbia.”

14. sit-ins acts of protest involving remaining on the premises of an establishment that practices discrimination; a common practice during the civil rights movement. “Other students, both Whites and Blacks, joined in similar ‘sit-ins’ across the South . . .”

IDENTIFICATION

Briefly identify the meaning and significance of the following terms:

1. Levittown__________________________________________________________

2. baby boom______________________________________________________

3. Sputnik___________________________________________________________

4. Highway Act of 1956____________________________________________

5. Commission on Civil Rights_______________________________________


7. Martin Luther King Jr______________________________________________
A. Match the following figures involved in the early civil rights movement with the appropriate description:

_____1. Rosa Parks  
   a. NAACP lawyer who challenged the 1896 Supreme Court decision (*Plessy v. Ferguson*) that upheld separate but equal public facilities

_____2. Martin Luther King Jr.  
   b. Chief justice of the Supreme Court appointed by President Eisenhower who wrote the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* that declared that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal

_____3. Orville Faubus  
   c. Black seamstress who in 1955 challenged a city ordinance by refusing to give up her bus seat to a White person

_____4. Earl Warren  
   d. Governor of Arkansas who in 1957 called out the National Guard to prevent Black children from attending Little Rock’s Central High School

_____5. Thurgood Marshall  
   e. Led a massive protest against the jailing of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama
   
   f. Appointed a presidential commission on civil rights in 1946
B. Match the following writers with the appropriate description:

_____1. Jack Kerouac  a. bemoaned the “gimme kids” suburbia produced
_____2. C. Wright Mills  b. founded the “beats,” a literary group that rejected the materialistic 1950s
_____3. David Riesman  c. recognized the depersonalizing aspects of the office and targeted the corporation as the villain of modern America
_____4. John Keats  d. described suburban America as identical boxes inhabited by the Drones and Amiables
_____5. Katherine Gordon  e. said that the 1950s produced the “other-directed” consumer society, which lacked individuality and creativity
                f. condemned the racial hostility that the all-White suburbs created

COMPLETION

Answer the question or complete the statement by filling in the blanks with the correct word or words.

1. Levittown answered the postwar American desire to move to ________________, away from the central city.

2. In response to the launch of Sputnik and to compete with the Russians in the space race, Congress created the ________________________________.

3. Although most of his civil rights initiatives were thwarted, Truman was successful in ordering the desegregation of the ________________.

4. To restore tranquility to a divided nation, the Eisenhower administration had a theme of __________________________.

5. Some of the largest advances came in the new cultural medium of the ________________ which at first was artistically innovative but became a safe conveyor of consumer culture.

6. The highway trust fund created under the Highway Act of 1956 helped subsidize the __________________________.
7. The first action of the civil rights movement is typically noted to be the ________________________________.

8. The philosophy Martin Luther King Jr. borrowed from Gandhi and applied to the civil rights movement was ________________________________.

9. In the South, racial ___________________________ was enforced at all places of public entertainment.

10. Painter ___________________________ challenged Americans’ ideas about the form and function of art.

TRUE/FALSE

Mark the following statements either T (True) or F (False):

_______1. During the decade of the 1950s, population growth in the inner city kept pace with the growth of suburbia.

_______2. Togetherness became a key concept among suburban families in the 1950s.

_______3. With more men entering the work force after the war, the number of wives working outside the home decreased.

_______4. Eisenhower claimed that when it came to money he was liberal, and when it came to human beings he was conservative.

_______5. Reflecting the basic conservative attitudes of the 1960s, the Warren Court issued several decisions that assisted prosecutors and police in the war against crime.

_______6. Although President Truman failed to achieve significant civil rights legislation, he succeeded in pushing the issue to the forefront of the political agenda.

_______7 One of the most important new directions undertaken by American youth between 1940 and 1960 was away from college education toward technical-vocational training and early entry into the job market.

_______8. The actions of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* and Congress in the creation of the Commission on Civil Rights were the most effective efforts made in the 1950s toward achieving African-American equality.
9. According to C. Wright Mills, the modern office was even more
dehumanizing than the industrial assembly line.

10. The American desire to enter the space race was a logical result of
technological evolution and had very little to do with Cold War feelings or
competition with the Russians.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the one alternative that best completes the statement or answers the question.

1. An accurate description of the social makeup of the suburbs is that
   a. only middle-class people lived there.
   b. they mainly attracted professional types such as doctors and lawyers.
   c. a surprising variety of practically all economic types—excluding mainly the very
      rich and very poor—resided there.
   d. only the very rich could afford to live there.

2. The attitude of most Americans toward further political and social reforms after the
   war was that
   a. because of newly acquired affluence, they turned away from reforms.
   b. they realized that, especially in civil rights, a great deal of work needed to be
      done.
   c. they expected President Truman to continue the economic reforms of the New
      Deal tradition.
   d. they usually supported only reforms for the advantage of labor.

3. President Truman's legislative program, the Fair Deal, called for
   a. measures opposed to the strengthening of labor unions.
   b. dismantling most of the legislated social gains of the New Deal.
   c. national medical insurance, federal aid to education, and civil rights advances,
      and the desegregation of the armed forces.
   d. significant tax cuts, elimination of wartime restrictions, and subsidies for business
      expansion.

4. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was responsible for
   a. coordinating student protests against the war in Korea.
   b. bolstering the sagging fortunes of the NAACP by joining it in the struggle for
      civil rights.
   c. direct but peaceful confrontation that would heighten the social tension of the
      civil rights movement.
   d. opposing the efforts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
5. In the years after World War II the United States experienced
   a. an economic boom caused by high rates of consumption and military spending.
   b. a continuation of the unemployment rates of the mid-1930s.
   c. a farm economic boom but widespread urban poverty.
   d. prosperity for businesses located in the Northeast but continued depression in the South and West.

6. Eisenhower's decision to send troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, was in response to
   a. a violent strike of railroad workers.
   b. a direct challenge to the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka when the governor of Arkansas used armed troops to turn back African American students in their attempt to attend school.
   c. student protests against the war in Korea.
   d. the beatings of “freedom ride” protesters by local Klansmen and other toughs.

7. Women discovered that suburban life in postwar America
   a. encouraged them to develop career skills.
   b. discouraged child bearing.
   c. encouraged them to devote their efforts toward homemaking.
   d. encouraged them to adopt feminist ideas.

8. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka determined that
   a. separate educational facilities for the races had to be eliminated.
   b. property owners had to pay school taxes even if they did not have children attending school.
   c. busing could be used to achieve racial balance in the schools.
   d. private schools could continue to bar minority applicants.

9. The main purpose of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was to
   a. unite conservative religious denominations in the South against federal intrusion into local racial affairs.
   b. settle some of the outstanding theological differences still existing among American churches.
   c. direct the movement against segregation and promote peaceful confrontation against the enemies of racial equality.
   d. educate aspiring religious leaders to the need for moral leadership in the coming years.
10. The Soviet launching of Sputnik revealed in America a
   a. haunting insecurity and growing apprehension about our priorities and our
      competitive edge.
   b. prolonged paralysis and a desire to retreat from further confrontation with the
      Soviets.
   c. passive naiveté and apathy to international issues.
   d. continued self-confidence that we would dominate the future as we had the
      previous decade.

11. The main bloc of voters that contributed to the election of Truman in 1948 consisted
    of
   a. professional and white-collar workers.
   b. businessmen and unorganized labor.
   c. federal workers and suburban middle class.
   d. farmers, organized labor, African Americans, and other minorities.

12. Critics of the consumer society of the 1950s in literature were known as the
    a. fair dealers.
    b. abstracts expressionists.
    c. beats.
    d. Kerouacs.

13. All of the following were consequences of suburban living after World War II except
    a. encouragement for feminism
    b. greater loss of intimate contact with uncles, aunts, and grandparents
    c. a new affluence replacing the deprivation of the Great Depression
    d. fulfillment of the desire for more space, comfort, and freedom of action

14. Eisenhower’s method of dealing with Congress during his administration was to
    a. lobby with intensity for needed reform legislation.
    b. challenge them to take the lead in civil rights activism.
    c. urge Congress to expand its authority over such issues as education, health care,
       and the federal budget.
    d. remain insulated from most legislative issues, preferring to play a passive role.

15. In the years following World War II the United States experienced
    a. declining church attendance.
    b. increasing church attendance.
    c. increases in church attendance, but only among Catholics.
    d. the popularity of neo-orthodoxy in the suburbs but not in the seminaries.
THOUGHT QUESTIONS

To check your understanding of the key issues of this period, solve the following problems:

1. What were some of the sociological effects of suburban living after the war?

2. What was Martin Luther King Jr. pressing for with passive resistance and civil disobedience? Why were his tactics successful?

3. What factors enabled the civil rights movement to achieve some successes under the apparently conservative administration of Eisenhower?

4. According to William H. Whyte, David Riesman, and C. Wright Mills, what was disturbingly flawed about life in the 1950s? Were their concerns justified? Why or why not?

5. How would you describe the postwar mood of Americans, and why was this mood more reflected in the Eisenhower presidency than in that of Truman?

6. What, if any, seeds of change do you see being planted in the 1950s?

Critical Thinking Questions


Rosa Parks, The Montgomery Bus Boycott

As I got up on the bus and walked to the seat, I saw that there was only one vacancy that was just back of where it was considered the white section. So this was the seat that I took, next to the aisle, and a man was sitting next to me. Across the aisle there were two women, and there were a few seats at this point in the very front of the bus that was called the white section. I went on to one stop, and I didn’t particularly notice the other people getting on. And on the third stop there were some people getting on, and at this point all the front seats were taken. Now in the beginning, at the very first stop I had got on the bus, the back of the bus was filled up with people standing in the aisle, and I don’t know why this one vacancy that I took was left, because there were quite a few people already standing toward the back of the bus. The third stop is when all the seats were taken, and this one man was standing, and when the driver looked around and saw he was standing, he asked the four of us, the man in the seat with me and the two women across the aisle, to let him have those front seats.

At his first request, didn’t any of us move. Then he spoke again and said, “You’d better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” At this point, of course, the passenger who would have taken the seat hadn’t said anything. In fact, he never did speak to my knowledge. When the three people, the man who was in the seat with me and the two women, stood up and moved into the aisle, I remained where I was. When the driver saw that I was still there, he asked if I was going to stand up. I told him, no, I wasn’t. He said, “Well, if you don’t stand up, I’m going to have you arrested.” I told him to go on and have me arrested.

He got off the bus and came back shortly. A few minutes later, two policemen got on the bus, and they approached me and asked if the driver had asked me to stand up, and I said yes, and they wanted to know why I didn’t. I told them I
didn’t think I should have to stand up. After I had paid my fare and occupied my seat, I didn’t think I should have to
give it up. They placed me under arrest then.

Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955)

In the afternoon of Thursday, December 1, [1955] a prominent black woman named Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested for
refusing to vacate her seat for a white man. Mrs. Parks was a medium-sized, cultured mulatto woman; a civic and
religious worker; quiet unassuming, and pleasant in manner and appearance; dignified and reserved; of high morals and
a strong character. She was—and still is, for she lives to tell the story—respected in all black circles. By trade she was
a seamstress, adept and competent in her work.

Tired from work, Mrs. Parks boarded a bus. The “reserved seats” were partially filled, but the seats just behind
the reserved section were vacant, and Mrs. Parks sat down in one. It was during the busy evening rush hour. More
black and white passengers boarded the bus, and soon all the reserved seats were occupied. The driver demanded that
Mrs. Parks get up and surrender her seat to a white man, but she was tired from her work. She remained seated. In a
few minutes, police summoned by the driver appeared, placed Mrs. Parks under arrest and took her to jail.
It was the first time the soft-spoken, middle-aged woman had been arrested. She maintained her decorum and poise,
and the word of her arrest spread. Mr. E. D. Nixson, a longtime stalwart of our NAACP branch, along with liberal
white attorney Clifford Durr and his wife Virginia, went to the jail and obtained Mrs. Parks’s release on bond. Her trial
was scheduled for Monday, December 5, 1955.

The news traveled like wildfire into every black home. Telephones jangled; people congregated on street corners
and in homes and talked. But nothing was done. A numbing helplessness seemed to paralyze everyone. Very few
stayed off the buses the rest of that day or the next. There was fear, discontent, and uncertainty. Everyone seemed to
wait for someone to do something, but nobody made a move. For that day and a half, black Americans rode the buses
as before, as if nothing had happened. They were sullen and uncommunicative, but they rode the buses. There was a
silent, tension-filled waiting. For blacks were not talking loudly in public places—they were quiet, sullen, waiting. Just
waiting!

Thursday evening came and went. Thursday night was far spent, when, at about 11:30 P.M., I sat in my peaceful,
single-family dwelling on a side street. I was thinking about the situation. Lost in thought, I was startled by the
telephone’s ring. Black attorney Fred Gray, who had been out of town all day, had just gotten back and was returning
the phone message I had left him about Mrs. Parks’s arrest. Attorney Gray, though a very young man, had been one of
my most active colleagues in our previous meetings with bus company officials and Commissioner Birmingham. A
Montgomery native who had attended Alabama State and been one of my students, Fred Gray had gone on to law
school in Ohio before returning to his hometown to open a practice with the only other black lawyer in Montgomery,
Charles Langford.

Fred Gray and his wife Bernice were good friends of mine, and we talked often. In addition to being a lawyer,
Gray was a trained, ordained minister of the gospel, actively serving as assistant pastor of Holt Street Church of Christ.
Tonight his voice on the phone was very short and to the point. Fred was shocked by the news of Mrs. Parks’s arrest. I
informed him that I already was thinking that the WPC [Women’s Political Council] should distribute thousands of
notices calling for all bus riders to stay off the buses on Monday, the day of Mrs. Parks’s trial. “Are you ready?” he
asked. Without hesitation, I assured him that we were. With that he hung up, and I went to work.

I made some notes on the back of an envelope: “The Women’s Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks’s
consent to call for a boycott of city buses. On Friday, December 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a
boycott to take place on Monday, December 5.”

Martin Luther King Jr., The Strategy of Nonviolent Direct Action

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities
“unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all
of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would
have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are
sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of
“outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an
organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five
affiliate organizations all across the South, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever
necessary and possible, we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our
local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were
deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along
with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community.

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises . . . the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?” We decided to set our direct-action program around the Easter season, realizing that with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal could be delayed no longer.

You may ask, “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, “Why didn’t you give the new administration time to act?” The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of
Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was “well timed,” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “Wait!” has almost always meant “Never.” It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowning what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, “How can your advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that “An unjust law is a law that no law at all.”

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. . . . So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong. . . .

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering that outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they do fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension of the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.
Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically made? Isn’t this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn’t this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn’t this like condemning Jesus because His unique God consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to his will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: “All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.” All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard word time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of the extremist. But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love—“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice—“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Was not Paul and extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—“I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist—“Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God.” Was not John Bunyan an extremist—“I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a Butchery of my conscience.” Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—“This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it.

Yours for the Cause of Peace and Brotherhood

Martin Luther King Jr.
1. Why was Rosa Parks a fortuitous focus for the beginning of the new civil rights movement?

2. From reading both Rosa Parks’ and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson’s accounts, can you see elements of why the Montgomery bus boycott was ultimately successful?

3. Based on the teachings of Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr. developed a strategy for Black Americans to oppose Jim Crow or segregated public services. What are the key components of this strategy?

4. To whom was Dr. King addressing his rationale? Was it effective?

5. What political and social pressures opposed the early civil rights movement? How would an opponent have responded to each of these three articles?