



The Question of Race

Julian Bond

“South: that part of the United States south of Mason’s and Dixon’s line, the Ohio River, and the southern boundaries of Missouri and Kansas.” – *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, Second Edition, G. & C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Massachusetts, 1956.

My forty-year-old dictionary gives this bland definition. Stark and geographical, the meaning does not capture the region’s culture, its people, its peculiarities, or its distinctiveness from the rest of the nation.

Over time, much of this distinctiveness has given way to the sameness that afflicts all of America — similar fast foods sold everywhere, disappearing dialects and accents, once-regional music now heard nation- and world-wide, and a history of racial oppression that is no longer simply a territorially bound taint.

When my *Webster’s* was published, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was in its second year, and the nation and the watching world were beginning to recognize the name of a new figure in the civil rights firmament, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The movement he helped lead remade the region during the next decade, and today’s South is very different from the South where schools, buses, polling places, water fountains, lunch counters, and even checker games were segregated by law.

But the region is still unique.

It is singular because of the history of oppression Dr. King and thousands of nameless others before him fought against and triumphed over. What makes the South unique today are the associations between Blacks and Whites over time — slaves and masters, the domineering and the subservient, neighbors and relatives, peaceful marchers and violent resisters, adversaries and allies.

For more than thirty years now, the legally constructed system of American apartheid that set the South apart has been dismantled; but the two Souths, Black and White, remain. These two Souths made the region special from its very beginnings; they make it special even today.

The modern movement for civil rights began in this century with the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Four years earlier, Booker T. Washington, the most widely recognized Black figure of his day, had promised the White South racial peace in exchange for Black economic progress. Washington was the founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a school which favored industrial skills over Greek and Latin, brick-making over the liberal arts. He became advisor to and confidant of American presidents and developed a patronage machine through ties to Northern philanthropists and industrialists. In his time, Washington dominated Black thought and politics.

Washington argued that Blacks would not press for racial equality if Southern Whites would assist in the agricultural, economic, and industrial development of the untapped human potential in their midst. “Cast down your buckets where you are,” he told a cheering audience in Atlanta.

Not everyone cheered. Washington spoke to a South over which racial segregation had descended like a malign cotton curtain, separating Blacks from Whites and from education and opportunity, but not from hope. It was thirty-odd years after the Civil War and Reconstruction, and, then as now, racial demagogues stalked the land. Then as now, minorities and immigrants became scapegoats for real and imagined economic distress.

In *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of separate facilities for Blacks and Whites. Ruling in the case of a Black man arrested for sitting in a “White” railroad car in Louisiana, the Court declared that states could enforce racial segregation.



The decision unleashed a wave of restrictive legislation, enshrining separate and unequal status for Blacks and Whites and codifying White supremacy across the South.

Disenfranchisement — accomplished by murder and torture, including ritual human sacrifice, and the introduction of peonage — resulted in the subjugation of the Black race, returning Southern Blacks to a status close to slavery.

W. E. B. DuBois, among others, objected to Washington's proscription of agitation for political equality. Northern born and Harvard trained, DuBois promoted the idea that an educated "Talented Tenth" of Black America was the key to racial progress, rather than the skills and job training that Washington proposed. He was especially angered that Washington advocated accepting the status quo. Blacks would never gain their rights, DuBois argued, by abandoning them.

The massive assault on Blacks' rights still did not destroy hope. My grandfather, born a slave in Kentucky in 1863, believed the twentieth century held promise and opportunity.

Speaking in 1901, he said:

The false partitions set up to separate classes and races are falling down. Illogical and un-Christian distinctions, though still disgracing the age and hampering the spirit of progress, must soon yield to justice and right.... Then forward in the struggle for advancement.

Wrong for a time may seem to prevail, and the good already accomplished [may] seem to be overthrown. But forward in the struggle, inspired by the achievements of the past, sustained by a faith that knows no faltering, forward in the struggle.¹

That optimism was shared by others, including DuBois, who proposed a plan of action four years later in 1905:

We must complain; yes, plain, blunt complaint, ceaseless agitation,



unfailing exposure of dishonesty and wrong — this is the ancient unerring way to liberty, and we must follow it.

Next, we propose to work. These are the things that we as Black men must try to do. To press the matter of stopping the curtailment of our political rights; to urge Negroes to vote honestly and effectively; to push the matter of civil rights; to organize business cooperation; to build schoolhouses and increase the interest in education; to bring Negroes and labor unions into mutual understanding; to study Negro history; to attack crime among us ... to do all in our power, by word and by deed, to increase the efficiency of our race, the enjoyment of its manhood rights, and the

Neighborhood churches, such as the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church pastored by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., were central to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Church culture supported mass organizing meetings by providing a familiar setting in which people from diverse communities and classes played participatory roles. Many churches aided the boycott by opening their doors early each morning to accommodate passengers waiting for alternate forms of transport.

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¹ "Address of Rev. James Bond," *Berea Quarterly*, February 1901.



performance of its just duties. This is a large program. It cannot be realized in a short time ... [but] this is the critical time.²

When DuBois and others organized the NAACP in 1909, it soon developed an aggressive strategy of litigation aimed at striking down racial restrictions enshrined in law.

Lesser victories led to the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which ended legalized segregation in public schools.

The NAACP had made a strategic decision to attack segregation in education. *Brown* followed a series of court decisions overturning segregation in graduate and professional schools. It reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* and destroyed the doctrine of "separate but equal." While it integrated few schools outside the border South, *Brown*

effectively ended segregation's legality; it also gave a nonviolent army license to challenge segregation's morality.

From *Brown* in 1954 forward, the Southern movement for civil rights expanded its targets, tactics, and techniques. Organizations and leadership expanded as well. Martin Luther King, Jr., introduced as a new leader during the 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott, articulated a new method of fighting segregation — non-violent resistance. The new method required mass participation. Reliance on slower appeals to the courts began to diminish.

A student-led movement emerged in 1960, targeted at segregated lunch counters and drawing inspiration from Montgomery's methods. Across the South, college-age Blacks sat down at segregated lunch counters in order to stand up for their civil rights. In 1961, the

movement put nonviolence on wheels with Freedom Rides, testing segregation at bus terminals throughout the South.

The young men and women who had won their spurs at lunch counters and on Southern buses graduated to voter registration campaigns in the heart of the resistant South. Disenfranchisement had been a fact of life for nearly all Southern Blacks since Reconstruction; winning the right to vote had been a priority since before the century began. Aligning themselves with local leadership in scattered communities across the rural South, and building on work begun when DuBois had offered his plan of action, the veteran Freedom Riders and others helped create a South-wide movement that culminated in 1965 in a dramatic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

In this period, gains were won at lunch counters, bus stations, and polling places, and the fabric of segregation continued to come undone. The movement's victories were enshrined in law — the 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights Acts eliminated Jim Crow in places of public accommodation and in voting.

As the modern movement began the twentieth century in a bitter struggle for elemental civil rights, in the post-segregation era it became largely a movement for political and economic power.

The strategies of the 1960s movement were litigation, organization, and mobilization, aimed at creating a national political consensus for civil rights protections and advances. In the 1970s, electoral strategies began to dominate, prompted by the increase in Black voters engendered by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Today across the Southern region, Black women and men hold office and wield power in numbers we dared not dream of before. Mississippi has more Black elected officials than Michigan. The number of locally elected Black officials has multiplied South-wide. As the slogan of a voter registration organization

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² W. E. B. DuBois in the *Voice of the Negro* (Atlanta), September 1905.



said, "Hands That Used To Pick Cotton Now Pick Presidents."

Today's South is far removed from yesterday's. It still shares the now-national preoccupation with race; it is far from the perfection that Dr. King dreamed about more than thirty years ago. But it retains a distinctiveness and a difference, and today as yesterday — even in the darkest days — not all of the differences are malign.

Black Americans fled the region in large numbers in two great out-migrations between 1916 and 1920 and again during World War II, but the numbers leaving slowed in the 1970s. Many have begun to return, seeking and finding some refuge from Northern urban crowds, if not from crime, and enjoying an easier pace, a return to roots, a more restful life.

They return to rediscover the many elements which still make the South different, and which had made it different when their parents and grandparents left years before. The dissimilarity with other regions of the country comes from the Southern people and from the different worlds they made together, on many, many occasions, sometimes unconsciously.

Southern food is different, a mixture of the English tradition of generous hospitality that the first White settlers brought with them, diets that the Indians they met introduced them to, including grits, and the African-American recipes that originated in a slave tradition of making more from less.

Southern art is different. There are more "folk" or "naïve" or "primitive" or "outsider" artists in the Southern region than elsewhere in the United States, and many of them are instructed by a religious fervor that finds its strongest expression in the South.

And Southern music — it is now the world's music. The blues and country and jazz that the region gave the world all have roots in the region's history of racial separation and of cultures appropriating, adapting and resisting, clashing and borrowing from each other.

Southern people are different, too. There is a slowness about them in speech and manner which outsiders frequently take for mental impairment, but which instead reflects a deliberate approach to life. There is also an

openness about them. Like the food and music they have made, they and their part of the country are contested combinations of elements — gumbo and jambalaya and jazz in Louisiana, or barbecue and blues in the Carolinas, Texas, or Tennessee. Few agree on which of these is superior, but almost everyone agrees they are good.

Julian Bond is the host of America's Black Forum, the oldest Black-owned show in television syndication. He was one of several hundred students from across the South who helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Bond served four terms in the Georgia House of Representatives and six terms in the State Senate. In 1968, as co-chairman of the Georgia Loyal National Delegation to the Democratic Convention, Bond was nominated for Vice President of the United States, the first African American to be so honored by a major political party. He withdrew his name because he was too young to serve.