The Fight for Justice

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The Civil Rights Movement continued for decades with significant if incremental progress. It it understandable that African Americans feeling the frustrations of discrimination would bristle at the slow pace and push for more aggressive, rapid change. Because of this, Black Power and the Black Panther Party appealed to young black activists who were discontented with the pace of progress against racial injustice. If progress is seen as empowerment for the oppressed and intimidation for the oppressors, then armed self-defense was an effective strategy. However, notoriety, while effective at gaining attention, is typically not the key to long-term success. Civil disobedience and nonviolence were more effective at creating lasting change than intimidation in the Civil Rights Movement; in fact, even groups that espoused armed self-defense were most successful when utilizing nonviolent methods.

The Black Panther Party utilized intimidation as its public persona, but in reality its most productive efforts were free of violence or aggression. It established the Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, Free Health Clinics, and ambulance services.[[1]](#footnote-1) Austin posits that, “the fact that [sickle cell anemia] is not ravaing the black community today can be attributed to the research and screening that the BPP made possible.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Black Panther Party was also instrumental in renovating the Oakland Community tuition-free school for Mexican-American students, proving its commitment to many people of color. [[3]](#footnote-3) Perhaps its most well-known community program, the BPP was responsible for serving ten thousand breakfasts each day across the country.[[4]](#footnote-4) These efforts showed that “the Panthers were not simply out to kill white people, despite the fact that the mainstream media portrayed them as mad killers.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Their notoriety and dismissal of white assistance limited their efforts; their largest impacts were in non-violent commitments to the community.

Parks, like the Black Panthers, worked privately to support her community. Rosa Parks helped those without gas, electricity, food, or clothing in Detroit winters. Unlike the Black Panthers, however, Parks could garner help from the white community as well; according to Leon Atchison, “You could take Rosa into the white community and nobody gets upset. But she would energize the black community,” proving that aggressive anger was not the only way to galvanize the Movement.[[6]](#footnote-6) While Theoharis voices frustration at the lack of credit given to Parks and the inaccurate view of her that has been painted, Parks herself had the ability to change that narrative in interviews and chose not to do so. Virginia Durr and E.D. Dixon were similarly frustrated with Parks’ unwillingness to even voice complaint about her financial struggles due to her involvement in the bus boycott.[[7]](#footnote-7) This value of humility in her steadfastness to the cause contrast with the ego that empowered the Black Power movement. While Black Panther leaders were in and out of jail, challenging the organization to find new or temporary leadership in the meantime, Rosa Parks and other nonviolent leaders could work consistently and conscientiously for their cause. She and other leaders like Martin Luther King were arrested over their acts of civil disobedience, but it did not interrupt their ability to organize and lead the movement.

Often the actors in the Civil Rights Movement were successful because of their respectability in their communities, serving as role models that white Americans would have more trouble criticizing than incendiary protestors. Theoharis notes that, “The foregrounding of Parks’s respectability - of her being a good Christian woman and tired seamstress - provided pivotal to the success of the boycott.”[[8]](#footnote-8) She dressed well, “simply” and “very matronly,” and “symbolized some of the finest womanhood of the South,” creating a beauty and mystique that was recognizable as quiet confidence without agitation.[[9]](#footnote-9) She intentionally minimized her role with the NAACP, which is part of why she is so often taught as an “accidental matriarch of the movement” when in fact she worked intentionally and intently with major Civil Rights organizations to spur the boycott and continue working thereafter.[[10]](#footnote-10) Parks realized that if her association with groups like the NAACP, which was already suspected of ties to communism, it could harm her credibility.[[11]](#footnote-11) The appearance and promotion of respectability helped Parks become a nationally recognized and appreciated figure, travelling safely across the country to make appearances.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As Martin Luther King told Andrew Young regarding the Black Power movement, “If you really have the power you don’t need a slogan.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The aggressive assertion of power often shuts down conversation; when Austin met Elaine Brown at a conference and she angrily waved her finger in his face, he “honestly felt fear racing through my veins.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While he ultimately had a positive conversation with her, if even a man who spent years researching the Party was intimidated by a finger wave, how would a typical American respond to the threat of armed violence from the same individual? Intimidation and fear limited the impact that the Black Power movement had, though it found success, as did Rosa Parks and the larger Civil Rights Movement, in non-violent community interventions.

1. Curtis Austin, Up Against the Wall: The Role of Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 265-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Austin, *Up Against the Wall, 262.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid*, 263.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Theoharis, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life,* 142-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jeanne Theoharis, The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life,* viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Theoharis, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Austin, *Up Against*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)