CALL AND RESPONSE

Key Debates in African American Studies

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taking fundamental solutions—like a man who settles one debt by contracting another. This can go on and on, until the day of reckoning. And that day may come, in the civil rights crisis, this summer just before the election.

There is a strong probability that this July and August will constitute another "summer of discontent." The expectations among Negroes in the Black Belt have risen to the point where they cannot be quieted. CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and the intrepid youngsters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, are determined to move forward.

With the probability high of intensified activity in the Black Belt this summer, the President will have to decide what to do. He can stand by and watch Negro protests smashed by the local police, with mass jailings, beatings, and cruelties of various kinds. Or he can take the kind of firm action suggested above, which would simply establish clearly what the Civil War was fought for a hundred years ago, the supremacy of the U.S. Constitution over the entire nation. If he does not act, the Negro community may be pressed by desperation to move beyond the nonviolence which it has maintained so far with amazing self-discipline.

Thus, in a crucial sense, the future of nonviolence as a means for social change rests in the hands of the President of the United States. And the civil rights movement faces the problem of how to convince him of this, both by words and by action. For, if nonviolent direct action seems to batter itself to death against the police power of the Deep South, perhaps its most effective use is against the national government. The idea is to persuade the executive branch to use its far greater resources of nonviolent pressure to break down the walls of totalitarian rule in the Black Belt.

The latest victim of this terrible age of violence—which crushed the life from four Negro girls in a church basement in Birmingham, and in this century has taken the lives of over fifty million persons in war—is President John F. Kennedy, killed by an assassin's bullet. To President Johnson will fall the unfinished job of ending the violence and fear of violence which has been part of the everyday life of the Negro in the Deep South.

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

*Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom* [1966]

In this 1966 article for the popular magazine *Ebony*, Martin Luther King Jr. (p. 559) responds to the advocacy of violence by militant groups such as the Black Panthers by reframing the debate on the use of violence. King's language is strikingly militaristic, but he reverses the traditional association of violence with power: calls for violence are the "posturing of cowards," while nonviolence is linked to action. Throughout the essay, he uses words typically associated with war to describe the nonviolent movement. To King, marches, boycotts, and political and economic organization are weapons, and violent "self-defense" distracts from the main fight. Rejected the use of violence as a way to end violence, King calls for people to have the courage to accept suffering as the way to end suffering.

Although King and Malcolm X never directly debated each other, critics often place King's views in opposition to those of Malcolm X. Malcolm X's critiques of King reinforce the idea that their platforms were oppositional. For example, when asked to comment on King in a 1963 interview, Malcolm X replied bluntly: "I think that any black man who goes among so-called Negroes today who are being brutalized, spit upon in the worst fashion imaginable, and teaches those Negroes to turn the other cheek, to suffer peacefully, or love their enemy is a traitor to the Negro. [* * *] It is time for the black people in this country to come together and unite and do whatever is necessary to gain the recognition and respect of the world." In 1964, however, after his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X sent a number of telegrams to King offering to work with him, albeit on his terms. His three-sentence telegram of June 30, 1964, sent to King in St. Augustine, Florida, says simply:

We have been witnessing with great concern the vicious attacks of the white races against our poor
defenseless people there in St. Augustine. If the federal government will not send troops to your aid, just say the word and we will immediately dispatch some of our brothers there to organize self defense units among our people and the Klu Klux Klan [sic] will then receive a taste of its own medicine. The day of turning the other cheek to those brute beasts is over.

Malcolm X had also expressed his desire to form a "united front" with King nearly a year earlier. In a July 31, 1963, letter inviting King to express his views at a Black Muslim-led rally in Harlem, Malcolm X proclaimed, "It is a disgrace for Negro leaders not to be able to submerge our 'minor' differences in order to seek a common solution to a common problem posed by a Common Enemy." King did not attend that rally, and consistently declined to debate Malcolm X directly, for, as his secretary, Dora McDonald, wrote in November 1962, King "has always considered his work in a positive action framework rather than engaging in consistent negative debate." Although the two men met face-to-face only once (on March 26, 1964, while King was waiting for a news conference at the U.S. Capitol), they came to represent opposite poles of thought on the use of violence in the civil rights movement, a dichotomy that tends to obscure the complexity of their thought on nonviolence and armed self-defense.

From * Ebony*, October 1966, pp. 27–34.

The year 1966 brought with it the first public challenge to the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence from within the ranks of the civil rights movement. Resolutions of self-defense and Black Power sounded forth from our friends and brothers. At the same time riots erupted in several major cities. Inevitably a link was made between the two phenomena though movement leadership continued to deny any implications of violence in the concept of Black Power.

The nation’s press heralded these incidents as an end of the Negro’s reliance on nonviolence as a means of achieving freedom. Articles appeared on "The Plot to Get Whitey," and, "Must Negroes Fight Back?" and one had the impression that a serious movement was underway to lead the Negro to freedom through the use of violence.

Indeed, there was much talk of violence. It was the same talk we have heard on the fringes of the nonviolent movement for the past ten years. It was the talk of fearful men, saying that they would not join the nonviolent movement because they would not remain nonviolent if attacked. Now the climate had shifted so that it was even more popular to talk of violence, but in spite of the talk of violence there emerged no action in this direction. One reporter pointed out in a recent * New Yorker* article, that the fact that Beckwith, Price, Rainey, and Collie Leroy Wilkins remain alive is living testimony to the fact that the Negro remains nonviolent. And if this is not enough, a mere check of the statistics of casualties in the recent riots shows that the vast majority of persons killed in riots are Negroes. All the reports of sniping in Los Angeles’ expressways did not produce a single casualty. The young demented white student at the University of Texas has shown what damage a sniper can do when he is serious. In fact, this one young man killed more people in one day than all the Negroes have killed in all the riots in all the cities since the Harlem riots of 1964. This must raise a serious question about the violent intent of the Negro, for certainly there are many ex-GIs within our ghettos, and no small percentage of those recent migrants from the South have demonstrated some proficiency hunting squirrels and rabbits.

1. White southerners linked to the murders of civil rights workers: Byron De La Beckwith was convicted of killing Medgar Evers; Sheriff Lawrence A. Rainey and his deputy Cecil Price were tied to the murder of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, and to the subsequent cover up; Rainey and Price were both indicted for conspiracy, and Price was convicted; Collie Leroy Wilkins was twice tried for the murder of Viola Liuzzo, and ultimately convicted of conspiracy.

2. On August 1, 1966, after killing his wife and mother, Charles Whitman (1941–66) went to the University of Texas campus where he shot 27 people, 14 of whom died.