

Bending the Arc of History

Encyclopedia Britannica states that Civil Rights are defined as, "...guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics." Examples include, the right to vote, right to a fair trial, right to government services, right to public education and the right to use public facilities - to name just a few.

Throughout the history of our United States, these civil rights were given to certain groups by law or constitutional amendment. For example, in 1789 voting rights were limited to property-owning or tax paying white males (6% of the population at the time). From 1792 to 1838, free black males lost the right to vote in several Northern states including Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

In 1870, non-white men and freed male slaves were guaranteed the right to vote by the Fifteenth Amendment. Disenfranchisement after the Reconstruction Era began soon after. Southern states suppressed the voting rights of black and poor white voters through Jim Crow Laws. During this period, the Supreme Court generally upheld state efforts to discriminate against racial minorities; only later in the 20th century were these laws ruled unconstitutional. Black males in the Northern states could vote, but the majority of African Americans lived in the South.

In 1920, women were guaranteed the right to vote in all US States by the Nineteenth Amendment. In 1924, all Native Americans were granted citizenship and the right to vote, regardless of tribal affiliation. In 1943, Chinese immigrants were given the right to citizenship and the right to vote by the Magnuson Act.

The examples above highlight the discrepancy between our founding documents and the practices carried out by those in power. The Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.-- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The Founders were aware of the hypocrisy as many of them owned slaves, or had wives, daughters, nieces, and mothers that were unable to vote. One of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, William Whipple, freed his slave Prince Whipple on the belief that no man could fight for freedom and own slaves.

It was inevitable that this hypocrisy, birthed at the founding of our country, and rooted in bigotry, classism, prejudice, sexism, and racism would need to be resolved by those willing to call it for what it was: injustice.

Injustice against fellow citizens, injustice against those that sacrificed their lives in wars for the country, injustice against the unborn because of their lineage, injustice against those who have no control of what they look like or where they were born.

To combat such injustice, one must look towards the virtues and ideals that motivated the Founders to fight for freedom against an oppressive British monarchy: Courage, honor, temperance, friendship, and justice.

In the 1950's and 1960's African Americans spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement, along with people of other races, sexual orientations, and religions. They all understood that a severe injustice was being thrust upon African Americans by way of discrimination, disenfranchisement, physical, mental and emotional abuse, and even murder.

Dr. Martin Luther King was one of the leaders of the civil rights movement. His efforts such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington, and his tactics of nonviolence helped fortify the coalition of the movement and gain support among politicians. He was assassinated in 1968 and became revered through history. The toll of fighting for justice was not lost on him. He often spoke about his own death and that he may not get to see the fruits of his labor, but that his cause was just and will be continued by those who saw merit in the cause.

There were many people that contributed to the civil rights movement in ways we may never know. Their names may have been forgotten but their efforts will live on in our memories and in the freedoms and rights we enjoy. However, we must not rest on our laurels and believe that the work is done and we have nothing left to do. For it is not enough to fight for civil rights, we must secure, protect, and defend them against the forces of injustice.

Thomas Paine, the English-born American political activist said, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it."

So we must ask ourselves, when we see injustice in our neighborhoods, our states, our country, our planet...what will we do?

Will we try to validate the inspirational language of our founding documents? Will we seek justice not for justice sake but for fame and fortune? Will we forget the sacrifices of those that came before us? Will we take for granted the warriors of virtue that lived and died for the dignity of future generations?

My friends, we must persevere and find within ourselves the answers to these questions. We must institute within ourselves a righteousness that is grounded in a morality that serves all human beings.

Robert F. Kennedy once said, "Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change."

He was correct. Change is painful but change is necessary. Because as Dr. King stated, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

It is up to us to bend history towards justice. We are the makers of history.

Sources:

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