

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

(A Look Back and a Look Ahead)

Speaker: Aldon Morris

Welcome to the last session of a series of public lectures on the Civil Rights Movement. Yes, this is the last session. The 15 lecture series included some of the most noted figures of the Civil Rights Movement. They have rotated between UAH and A&M and have lasted the entire fall semester. A&M and UAH are to be commended for planning and implementing such an excellent collaborative and historical lecture series.

The planning committee has worked very hard to make sure each lecture was carried out as scheduled. Many times we see the finished product and we forget about all of the background and the preparation that has gone into making each program a success. In expression of our appreciation for all the hours of planning and implementation, let us give the planning committee another hand of applause.

Attendance at the lectures has been excellent. People attending the lectures seem to listen attentively as the presenters gave first-hand accounts of the major development of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama from 1954 to 1965. For some of us, the lectures are a source of new knowledge or additional knowledge. For others, the lectures cause us to reflect on the past and have hope for the future.

The lecture this evening by Dr. Aldon Morris entitled, *The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama (A Look Back and a Look Ahead)* will be dynamic and thought provoking. Dr. Morris will be introduced by Dr. Glenna Colclough, Chair of the Sociology Department at UAH, but before the introduction of the speaker I would like to acknowledge the sponsors that made the lecture series possible. We have the Alabama

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Humanities Foundation. We have Marion Carter who is the associate director of this organization in the audience. Please stand. The Huntsville Times, Mevatec Corporation, DESE Research, Alabama Representative Laura Hall, Alabama A&M University Office of the President, Office of the Provost. We have Dr. James Hicks who is provost in the audience, A&M, State Black Archives Research Center and Museum, Title III Telecommunications and Distance Learning Center, Office of Student Development, Honors Center, Sociology/Social Work, History and Political Science at Alabama A&M University. We have the University of Alabama Office of the President. We have Dr. Frank Franz, President of UAH, in the audience, Office of Provost UAH, Dr. Fran Johnson. History Forum Bankhead Foundation, Sociology Social Issues Foundation, Humanities Center, Division of Continuing Education, Honors Program, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Office of Student Affairs and UAH Copy Center.

The reception this evening is sponsored by the social work department's undergraduate and graduate student organization. So again, thank you for attending this important historical lecture series. Thank you very much.

Introduction: I am Glenna Colclough from the University of Alabama in Huntsville. We are so pleased to have Professor Aldon Morris with us tonight for the last lecture series on the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama and also for the Sociology Department Social Issues Symposium, which has also worked on this particular lecture this evening. We are honored to have with us one of the most distinguished sociologists in the country and foremost sociologist of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Aldon Douglas Morris was born and spent his early years in the Mississippi Delta before moving to Chicago as a young adolescent where he began his very distinguished educational career. In 1972, he earned an associate's degree in sociology from Olive-Harvey College in Chicago. In 1974, he graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in sociology from Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois and attended graduate school at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, where he earned an MA in 1977 and a Ph.D. in 1980, both in sociology. Professor Morris' first teaching position was at the University of Michigan where he began as an assistant professor in 1980. He left Michigan in 1988 and became an associate professor and associate chair of the department of sociology there in Michigan and then in 1988, Professor Morris returned to the greater Chicago area accepting a position at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He has been a full professor of sociology there since 1992 and was chair of the department from 1992 to 1997. At Northwestern, Professor Morris has also been associated with the Institute for Policy Research.

Aldon Morris has been the recipient of countless awards and honors. Among his numerous publications, his book, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, is generally recognized now as a true classic in the field of social movement. He has won many awards including The Gustavus Myers Award, the Distinguished Contributions to Scholarship for the American Sociological Association and the Annual Scholarly Achievement Award of the North Central Sociological Association. The book was also selected by choice as one of the outstanding academic books of 1984. In 1986, Professor Morris became the President of the Association of Black Sociologists, a post he held for 3

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

years. He was the consultant for the famous PBS series, *Eyes on the Prize*, in the mid-1980's and was also associate editor the *American Sociological Review* from 1983 to 1986. Over the years, Dr. Morris has been very busy organizing numerous conferences and speaking all over the country and his work has been published and reprinted in numerous places. In 1995, he received the Certificate of Leadership Award from the Association of Black Sociologists and in 1997, he held the Martin Luther King, Jr., Caesar Chavez, Rosa Parks Visiting Professorship at the University of Michigan.

In recent years, Professor Morris has continued his research on the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, his research includes the study of the National Baptist Convention funded through the Hartford Seminary as well as the study of The Black Chicago Renaissance Movement.

Tonight, Aldon Morris is here to offer us some reflections on the Civil Rights Movement and his talk is entitled, *The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama (A Look Back and a Look Ahead)*. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Aldon Morris.

Aldon Morris: Well, good evening. First of all, it is a real pleasure and honor to me to be here. I want to thank each and every member of the planning committee. Knowing something about organizing in social movements and so forth, I know that nothing never just takes place out of the blue, a lot of work went into it. So, I want to just recognize the people who put this all together.

I would say that one of the reasons why I decided to come to Huntsville is because I think that during this period of history it is very important for us to revisit the Civil Rights Movement and what has happened in this country in terms of race relations

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

and so one. Hopefully, in my talk, I will give you some sense that it is not just important as a romantic journey into the past to revisit the glory days as they were but to really think about race and race inequality today. So, then it is a pleasure for me to address you and to speak on Alabama's role in the Civil Rights Movement and where we need to go from here.

One simply cannot think about the Civil Rights Movement without thinking about the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott where 50,000 African-Americans refused to ride the buses for over a year. Certainly, we cannot think about the Civil Rights Movement and not think about the major confrontation in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. We cannot think about the Civil Rights Movement and not think about the Selma confrontation in 1965. When we think about the Birmingham confrontation in 1963, what is going to come out of that of course is going to be the 1964 Civil Rights Act that is going to take the legal teeth out the Jim Crow order. Then, of course, the 1965 Selma confrontation was the major struggle that ended up with blacks ceasing the franchise and being able to vote, which they had not been able to do since the reconstruction period. So, then, clearly Alabama is a good place to talk about the Civil Rights Movement.

Now, I want to add a personal note here because I think it would provide some kind of context for what I am going to say. I was born in Saltwater, Mississippi in 1949. I cannot believe that I am this old, but it happens. I knew the Jim Crow system first hand. I drunk from colored water fountains. I attended segregated inferior schools. I remembered that when school began in the fall that almost all of the black students would disappear for 3 months and they went out into the white man's cotton field. I can still recall very

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

clearly how we had to walk a mile to the colored school passing by a very new sophisticated looking white school and walk to the colored school and then receive the torn up hand-me-down books that the white students no longer had any use for. I remember when whites called our father boy and called our mother auntie and referred to all of other inhabitants of the black community as niggers. As a young boy, I loved ice cream. I remember having to walk to the Dairy Creme and then having to go round to the back of the Dairy Creme and have the ice cream cone handed to me out of a little hole in the wall in the back of the Dairy Creme.

As a 16-year-old boy, I was gripped with fear when Emmett Till, 14 years old from Chicago, was lynched in Mississippi. In short, what I am saying is that I experienced the prison of Jim Crow first hand.

Though more formerly stated, by the 1950's, southern whites in Alabama and throughout the south had established a very comprehensive system of domination over blacks. It is what I have called a tripartite system of domination in the sense that it controlled blacks economically, politically and personally. Economically, blacks were highly concentrated in the lowest paying and dirtiest job that the rural areas in the city had to offer. Politically, southern blacks were oppressed because they were systematically excluded from the political process. They could not serve as jurors and they really had no input into the governing process. blacks were controlled personally because the system of racial segregation denied them personal freedom and by personal freedom I am talking about something as simple as being able to urinate in a decent toilet. I am talking about the kind of personal freedom that whites enjoyed on a routine basis.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

So, racial segregation itself was an arrangement that set blacks off from the rest of humanity and labeled them as an inferior race. Thus, the monumental question that confronted southern blacks at the second half of the 20th century was simply this, how can a relatively powerless group overthrow this tripartite system of domination. It is a system of domination that is backed by legislation, by custom, by terror and by the iron fist of the southern state. There was a darkening path. How do you overthrow this kind of system without very much power?

Now, the great abolitionist, Frederic Douglas had already given a clue as to what has to happen when he declared that he who would be free must himself strike the first blow. The Civil Rights Movement was really that first blow in terms of overthrowing the Jim Crow order. Now, the Alabama Movement struck a blow heard throughout America and around the world. So, let me just present to you my thesis or really what my basic argument is here. It is this, that the local movement in Alabama and throughout the south encompassed the organizational and political framework that were the culminating forces that really ended up withdrawing the Jim Crow order. To understand how the Civil Rights Movement overthrew racial segregation in America, you must come to grips with what I talk about as the local movement. When you think about these local movements, they did at least 3 things, one is that they organized and mobilized the black masses. Two, they developed the strategy of mass nonviolence direct action and three, they persuaded the people to abandon their passivity and fear and to boldly disrupt the Jim Crow order until it would collapse. Then, to simplify, I am going to focus tonight on the 1963 Birmingham confrontation. It is important to keep in mind that the same dynamics

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

that unfolded in Birmingham in 1963 also unfolded in many local black communities throughout the south. When I first started studying the Civil Rights Movement, I was struck by how previous accounts attributed how the Jim Crow order got overthrown. They attributed the victory to the Supreme Court, 1954 Brown versus Board decision or they would attribute it to the actions of the Kennedy and Johnson administration and to the actions of sympathetic, northern white liberals. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was given some credit. He was usually viewed as a charismatic, black Moses who single-handedly waved the magic wand that freed his people, but as I dove into the archives and interviewed key participants of this pivotal movement, I developed a very different view of how it all happened. I came to recognize that even though the courts were important and so were the Kennedy and Johnson administration as well as sympathetic whites, but these were not the critical factors responsible for overthrowing the Jim Crow order. They were secondary factors, which were triggered by moral and deeper primary factors. Then, in my view and in my research, the primary factors were the local movements that were developed following the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. These local movements had a definite character. First, they were deeply rooted in the black church. Many of them were led by black ministers. Second, they were committed to mass nonviolent direct action that directly confronted the forces of racial segregation. Third, they were associated with the charismatic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Now, why was the black church so important in this context? I think it is important to talk about the black church historically here but also I think it gets a bum rap a lot for what it fails to do and I think there is a lot of criticism for the black church

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

and we may get into it later. I think that we also need to also recognize the historic role that it displayed in the black community. The black church was so crucial to the movement because it was a mass base, indigenous institution respected by black people. Its ministers constituted the bulk of black leadership. The church was largely free of white control and could act independently if it had the courage to do so. During the days of racial segregation, you could not think of any other organization or institution within the black community that was as free to act independently if it had the courage to do so with the church. The black church functioned as a repository of black culture that housed and nourished the community's sacred beliefs and cultural expressions, especially black music. In studying the Civil Rights Movement, I remember talking to a minister about the role of music, one of the major leaders of this other movement. We could not have been able to mobilize that movement and the whole people together if we did not have the music. Church services are the black community's communication network. You go to church and you learn what is happening in the community. You learn the gossip. You learned other kinds of important information. Finally, the church was the community's organizational framework through which important goals could be pursued in a systematic fashion. Because of all of these functions of the black church, it really had no rival in the black community in terms of its importance and this is why the sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, referred to the black church as a nation within a nation. It falls then that the black church would become the institution on their cultural backbone of the Civil Rights movement.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

The strength and importance of local movements were determined by the degree that the community's churches became involved in the movement in terms of providing a mass of people willing to engage in protest, providing the movement with leadership, with finances and with the resolve to face danger despite the possible consequences. Now, these movements were crucial because they became committed to engaging in mass, nonviolent direct action.

When you think about the Jim Crow order and for those of you who are old enough to remember, you know that the Jim Crow order was nothing to be played with. Those who dared to violate its rules could expect awful consequences including being fired from your job, being jailed, being beaten and at worst being hung from the limb of a tree. It was a system designed to make people cowards and to say yes boss to white people who despised them. It was a system that was designed to exploit black people economically and to dominate them politically. It was a system that thrived on keeping black people educationally ignorant and timid. Jim Crow then was dedicated to producing meek, black people who were afraid to rebel against one of the cruelest systems of domination known to human beings. As I said earlier, it was backed by guns, southern states and by terror groups like the Klan. So, then the job of local movements was to produce a fort that could overcome the power of white segregationists.

The great achievement of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott was its revelation that there existed a method of social protest that could boldly confront the Jim Crow system and win. That method was nonviolent direct action. First of all, most blacks, like most other Americans, believed in self-defense rather than turning the other cheek. To

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

have people in mass to function nonviolently was a great, great achievement. It was a method that had to be taught to black people. I know at one time I was in Turkey and I asked folks there about what they thought about the Civil Rights Movement and they said the blacks were peaceful and they would sing all this beautiful music and all. I was thinking I really know black people and it was a very complicated thing to get them to accept this whole idea of engaging in nonviolent direct action. It was a unique form of combat that could be used in a way to really challenge the Jim Crow system. I often think about what if King and others had chosen to try to overthrow Jim Crow violently at that time. How might the response have been very different? More than likely, it would have been crushed immediately by the power of the state and other groups acting violently against it. I would argue then that when you think about the Civil Rights Movement one of the thing very important to recognize is that generation formed a taxable problem. It said, we want to overthrow segregation. We do not have that much power. We do not have the guns. We do not have the state behind us. We do not have the media behind us. What do we do then? They came up with this idea of engaging in massive, nonviolence direct action.

Another very important thing about that movement was the creation and the development of Martin Luther King Jr., as a charismatic leader because leaders are important in a movement. Now, King became a charismatic tool of the black community and of the Civil Rights Movement. What do I mean by charismatic tool? That means anytime he went to a movement, say he goes to Montgomery, Birmingham or to Selma, immediately the focus of the nation was on that community. He had the eyes of the world

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

on where he went and the black community really never had that kind of person. So, that gave the black community something that it had never had. One of the things in studying social movement that I think is an important point for all of those who wish to engage in social change by participating in social movements is there is never such a thing as one leader that leads the social movement. The data shows that Martin Luther King Jr. did not create the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Movement created Dr. King in the sense that there were already large numbers of people in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 who had already decided that they were going to have a boycott. Rosa Parks was not just some tired old lady. She was an activist. She worked in the NAACP and working in the NAACP in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 was like working in the Black Panther Party in 1966 or 1967. So, when they decided that they were going to have this boycott, they looked around and they said who should be our spokesperson. Then, they said there is this good speaker over at Dexter Church, Reverend King. He is pretty eloquent and he has a Ph.D. They said, let's try him. So, that is how King became the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. From there, he went on to grow into this major charismatic tool. I made this point because for those who are interested in social change to have the idea that there are somewhat Moses type of leaders that are going to come along and wave a magic wand and free people is just not the way it happens. So, then, we have a development in the south where now black people have a method, nonviolent direct action, to go and confront the system of domination directly. Now, you have a charismatic leader who can bring attention to those movements, not only domestically but

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

bring attention to the whole world as to what is happening to black people in a country that is selling itself as the beacon of democracy.

We have to remember that another very important contact during this period was that America was locked in the Cold War. It was in a colossal battle with the Soviet Union. The cold would be the super power. What the United States was doing internationally was telling all of the newly, independent nations of Africa, Asia, and South America is that you should come and align yourself with us because those communists in the Soviet Union are a totalitarian government. They are totalitarian; we are democratic. So, what this did for the merging Civil Rights Movement was once these local movements confronted the system of segregation, then the leaders of the Third World looked at America and said, is this a democracy? Is that how you treat young black children in the streets and so forth? So, then there was this international contact. This was also very important because with the confrontations in the street it really caused a nightmare for the American Foreign Policy.

I believe that (and this is why it is so important to talk about the fact that there is no one leader of a mass movement), the confrontation in Birmingham in 1963 where King was triumphant would never have happened without Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights built a strong local movement over in Birmingham. He had fought the system of segregation in Birmingham for 7 years before King decided to come to Birmingham in 1963. In terms of Fred Shuttlesworth, let me just give you a sense of the kind of person that he was. Fred Shuttlesworth is one of the few

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

people and I have talked with him a lot. I would say he is my favorite civil rights leader really from that period because this man really conquered the fear of death. For him, the destruction of racial segregation became more important than his own life. That is why in 1956 when he organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. He cried in this manner, "Now, when you organize to fight segregation that means you can never be still. We are going to wipe it out or it is going to wipe us out. Somebody may have to die." Shuttlesworth was clear that he, himself, was ready to die for the cause. He maintained, "I tried to get killed in Birmingham. I tried to widow my wife and my children for God's sake. I believed that scripture, which says whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. I had no fear." So, this was the attitude that was incomprehensible to Bohr Conner and I would also say to a lot of black people as well. A system of oppression cannot endure for long when it is persistently attacked by leaders willing to die for freedom and one who is able to instill that spirit in the hearts of the oppressed. That was the character of the leadership that took place in Birmingham. Let me also emphasize this once again, I will not take your time to go through this, but there were literally hundreds of leaders, activists and organizers who were part of the local movement in Birmingham.

Now, I argued a little earlier about how important the black church was, saying that was where most of the participants came from, that is how the black mass organized, that is how they financed the movement, passed the plate and raised the money and so forth. You know something that was interesting during the Civil Rights Movement and in Birmingham is that the churches who supported the movement earlier were hardly

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Working class black churches but relatively poor Black churches. So, when I say the black church, I want to be a little careful there because at that time there were about 400 black churches in Birmingham, Alabama. The movement that really produced the major confrontations in Birmingham was organized by about 40 working class black churches. The other black leaders or other ministers were accommodation leaders. They had deals with the white power structure. They were afraid to stand up with the people and so on. The middle class and more prosperous black churches were rather late in coming to the movement and supporting it. Now, I want to briefly mention why it is that Birmingham in 1963 ended up being the major _____ that it was. It was because when you think of what power is. The famous sociologist Max Vaper defined power in this way. He says it is the ability to realize one's own will despite resistance.

In Birmingham, as in many other local southern cities and rural areas, blacks have gone to the white power structure and said look, can you desegregate the buses. Can we have some black policeman? Can we get some school desegregation? I mean the Brown decision was passed 3 or 4 years ago and nothing has happened and the white power structure always responded by saying, look you know we cannot do that. Segregation is the law of the land. So, what we have here is black leaders who are without power. They are going and they are pleading and begging the white power structure to implement change. The power of the Civil Rights Movement is this. How do you generate the ability to realize your own will despite resistance? Now, what nonviolence resistance... This is why Martin Luther King was a radical and this is why he was not this kind of peaceful lover that he is portrayed as now. What he understood and

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

what the people understood at that point in history is that the only way that segregation was going to change is that the entire Jim Crow order had to be disrupted.

Therefore, in 1963, number one, they implemented an economic boycott of the downtown area. All black people in Birmingham, 90 percent, refused to shop during the movement in Birmingham and it was during Easter season. I know that most black people in this audience would know this. I do not know how many white people know. For black people during Easter, it is second only to Christmas in terms of black people shopping. Everybody has to have a new hat and you have to have new clothes to go to church and so forth. So, then, the white business people in Birmingham expected a great deal of business during the Easter season, but black people refused to buy anything and because of all of the political uncertainties that was going on in Birmingham, white people were afraid to go downtown and shop. So, number one, the business community in Birmingham was brought to a halt. There was no money being made in Birmingham during the movement in 1963. Also, they mobilized thousands of people to march through the streets. What did this do? It did not only make a statement, but it tied those streets up. You could not have any cars, trucks or goods being delivered during this period because the city was completely tied up. One of the ways in which, of course, the power structure dealt with all of these demonstrators and agitators as they call them is that they put them in jail. Then, the movement in Birmingham had a plan for that. What if we fill the jails up and there is nowhere to put anybody else? You would still have thousands of demonstrators coming to demonstrate and the jails would be full; they were able to achieve that. My point here is that what mass, nonviolent direct action did during

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

this period is that it created a total crisis in places like Birmingham, in places like Selma and in other places. It brought business to a halt. It brought political activity to a halt. It created a crisis. It generated power in this sense that then the capitalists who are into making money would say, well, my goodness; this cannot go on. This cannot continue. So, then they started putting pressure on the political leaders saying you need to go talk to those folks in the movement. These leaders of the white community were now coming to the movement leaders saying what do we have to do for you all to stop all of these demonstrations and tying up business and tying up the political system. What can we do? You have to take down the signs of segregation and so on. The bottom line then is that such a crisis was created through the use of nonviolent direct action that the system then had to grant many of the demands of the movement. It is the way in which the Jim Crow order was overthrown.

Because of the national and international crisis created by the Birmingham movement, the White House concluded that they had to act. Attorney Robert F. Kennedy studied the map of the United States where pins showed trouble spots multiplying daily. One of the other things was that the Birmingham Movement was organized so magnificently that literally thousands of local movements grew up in cities all across the nation. They called themselves the Birmingham-style movements. They were styled after Birmingham. So, what you have now is the crisis that is just multiplying throughout the nation. John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, the attorney general, ended up in the war room. They were looking. They had little pins on all this spots where protests were breaking out. So, the attorney general concluded that the federal government could no

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

longer run around the country like a firearm putting out brush fires. He told his brother, President John F. Kennedy, that they had to correct basic injustices. The President responded with a national address in which he explained that now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city, state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. Then, on July 2, 1964, John F. Kennedy signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1964 Civil Rights Act was the act that overthrew legal racial segregation. Then, of course, the 1965 confrontation in Selma was the battle that ended up causing Johnson then to introduce a Voting Rights Act and that is how black people ended up with a franchise. Now, not only did you get the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but you had other measures like affirmative action whose goal was to bring equality between the races.

Now, what I want to do is share with you the lessons that I think can be learned from the Civil Rights Movement. The first lesson to be learned from the Civil Rights Movement is that masses of people acting collectively can generate social change. I want to speak more directly to the young people in the audience. A large portion of Civil Rights participants were young elementary, high school and college students. Indeed, as the movement progressed, black colleges and universities became second only to the black church in terms of its role in organizing and mobilizing black people to confront the Jim Crow order. Thus, young people were crucial to change that was produced by the movement. In fact, when you study social change movements through time and across space and different nations, you realize that in most of those movements the young

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

people who are idealists, who believe in democratic values and who believe that change can happen generally play a very, very important role in producing change within those movements. Another lesson to be learned from this pivotal movement is that it produced real change that is often not understood by younger generations of black people. Young people, imagine being in a situation where you could not vote, where you could not use a washroom, where you could not stay in a hotel, where you could not attend most colleges and universities of this nation, where you could not defend yourself when being attacked physically by whites without risking jail and the possibility of death and where you could do nothing when your father was called boy and your mother called auntie. Imagine being shut out of decent occupations and careers simply because of the color of your skin. Young people, real change occurred. The Civil Rights Movement produced real change and it is only ignorance of history that causes one to doubt that the Civil Rights Movement made a difference. Stokely Carmichael who was one of the important student leaders of the Civil Rights Movement summed it up all metaphorically when he stated that one thing is for sure, black people would never go to the back of the bus again. At the same time, I understand why young black people erroneously believe that the Civil Rights Movement did not generate major change. It is because that movement failed to bring about complete racial equality and it also generated the fears of white backlash against racial equality that rages to this day. The current, white backlash disclosed itself in the hypercritical rhetoric of color blindness and individual right rather than group right. White backlash claimed that equality had been reached and that measures like affirmative action equaled reverse discrimination against qualified whites and generally they mean

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

qualified white males in their view. These whites along with some strategically black supporters (like Clarence Thomas or somebody like that) claimed that the racial playing field is now equal, but the real truth and the hard data reveals a different reality. For example, look at the recent 2000 Census Data and what you will see is some of the following. If you look at each fifth of white families, it will show that each fifth of white families earn dramatically more than each fifth of black families. For example, the lowest fifth of white families on average make 15, 855 dollars a year while similar situated black families earn only 8,236 dollars a year. You have the data there. The other part of it is that it does not get any better when one examines affluent whites and affluent blacks. Indeed, the top 5 percent of white families on average earn 282,017 dollars while similar-situated black families earn only 182,373 dollars. That is a whopping difference of 100,000 dollars.

Moreover, social scientists have come to realize is that wealth is an even more important indicator of racial equality than is income. Wealth consists of assets such as homeownership, stocks and bonds, annuities and the like. Wealth constitutes the resources that are passed down through generations. Wealth determines which groups of families and individuals will have superior power and resources through history. Now, if we want to be honest about it, black people were in slavery for 244 years, then, Jim Crow for another two-thirds of a century, almost another 100 years. They were not earning any assets to be passed down to generations. Even black generations of today have to start pretty much anew and that is not happening in the white community in the same way. Another fact that I think that has to be confronted is that when whites argue I did not own

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

any slaves; I like black people. The fact of the matter is that 244 years of free labor that produced all of these resources did give whites a great amount of wealth that has been passed down to generations to this day. What a head start, what a head start, 244 years of slavery and then three quarters of a century of Jim Crow. Then, the data is clear. At each income level, whites have 5 to 10 times greater wealth than blacks. The greatest wealth inequalities are between higher income blacks and whites. So, it gets worse as you go towards the top. So, in terms of in common wealth, the racial playing field is grossly unequal. That field is a steep incline and a slippery slope for blacks and the current rhetoric of color blindness among whites is not going to change these basic facts.

I want to turn to another very serious form of racial inequality in this nation and in the state of Alabama, in particular. Record numbers of black people, especially young black people, are being locked up in the nation's jails. In the year 2000, 5,051,182 were convicted felons, that is 21 percent of all blacks and 37 percent of black men were convicted felons. Now, let us turn to the state of Alabama, because out of all states, Alabama had the 6th largest incarceration rate out of all of them in 2000. Their rate was 549 persons per 100,000 residents. What does it mean for Alabama to have such a large incarceration rate? In Alabama, felony conviction leads to political disenfranchisement. Indeed, Alabama was one of the few states that disenfranchised all forms of felons including prisoners, parolees, felony probation, jailed inmate and ex-felons. In fact, when you look at the data for Alabama and across the nation, the largest number of folk who are disenfranchised because of felony convictions are actually ex-felons, people who have paid the price but still are disenfranchised. Last year in Alabama, 111,755 African-

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Americans were disenfranchised because of felony convictions. Out of the 10 largest African-American disenfranchised populations, Alabama ranked 6th in the nation. Moreover, there is a large racial dysbaric in Alabama when it comes to felony convictions. The total disenfranchisement rate in Alabama was 6.75 percent but for average Americans that rate doubles the white rate at 13.97 percent. So, nationally, this means that Alabama had a higher rate of black disenfranchisement due to felons than 41 other states. The bottom line is this. This is not without consequence. Probably enough blacks in Alabama were disenfranchised to determine the final outcome of Gore-Bush presidential election. Now, this decision is even stronger when you consider all of the ex-felons nationally who cannot vote. So, then, let me close by saying that the playing field between blacks and whites in this country and in Alabama is nowhere near equal. Income, wealth and equalities between the races remains staggering. A large disproportioned number of African-Americans languish in jails and are disenfranchised because of these convictions.

A more, basic reality I think is that the Civil Rights Movement was able to destroy legal, racial segregation. That is a major accomplishment, but as you well know, America, Alabama and Huntsville for the most part are more racially segregated than during the days of the Civil Rights Movement. There is an article in your major paper here that shows that Huntsville has become more racially segregated in 2000 than it was in 1990. So, it is hard to argue that we are going in the right direction. We have flipped the script. We are headed backwards. So, I think that one of things that is very important to point out and this is true during the Civil Rights Movement, black people never

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

wanted integration because they wanted to be close up around whites or because they wanted to marry whites. What was clear is that in white neighborhoods there were different life chances. There were better schools. There were better services in the community. So, it was the inequality between blacks and whites that caused blacks to say, well we need racial integration. If we all live in the same neighborhoods, go to the same schools and so forth, then we could be equal. The bottom line then is that is not happening and it does not appear to be happening. Before you think that I am picking on Alabama and the South, I bet you when I read the article today in the paper about Huntsville going in the opposite direction and being more segregated now than it was a decade ago, I think you all are ranked number 61 or somewhere around in there. I bet Chicago is up around 3 or 4, but not 1. So, it's a national phenomenon. It is a national phenomenon. So, I would conclude by saying that for freedom-loving people and for people who really want America to be a robust democracy because I maintain, that with staggering racial inequality where there is no equal playing field, you cannot have a robust democracy because those kinds of conditions are not congruent with the claims of the constitution. One of the most important things that the Civil Rights Movement did is that it freed a lot of white people as well as blacks because there were many white people who did not want live like that, living a lie in terms of what this country claimed to be. Therefore, it is just as incumbent upon whites as it is blacks to start thinking about how to reengage the struggle about how to bring about real equality because a social movement and change of real racial equality is needed today as much as it was needed

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

when Jim Crow held sway over most of the south and the nation. America cannot mature into a robust democracy until racial inequality is eliminated at its very roots.

Q: You said that _____ were second only to the black churches immobilizing the movement?

A: Yes.

Q: Did the colleges publicly support these movements, like most of them were state funded, and if they did, did they lose their funding or what did they do about that?

Q: The private black colleges participated a great deal more than the public ones. Whenever there was a protest at a state school, they would get a visit. They would say, tell the president. Can you stop this? If not, we have to cut your funds off. But the other thing is that many of the black students could not be controlled by the administrators. They were caught up in the movement. They were caught up in fighting for change and they went on and protested anyway. The black administrators had to say, heh boss, I cannot control them. So, yes you did have a greater amount of participation from the private ones, but you also had significant protests come out of the state schools as well. By the way, on that questions, do you know that one of the most controversial things that happened in the Birmingham Confrontation in 1963? When the movement needed all these people to go to jail or fill up the jail, King and his lieutenants made a decision that they were going to us really young children to participate in this demonstration. Now, this was very controversial. It was debated within the movement. King's lieutenants, very interestingly, had gone to all these schools in the community; I am talking about elementary schools and they had organized. So, they made the decision to use the kids and they did not tell the parents. So, these young kids were going out there confronting

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Bohr Conner and so on. Now, on the other hand, the belief of the folk in the movement, especially King and other religious leaders and so forth, they always argued that God was in it. They were confident that God would protect the children. What is so interesting to me is that at the moment that it was time for the children to go and protest, the organizers came to these elementary schools and the kids would line up by the thousands. They were jumping over the school's fences and all and racing down to the 16th Street Baptist Church. At the apex of that movement, there were 3,000 really young people in the jail. So, you can imagine the degree to which the parents/adults had to get involved because they had no choice but to try protect their children at that point.

Q: (inaudible) Would say that Afghanistan not only exists because of the ocean, but we live under a form of terrorism right here in this country and they are talking about righting a new constitution that all the blacks and whites get involved with rewriting this constitution and turning things around because if they have a block on the voting, a block on the schools, block on the jobs....it is a materialistic system. Would you agree with that.

A: Well, I will put it in my own words. The way that I look at it is that I try to go back to other periods in history. We had a period in history like what we have now and that was the McCarthy period. This was a period in which there were groups across America who were organizing for change and then what was used by people who wanted to block change was to accuse all of these groups of being communists. Talking about taking rights away, do you know that Paul Roberson, who was this internationally famous actor and singer, he used his being a celebrity to go across the world saying that America was

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

not a democracy because of the way it was treating its own black citizens. Do you know that because of the McCarthy activity and because of communism, they took away Paul Roberson's passport so he could not travel for over a decade. They did not only take his away. They took away W.B. Dubois because W.B. Dubois was traveling across the world doing that thing. So, they took these passports. What my point is here is that with Americans, many of us know in our heart, when you start talking about taking away constitutional, guaranteed freedom, that you are truly on a slippery slope. We also know that black people feel it most intensely because we know that we will pay far more dearly than others. So, I would certainly agree that the treatment of people of color in this society to a certain extent can dictate how we see people of color around the world. That is one of the reasons why I argue that it is so critical that we get over this race problem. When I say get over the race problem, I want to be clear; I do not mean to hold hands and sing, We Shall Overcome. Until the structures of inequality, income inequalities, public inequalities, educational inequalities....Until those structures of inequality are _____, there is no reason for us to suspect that we are going to get along together in some form of racial harmony. Think about this. If it took almost 40 years...If you have structures of control and structures of this _____ that lasted for 40 years, what would you really have to do to change those? They are deep. They are well entrenched and so it would take a lot. Coming back to my brother over here, I would say that there are some real serious problems confronting this country in terms of race but not only race. There is another serious thing going on. When we talk about racial inequality, look at class inequality. Inequality between well-off Americans and poor Americans or even

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

working class Americans; I do not care what color they are, those inequalities have increased drastically very significantly. So, one of the things about the black movement and one importance in this country historically, it has always been a broad-based freedom movement and it allows other people who want a democracy to get involved. That is why when we look at the Civil Rights Movement and think about it and what it did, it generated the Women's Movement. It generated the Environmental Movement. It generated the Disability's Movement. It generated the Farm Worker's Movement and there are a lot of other movements I can mention. Its because the black movement has always reached at and really tried to push to be a robust democracy and really reach out embrace what is claimed in the constitution. That is why King said, we are just trying to make the country live up to what it claims to be on paper. So, we are in a serious situation here.

Q: With the trend going backwards, do you think that reparations can help out to heal some of these wounds or do you think that it would farther divide us or do you think it has some kind of a place in the movement today.

A: I think that reparations should be seriously debated and considered in America. I think that one of the reasons why America walked out of the conference in South Africa was not so much because of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. I think that all of these countries from across the world was going to come to America and come to Europe and say, look, here is what has happened, here is why America is a rich nation because of its engagement in the slave trade and because of all of these centuries of slavery and here is why Europe is such a strong power because of its role in the same dirty business. If we

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

want to go on a new path, we have to try to correct some of these inequalities and these centuries of oppression. So, my position about reparations is that I think that everything now ought to be put on the table for discussion. I think as I mentioned in my talk, I believe that if we were dealing with a situation in which whites in this society or any other privilege group had really, really earned everything fair and square or if they are really where they are simply because they worked hard and not because of 250 years of free labor and not because of 75 years of Jim Crow (if that were true) then blacks should not be talking about no reparations, but it is not true. If blacks are forever locked behind because of the history of this country and the racist practices of this country, the question really then is how do we go about changing that? How do we do it? Do we just say, well you know, everybody pull themselves up by their own bootstraps now. We are all equal now and we know that is not true. So, yes, I think that reparations is something that ought to be fiercely considered. It ought to be debated and discussed like any other proposed measure. There are all kinds of complexities and all of that. A lawyer once told me that just because something is complex to implement does not mean that it should not be seriously considered if questions of justice are involved. Everybody still like me okay?

A: Yes.

Q: I want to ask the question about disenfranchisement. Is that possible to be disenfranchised for us? I have heard that we have the right to vote upon every so many years, is that true?

A: I am not an expert on exactly how that happens. I do know that the Civil Rights Act was something that was suppose to be put in place for a limited amount of time until the

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

goal had been accomplished and then it would be revoted on. I have noticed that has happened in the past, so there may very well be additional times that it would have to come up for another vote and so forth so. In other words, I do not think that the Voting Rights Act is suppose to exist in perpetuity. I do not think that is the way it is on the book.

Q: Will disenfranchisement take place in the black community because the 1965 Civil Rights Act is no longer in the book.

A: I am not sure that follows. I think number one that most black people who vote and who recognize the responsibility to vote and what we had to pay to get it, they are not about to give it up for any reason. I think that you know that we have a far more serious problem; I would not say more serious, but equally serious problem and that is a lot of our people are not being educated for exercising the franchising and recognizing they got it through people making all kinds of sacrifices and so forth.

Q: Dr. Morris. Thank you very much for your speech. I have been trying (inaudible) I cannot find a measuring yard to measure your progress, because we have the rights and nobody would touch that. The females have the rights and nobody can mess with them. A young girl can work here with their tops on with their small bikini and you cannot even touch her, even if you want to, but every time blacks are given their rights the government has a way with a lawyer to circumvent that right. What is the cause of racism? I will give you the cause, if you want a debate, but how do you as a people find the cause of racism that you cannot stop. I do not see any end to this. So, if (inaudible)

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

and nobody would mess with her when she comes around here. (inaudible) and nobody debates that?

A: I got your point, I think. One of my replies would be this is a little side issue. What I think he was asking me is that how do you measure progress on the racial front and how can you be sure that you progress when the rights that you won can be easily taken. I think he was also saying that when you look at gender inequality, it seems to be a little less complexed and that the rules are clear about what you can and cannot do, specifically the women. My sidebar is to say that gender inequality (inequality between men and women) is that it remains a fundamental form of inequality in America society. Secondly, the black community is the one that can afford gender inequality the least because when you look at the degree of family that are headed by black women by themselves, we need to fight like hell to make sure that they can get decent jobs and decent pay. Not only that, because of the historical burden that has been thrust on the black community, black men and women need to be equal to be able to carry forth the struggle. So, I want to say that about gender inequality. Another major form of inequality is that if America is to be what it aspires to be, it is a form that needs to be eliminated. Now, let me go back to what I think is the crust of this question and that is how do you measure racial progress in this society and can it be easily taken? I think that as I said in my talk there has been racial progress in this society. Before the Civil Rights Movement, if you were a middle class black, you were a teacher; you were a preacher; you were a mortician or you were an attorney or doctor. It was a small, tiny black middle class. Less than a tenth of the workforce could be classified as black middle class prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Now, a third of the black population can be counted as part of the black middle class and that is because that movement was able to open up doors of opportunity that had been previously closed in the schools and in the workplace itself. So, it would be foolhardy I think to not understand the progress that has been made because when you understand the progress that has been made, then you understand that you have something to build on. Now, the other part of it is yes. The gains are always under assault and what that means is that the struggle must always be vigilant to make sure that they are not reversed. Not only that, of course, you make sure that you lay the groundwork to move ahead into progress beyond what you have already received. It is a dual fight always. Protect what you got and push forward. That has been our history in this society, this country.

Q: Dr. Morris you spoke of a disparity in the numbers of African-Americans and whites being sentenced but I would like to ask a question. What do you think is a possible solution to alleviate that? With the disparity in the way the sentencing occurs because it has been proven over time definitely that blacks receive harsher convictions in comparison to white counterparts. What are possible solutions to alleviate this and make it a fair conviction across the board versus one being greater than the other?

A: Well, you certainly referred to a very, very complex problem in this society. We know that justice in America is highly correlated with the amount of resources that you have. If you have a lot of money and you can get good lawyers and you can get good experts, witnesses and so forth, you have a much greater chance of being released and not convicted. On one hand, I think what we have to do is recognize that there is this complicated relationship always between race and class and so a big part of the problem

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

is that large numbers of black people who are incarcerated and who are convicted are also poor. So, we have to deal with this whole issue of economics, unemployment and the work and poor. So, that is a big part of it. Another part of it, of course, is that the criminal justice system in America has been racist. One of things that is going on right now in Illinois is that our governor (and he is a Republican) was courageous enough to declare a moratorium on death _____ in Illinois. Now, what is so interesting here is that there has been about at least 10 different cases now of black men on death row. Most of them have been accused of raping white women and other very, very serious crimes. Thank God for DNA. Over the last year, I have not counted them all, but I can tell you that at least 20 black men have been released from death row for false convictions. What we also know from this and what we are learning from this is that many times the convictions were beaten out of them by racist white cops and so forth. It is just a fact and so here again is a situation in which the criminal justice system has to be studied, examined and challenged. By the way, one of the reasons why you have a large rate in the prison population, especially amongst African-Americans is drug convictions. There are those who argue that most of these people need help. They need rehabilitation, not to be thrown away and locked in jail where they become hardened criminals and then released and reek havoc on the society. So, yes, I would just say that we clearly have a criminal justice system with some serious, serious racial biases in it and it is getting innocent people killed and forcing folk to stay in jail far longer than they should and as a result also being politically disenfranchised.

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Q: It is really not a question. It is more of responding to the issue raised about disenfranchisement. The Voting Rights Act is periodically comes up for renewal. If it is not renewed, though, blacks will not lose their right to vote. Remember the 15th Amendment is the thing that gave blacks the right to vote. So, until that amendment is repealed blacks will always have the right to vote. What the Voting Rights Act does is that it gives the federal government the authority to come in and enforce the 15th Amendment. If the Voting Rights Act is not renewed, then that power will also removed. So, I just wanted to clear that up.

A: What I am concerned about is if we all have the right to vote but we do not vote because we are discouraged or something...I hear information all the time that people are just not voting. In fact, middle class and low class people (poor people) have got to realize that they have power if they use it, the power of their vote and they should not be discouraged. They should get together and begin to use that power. Now, the United States is becoming ruled by corporations, but I know that there is not a senator anywhere or representative that cannot be voted out of office if you do not like what they are doing by numbers. I wish to goodness that people would realize that, particularly young people. So, let us get together, all of us, and vote some of these ridiculous laws and actions by the federal government out.

A: What I would say to that is that of course I agree with this, but I would also add that often you vote one group of scoundrels out and another group in. The real problem is that many people choose not to vote I think because they went and they voted and they thought that some real change was going to come and it was at this that is made no

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

difference. When you think about my argument about the playing field is not level...Think about this. One of the most (I do not think that anybody would disagree with me) important bodies in the federal government is the senate. There is not one black senator and it does not concern many folks, no big thing. I think that part of what has happened in this country is that we just have turned our heads away now. I look at all of the major talk shows like CNN and The Today Show and Good Morning, America, and all that. I do not see any diverse group of people discussing issues. For the most part, I have never really seen any serious black journalists or anybody on discussing any issues; so, it is becoming a very narrow dialogue, a very closed kind of community. Finally, about the importance of the vote, a democracy is not just about the vote. It is about informed citizens organizing themselves and engaging in relentless participation in struggle to make the country a democracy. So, I think we have to keep that part in mind. Lastly, I want to thank you for listening to me tonight. I want to say that in these sort of talks, I wonder about them later because I know that part of what I got to say is not meant to bring any peace, no feel good. I think that as an individual I hate to be the bringer of bad _____; I really do. I would rather for everybody to say, boy, that Dr. Morris is a real cool guy. I love him, but I know I have a higher calling as an academic and as somebody who studies these things. If I said anything to spur you all to think deep about, even if you completely disagree with me, even if you read the data that I have tried to talk to you about differently, I only ask please let us think about what is happening in America today. Thank you.