

Black Militancy | A1 Sample Answer

Account for the rise of black militancy during the 1960s and assess its impact on the civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement of the sixties, led by Martin Luther King, was predominately a peaceful movement. King was a pacifist and preached the use of non-violent protests and other peaceful methods to achieve goals for civil rights. For the most part, this was successful and President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1965. However, the movement began to show signs of disunity soon after this.

Black militants were of the belief that these reforms were a case of 'too little, too late'. The legal barriers for equality were gone but racism was still prevalent. Blacks were the poorest, most illiterate, most badly housed and most unemployed racial group in America even in 1965. Many young, urban blacks became disillusioned with Martin Luther King because the gaps between his promises and how they were fulfilled seemed too large to ignore. They saw the civil rights movement as something white people still controlled, which was what they were meant to be against. Young, urban blacks in northern cities came to reject both white liberalism and King's civil rights campaign, wanting and choosing a more extreme option.

By 1964, the SNCC was openly critical of interracial co-operation. In 1966, its chairman said the time had come for blacks to take control of the civil rights movement away from whites. This was the start of the rise of black militancy. He said that there was no room for white involvement in black rights and rejected King's faith in reform through non-violence. He said, "we have got to get us some black power." Many young blacks felt more strongly about this mind-set than they did about King's and 'black power' became their slogan. They thought reform was taking too long and whites would only respond to violence.

In 1966, a more extreme group called the Black Panthers were set up. They were a paramilitary force and their leader, Huey Newton, called on blacks to defend themselves against the police. They collected weapons in case of attack. The Panthers targeted the police and their campaign did indeed frighten many whites. However, in urban neighbourhoods where most of the population was both black and extremely poor, the Panthers set up charitable help such as the free breakfast and lunch programme. They gave out free meals to poor black families, including hundreds of children. They also gave free clothes to people in need. They often helped poor black people who were in trouble with the authorities or their landlords by giving

them free legal aid. J. Edgar Hoover said that the free breakfast and lunch programme was ‘the most dangerous internal threat’. The FBI unleashed COINTELPRO covert operation to stop the Panthers. This just increased urban black animosity towards white authority.

In the black ghettos in northern cities, a group called the Black Muslims won much support. They denounced Christianity, the primary religion of America at the time, and declared black superiority. Elijah Muhammad, their leader, advocated black separatism and racial pride. He denounced King and called him a tool of white pride. Muhammad Ali was a firm member of this group. By the mid-sixties, Malcolm X had become the spokesperson for the Black Muslims. He was a charismatic leader and his message of Black Nationalism appealed to many urban blacks. He acknowledged and expressed their anger at white oppression better than King. Famously he made a speech about how he used an X as a symbol for his last name because his true surname had been stolen from his family by slavery. Malcolm X was assassinated by a black gunman and he quickly became a martyr to many blacks.

Riots and violent protests with black militants were common. In 1964, small scale racial violence erupted in the black ghetto of Harlem. In 1965, five days after the Civil Rights Bill was passed, a huge riot broke out in Watts, Los Angeles. For six days, looting and fighting between black youths and police raged. 28 blacks were killed and damage done to property totalled thirty million dollars. The riot upset King who still held the belief that the way to achieve civil equality was through peace. He moved the SCLC headquarters to Chicago to shift the focus on to northern blacks who had trouble with housing and jobs. Further riots took place in the summers of 1966 and 1967 in New York, Detroit, Chicago, Newark and other cities. In 1967, 83 people were killed in 164 different riots. They caused over 100 million dollars’ worth of damage.

Because of the violence of black militancy, the civil rights movement became deeply divided. King and other moderate leaders pleaded for peace and, fearing white backlash, insisted black militants were the minority. Many whites became frightened or angry at the movement and it made many unwilling to offer their support any longer. Other whites thought the riots were inspired by envy of white prosperity. They claimed that blacks were just lazy and would become prosperous if they worked harder. However all American’s economic prosperity did was anger young blacks further as, due to a system of racial discrimination and prejudice, they were unable to attain any of it.

Ultimately, King’s death in April 1968 marked the beginning of the end of the civil rights movement. Many blacks felt that, violence or peace, true civil reform would never come. Riots broke out in 125 cities following King’s assassination. One week later, the new civil rights bill that promoted equal housing was

passed. However racial inequality and prejudices still remained a major obstacle for blacks and remain as such today.