

Name: _____ Class: _____

Empowering the Black Power Movement

By USHistory.org
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This informational text discusses how the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s emerged as a major political force following the Civil Rights Movement. While the Civil Rights Movement helped end legal segregation in America, the Black Power movement sought to end the economic and social inequality that African Americans continued to face. As you read, take notes on how the Black Power Movement was formed.

- [1] On June 5, 1966, the Civil Rights Movement's James Meredith was shot in an ambush as he attempted to complete a peaceful solo "March Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. Meredith had already made national headlines in 1962 by becoming the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

Civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Floyd McKissick of CORE,¹ and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC² rushed to Meredith's hospital bed. They determined that his march must be completed. As Carmichael and McKissick walked through Mississippi, they observed that when it came to race relations, little had changed despite federal legislation. Local townspeople harassed the marchers while the police turned a blind eye or arrested the activists as troublemakers.



"Black Power movement at the Chicago Freedom Movement Rally Soldier Field Freedom Sunday" by Chicago Urban League Records is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

At a mass rally, Carmichael uttered the simple statement: "What we need is black power." Crowds chanted the phrase as a slogan, and a movement began to flower.

Carmichael and McKissick were heavily influenced by the words of Malcolm X,³ and rejected integration⁴ as a short-term goal. Carmichael felt that blacks needed to feel a sense of racial pride and self-respect before any meaningful gains could be achieved. He encouraged the strengthening of African American communities without the help of whites.

1. CORE stands for the Congress of Racial Equality. The organization formed one of the "Big 4" civil rights organizations.
2. The SNCC, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was another one of the "Big 4" civil rights organizations.
3. Malcolm X (1925-1965) was an African American Muslim minister and human rights activist who criticized white power's harsh treatment of black Americans and encouraged black Americans to resist white power with violence.
4. Racial separation, or segregation, of students was legal in America until the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board* that "separate but equal" segregation policies were unconstitutional. A policy of integration, or bringing together students of different races in the same schools, began. A decade later, in 1964, American President Lyndon B. Johnson asked for, received, and signed a bill called the Civil Rights Act, which prevented discrimination in voting, education, or public spaces, thereby nationalizing integration policies.

- [5] Chapters of SNCC and CORE — both integrated organizations — began to reject white membership as Carmichael abandoned peaceful resistance. Martin Luther King Jr. and the NAACP⁵ denounced⁶ black power as the proper forward path. But black power was a powerful message in the streets of urban⁷ America, where resentment boiled and tempers flared.

Soon, African American students began to celebrate African American culture boldly and publicly. Colleges teemed⁸ with young blacks wearing traditional African colors and clothes. Soul singer James Brown had his audience chanting “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.” Hairstyles unique to African Americans became popular and youths proclaimed, “Black is Beautiful!”

That same year, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale took Carmichael’s advice one step further. They formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. Openly brandishing weapons, the Panthers decided to take control of their own neighborhoods to aid their communities and to resist police brutality. Soon the Panthers spread across the nation. The Black Panther Party borrowed many tenets⁹ from socialist movements, including Mao Zedong’s¹⁰ famous creed “Political power comes through the barrel of a gun.” The Panthers and the police exchanged gunshots on American streets as white Americans viewed the growing militancy with increasing alarm. Newton himself was arrested in October of 1968 after he was involved in a shootout with police that left an officer dead.¹¹ Despite the escalation¹² in violence around the country, the Black Panther Party kept growing.

The peaceful Civil Rights Movement was dealt a severe¹³ blow in the spring of 1968. On the morning of April 4, King was gunned down by a white assassin named James Earl Ray. Riots spread through American cities as African Americans mourned the death of their most revered¹⁴ leader. Black power advocates saw the murder as another sign that white power must be met with similar force. As the decade came to a close, there were few remaining examples of legal discrimination. But across the land, de facto¹⁵ segregation loomed large. Many schools were hardly integrated and African Americans struggled to claim their fair share of the economic pie.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement led by CORE, SNCC, and NAACP achieved much with their nonviolent civil disobedience methods in regards to ending Jim Crow laws¹⁶ and supporting integration laws. But the 1970s would belong to the Black Power movement.

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5. The NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is another of the “Big 4” civil rights organizations.
 6. **Denounce (verb):** to state that something is evil or wrong
 7. **Urban (adjective):** in, relating to, or characteristic of a city or town
 8. **Teem (verb):** to be full of something in large numbers
 9. **Tenet (noun):** a core belief or idea that is important to a group
 10. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was a Chinese communist and the founder and first president of the People’s Republic of China.
 11. Newton was convicted on charges of voluntary manslaughter of Officer John Frey, with witnesses claiming that Newton used Frey’s gun to shoot Frey. Due to conflicting evidence, California granted Newton a retrial in 1970. After two mistrials with hung, or undecided, juries, the district attorney said he would not pursue a fourth trial and Newton was released from prison. Newton claims that Frey shot him first and that he and another officer, Herbert Heaves, were shooting opposite each other.
 12. **Escalation (noun):** an increase in amount, intensity, or scope
 13. **Severe (adjective):** very great, intense, or harsh
 14. **Revere (verb):** to feel deep respect or admiration for something or someone
 15. De facto is a Latin expression that means “in fact” and is synonymous to “as a matter of fact.”
 16. Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation throughout the American South.

Unit 9: “Empowering the Black Power Movement” <https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/empowering-the-black-power-movement>

1. Who was James Meredith? Why was he significant to the Civil Rights Movement?
2. Who first used the term “Black Power”?
3. Which organizations were in favor of Black Power and which were opposed? Why?
4. What was the goal of the Black Panthers?
5. What impact did the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. have on the Civil Rights Movement? What impact did it have on the Black Power Movement?

Due: April 17th, 2020