

Unit 9 Essay Prompt

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Power Debate

Using information from the documents and your knowledge of United States history and government, answer the following question:

Martin Luther King Jr. was very critical of Stokely Carmichael and other advocates of Black Power. Why? Was he right to criticize them? Why or why not?

• King and the Black Power Debate •

The Civil War put an end to slavery. However, instead of blacks gaining full equality, a new system of racial segregation was soon imposed on them—especially in the South. This system was named “Jim Crow” after a well-known figure in minstrel shows. For nearly a century, Jim Crow segregation kept blacks separate from whites in many areas of public life. Poll taxes and other laws made it nearly impossible for blacks to vote in many Southern states.

It was only in the 1950s that blacks and whites forged a massive movement that was able to bring down Jim Crow laws. That movement flowered in the wake of the war against Nazi Germany. This war of racism may have convinced enough Americans to open their hearts to cries for change in America’s own system of racial injustice.

Also, at that point, the right leader appeared—one able to arouse fully the religious, spiritual, and political feelings of his people. In Martin Luther King Jr., all of America seemed to discover its voice. And, in the early 1960s, a united assault finally put an end to legalized segregation. Moreover, it confronted Americans as never before with the need to eliminate the evil of racism in all its forms.

The full force of the civil rights movement made itself known through sit-ins, Freedom Riders, and activists who went South in ever-increasing numbers in the early 1960s. The 1963 March on Washington marked a turning point after which Congress could no longer avoid the challenge.

The civil rights acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968 ended all the forms of legal segregation that had been the focus of the civil rights movement. However, the urban riots of the mid-1960s made it clear that racial divides still existed and that new struggles against them would not be easy. As the civil rights movement was turning to confront these problems, a major dispute divided it. This

dispute pitted King and many of his oldest comrades against a younger and more militant group of black activists. The dispute centered around the call by these younger activists for “Black Power.”

King had always advocated disciplined, non-violent civil disobedience to awaken the moral conscience of all citizens, black and white. He aimed for the integration of blacks into a society that would be completely “color blind.” As he put it, his dream was that one day his children would be judged “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” King’s views were shared by many at his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These groups worked with whites and included them with blacks in positions of leadership.

At first, these views were also shared by the leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, its leader, Stokely Carmichael, clashed with King in 1966 by adopting the Black Power slogan and calling on whites to give up leadership positions in SNCC. In doing this, he was following in the footsteps of Malcolm X and other black nationalists. Their appeal was especially strong among angry blacks in the cities. Some saw it as a call for blacks to depend more fully on themselves rather than on whites, both in the movement and in society at large. Others saw the Black Power slogan as a divisive form of reverse racism, one that could only weaken the movement.

In a way, the Black Power dispute is just one example of a longstanding debate among blacks over the best way to achieve justice: through integration into the larger society or through self-help and self-empowerment. This debate began long before the 1960s, and in many ways it is still going on. The sources for this lesson will help you take part in it.

King and Black Power Time Line

1954

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court declares that the concept of "separate but equal" public schooling is unconstitutional.

1955

When Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, she is arrested. This sparks a boycott of the city buses by blacks, which lasts more than a year. Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. leads the boycott, gaining national attention.

1957

Reverend King invites southern black ministers to a meeting in Atlanta. There, the group forms the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It is guided by King's philosophy of nonviolent protest. SCLC operates as an umbrella organization coordinating the efforts of many other local groups. It organizes mass protest campaigns and voter registration drives throughout the South.

1960

In February, four black students protest segregation by starting a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. In April, black college students found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC promotes the tactic of non-violent sit-ins. It takes part in the Freedom Rides, trips by activists on interstate buses to challenge various forms of segregation in the South. Later it leads voter registration drives in the South.

1963

Civil rights protests grow and a sense of crisis deepens, especially after a Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, is bombed, killing four young black girls. In August, Martin Luther King Jr. gives his historic "I Have a Dream" speech as more than 250,000 people there march for jobs and freedom.

1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ends segregation in all public facilities.

1965

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits racial discrimination in voting practices. This follows a major march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King Jr. Meanwhile, tensions between SCLC and SNCC grow. On February 21, Black nationalist leader Malcolm X is assassinated. Malcolm X first became known as a national spokesman for the Nation of Islam, a black separatist religious and political organization. By 1965, he had left the Nation of Islam, but he continued to stress black pride and the use of violence in self-defense. He gave voice especially to the anger of many urban blacks.

1966

Stokely Carmichael leads one faction in taking over SNCC. The organization then ejects white members, as Carmichael calls for Black Power and stresses the need for black self-reliance and the right to use violence as a means of self defense. Meanwhile, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton co-founded the Black Panthers in Oakland, California. The Panthers advocate the use of violence for self-defense. Their platform reads: "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community. We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny."

1966-68

King continues to oppose black separatism and Black Power as a slogan. He begins to speak out against the Vietnam War and makes plans to lead a national Poor People's Campaign to aid the poor of all races. On April 4, 1968, he is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

Visual Primary Source Documents 1–3



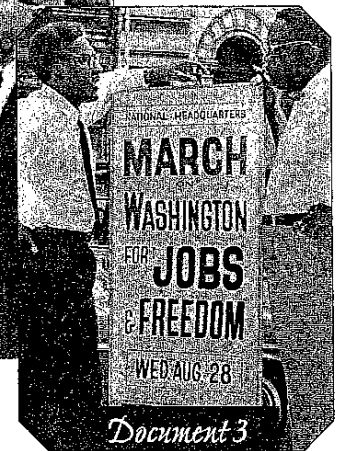
Document 1

Courtesy of the
Library of Congress.



Document 2

The Granger Collection, New York.



Document 3

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs
Division, LC-USZ62-133369.

Information on Documents 1–3

Document 1 Kivie Kaplan, President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1966–1975. The NAACP from its beginnings included white as well as black leaders, and Kaplan was actually just one of several white NAACP presidents.

Document 2 Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (fourth from right) and other civil rights leaders march against segregation from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 25, 1965. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

worked closely with the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee (SNCC), though King disagreed strongly with it when it began to be guided by the Black Power concept.

Document 3 On the left is civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, with Cleveland Robinson on August 7, 1963. The two are working to organize the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin opposed any use of violence in the struggle for civil rights, and criticized the views of Black Power groups.

Visual Primary Source Documents 4 & 5



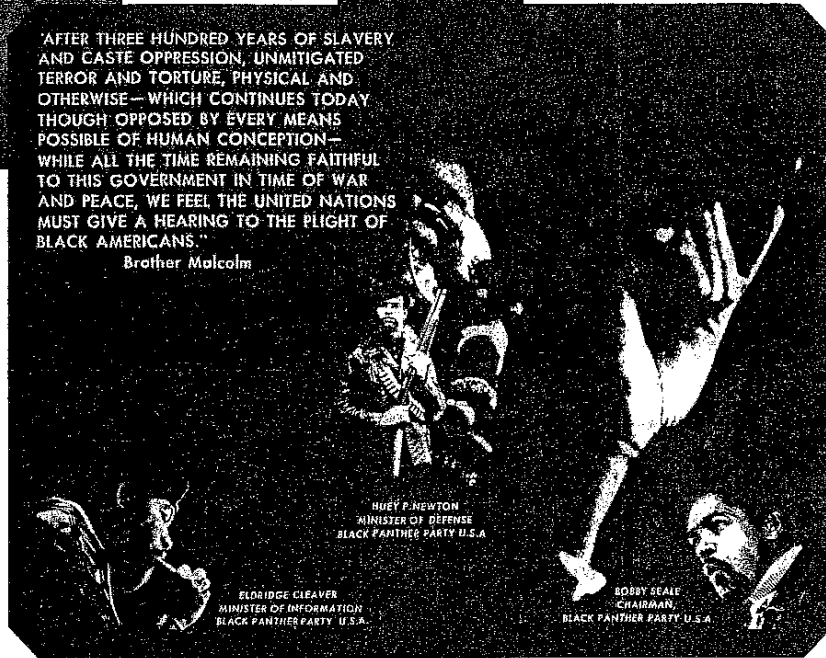
Document 4

Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division, LC-USZ6-1847

Document 5

"AFTER THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF SLAVERY
AND CASTE OPPRESSION, UNMITIGATED
TERROR AND TORTURE, PHYSICAL AND
OTHERWISE— WHICH CONTINUES TODAY
THOUGH OPPOSED BY EVERY MEANS
POSSIBLE OF HUMAN CONCEPTION—
WHILE ALL THE TIME REMAINING FAITHFUL
TO THIS GOVERNMENT IN TIME OF WAR
AND PEACE, WE FEEL THE UNITED NATIONS
MUST GIVE A HEARING TO THE PLIGHT OF
BLACK AMERICANS."

Brother Malcolm



The Granger Collection, New York

Information on Documents 4 & 5

Document 4 Malcolm X rejected King's philosophy of non-violence. He also rejected integration. His ideas inspired many of those who began using the Black Power slogan in the mid-1960s. Here he and King briefly meet as King leaves a press conference at the U.S. Capitol on March 26, 1964.

Document 5 Probably the most famous organization backing the Black Power idea was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. This 1970 Black Panther poster shows Panther leaders Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale, and it includes the words of Malcolm X.

Written Primary Source Document 1

Information on Document 1

This is a passage from a speech by Stokely Carmichael, head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Carmichael did not invent the Black Power idea. However, he did develop the concept and use it boldly to reorganize SNCC and limit whites from leadership positions in that organization. This speech about "Black Power" was given to a group of radical students at the University of California in Berkeley, in October 1966.

• Document 1 •

Now we maintain that we cannot have white people working in the black community, and we mean it on a psychological ground. The fact is that all black people often question whether or not they are equal to whites, because every time they start to do something, white people are around showing them how to do it. If we are going to eliminate that for the generation that comes after us, then black people must be seen in positions of power, doing and articulating for themselves.

That is not to say that one is a reverse racist; it is to say that one is moving in a healthy ground; it is to say what the philosopher Sartre says: One is becoming an "antiracist racist."...

And it is nonsensical for people to start talking about human relationships until they're willing to build new institutions. Black people are economically insecure. White liberals are economically secure. Can you begin to build an economic coalition? Are the liberals willing to share their salaries with the economically insecure black people they so much love? Then if you're not, are you willing to start building new institutions that will provide economic security for black people? That's the question we want to deal with.

Written Primary Source Document 2

Information on Document 2

Roy Wilkins was Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1955 to 1977. The passage is from *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins*, by Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews (Viking Press, 1982, pp. 316–317). In the passage, Wilkins comments on his 1966 disagreement with Stokely Carmichael about the concept of “Black Power.”

Document 2

The issue [of Black Power] was not new. There had been Negro banks and savings and loans for nearly seventy-five years. Obviously, black people had been thinking of economic power for a long time. For sixty years, the NAACP had asserted the right of Negroes to self-defense against the violence of white oppression. During the Parker affair in the thirties and the elections of 1948 and 1960, Negroes had amply shown how aware they were of their own political power. None of these things was new. The younger people were either ignorant of the long record or they chose to ignore it.

The real question so far as I was concerned, was whether SNCC and Stokely were after a revolution. I had always believed that for American Negroes revolutionary fantasies were suicidal. To oppose revolution did not mean to fear whites; I knew that anyone who was not cautious in leading a one-tenth minority into conflict with an overwhelming majority was a fool. You can face a lion one way when you have real artillery, but if you have a powder puff, you have to handle yourself differently—if you want to keep your people alive. For all Stokely's reckless talk of guns and power back then, I still don't think he could tell the difference between a pistol and a powder puff.