

Rosa Parks

Mother of the Civil Rights Movement

Mary Margaret Sudduth

Bianca Trejo

Research Directorate



DEFENSE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH

Directed by Dr. Daniel P. McDonald, Director of Research
February 2011

Observance Report # 04-11



For many, Rosa Parks is the woman who stood up by sitting down; however, her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement began before and ended long after the famous events of December 1, 1955. Parks should not be considered a passive, tired bus rider, but instead as a social activist tired of inequality. She did not simply participate in a singular event, but made her life's work about contributing to the greater Civil Rights Movement. This article details her work before and beyond the now famous bus ride that pushed progress forward.

Although the first milestone in the Civil Rights Movement was in 1948 when Truman signed Executive Order 9981, granting all people in the armed services equal treatment and opportunity without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin, Rosa Parks' involvement in equality began as early as 1934. Her initial involvement in changing the way African-Americans were treated in America began when she joined the effort to help collect money for a group of nine African-American teenage boys who were falsely accused of raping two white women. Later, with her husband's support, Parks finished her high school education as well as, after three failed attempts, registered to vote. These accomplishments occurred at a time when less than 7% of the African American population was receiving high school diplomas and during the backdrop of Jim Crow laws, making it difficult for African-Americans to participate in politics.

Shortly after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Rosa Parks' brother was drafted into the U.S. Army, yet was not allowed to vote. This injustice was the final push that led Parks to formally join the Civil Rights Movement in December of 1943 when she joined the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). During Parks' first meeting at the NAACP, she was the only female attending that evening and was elected secretary of the chapter. According to Parks, she was too timid to say no and just began taking minutes. Her role in the Civil Rights Movement was not to be the face of civil rights, but instead a more subtle role organizing membership in the NAACP, keeping the books, and recording reports of discrimination. During her work under executive secretary, E.D. Nixon, Parks focused on two main Jim Crow issues: voting rights and desegregation of the city buses.

Desegregating the city buses in Montgomery, Alabama may seem like an arbitrary cause in the presence of the many Jim Crow injustices; however, Parks suffered personally from this prejudice and one memorable occasion cemented this cause for Parks as early as twelve years before her famous act of passive resistance. Of all of the segregation laws, the bus system was the most arbitrary, with rules changing from bus driver to bus driver. One noteworthy driver, James F. Blake, was particularly prejudiced and cruel often forcing African-Americans to pay for the ride through the front doors, exit, and reenter in the rear doors. Often, once the individual exited after paying, Blake would shut the doors and speed off, leaving the patron behind with the bus exhaust. During Parks' first encounter with Blake, he ordered her to reenter the bus through the back; however, Parks refused, suggesting that the back of the back entrance was so full that she would not be able to enter. When Blake pushed Parks she demanded he not touch her, saying that she would exit on her own. At this point Parks, unknowingly, demonstrated her first act of passive resistance. She purposely dropped her purse on the way out and sat in one of the front seats to pick the purse up. She then exited the bus and would not ride the bus when Blake was driving it for 12 years.

Parks' activity became more high profile when she delivered her first speech at the state NAACP convention in Mobile. This speech elicited a thunderous applause and subsequently got her elected to secretary of the statewide NAACP (on top of her current position as secretary for the Montgomery branch). Parks' civil rights activity slowed for a short period while taking care of her sick mother and working many jobs at one time took center stage.

Bus segregation had been bubbling up once again as Montgomery's black community was discussing a potential boycott. Considerations of a boycott never led to action out of fear that it would not work. The issue came to a head when a 16 year old African-American girl refused to give up her seat to a white patron. She was arrested and charged. This young lady was an active member of the NAACP youth council and was an advisee of Parks. Parks considered this as an opportunity to challenge the system and immediately began raising funds for the girl's defense; however, it was soon discovered that she was pregnant. Parks feared that the girl would be caste as having a bad reputation and would not be a model plaintiff. This could possibly weaken the boycott.

Just as Parks believed that there was no model plaintiff or hope for the bus boycott, she was offered an opportunity to attend a training workshop at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, TN. Highlander is a famous school for training activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Diane Nash, and Marion Barry, Jr. The particular training Parks was offered involved the discussion of desegregation – "Radical Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision". During her two week training at Highland, Parks learned new strategies for activism. As she ate integrated meals and partook in integrated conversations, it was during this training that Parks was able to see what an integrated society may offer. Here she was able to share her struggle, discuss ways to use the media as well as the churches to spread activism, as well as network with other prominent activists.

When Parks returned to Montgomery, she and her associates were still watching for potential bus segregation cases; however, the opportunities when African-Americans did not acquiesce to the bus driver, the individuals were not model citizens to illustrate the cause. It was not until December 1, 1955 that the opportunity presented itself. Parks was on her way home from work and boarded the bus home. Without realizing, the driver was none other than Blake, the bus driver she had been avoiding for 12 years. She sat in the middle "mixed" seating section, where the bus driver was permitted to push the "colored" sign closer or further from the back as needed. After three stops, Blake did just that and told Parks and the three other African Americans in that row to stand to allow one white man to sit. At this moment, Rosa Parks went from being a quiet foot soldier in the civil rights movement to a forceful voice. Blake asked Parks if she was going to move and she said "no." Blake then told her that he would have her arrested and she responded, "You may do that." At this moment, Parks did not passively sit back, but instead she took action and expressed her right as well as acknowledged Blake's. When the officers arrived at the scene, she was asked why she did not stand up when Blake asked her. She only responded with one question – "Why do you all push us around?" The officer could not answer this question and offered that Parks had broken the law and would be under arrest.

Her arrest sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation. It sparked the involvement of many other protests, and it fueled Dr. Martin Luther King to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. After Parks arrest, she became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement. From an effort of hard work, the U.S. Supreme Court declared desegregation on public buses in 1956.

In 1963, Parks participated in the March on Washington civil rights rally, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his 'I have a Dream' speech. She traveled and worked at a variety of places until 1965, when she was hired as a secretary and receptionist for U.S. Representative John Conyers in Detroit, Michigan. She held this position for 20 years before she retired. She participated in the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights for African-Americans. In recognition of her efforts in the Civil Rights Movement, she received numerous awards from the NAACP, President Bill Clinton, and Congress. In addition, a library and museum was opened in her memory. Finally, she wrote two books about her life.

From early experiences growing up in society under Jim Crow to her extensive work in the NAACP and beyond, there is much more to Rosa Parks' story than just one act of defiance. The society we know today is the fruit of Parks' courage and determination. From her need for action and mastery of civil disobedience, Rosa Parks is one of the most recognized leaders for The Civil Rights Movement. As we reflect on the giants who came before us during this Black History Month, let us not consider Rosa Parks as a woman who sat down to stand up one day on a bus, but instead remember her as a woman who stood up every day.