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Civil Rights

The United States is inevitably considered a ‘Superpower’ and has been one since World War II. The term ‘Superpower’ is often used loosely, but is possibly best described by Lyman Miller, of Stanford Journal, as “a country that has the capacity to project dominating power and influence anywhere in the world.” While the United States has advanced over the decades for many reasons, history proves that the country is still lacking in at least one aspect: failure to recognize all citizens as equal.

The United States is a fairly young country, but prior to the 1950’s, the country recognized minorities and women as only second class citizens. The radical changes to minorities and women’s rights would not begin to transpire until the early 1950’s. From 1953 through the mid 1970’s the United States would make gigantic advancements in the recognition of women and minorities as equal citizens. The developments did not come without perseverance and sacrifices by many. The radical developments in civil rights over this twenty-five year time frame would allow all women and minorities opportunities in education, employment, and personal decisions.

In the early 1950’s the roles of women were vastly different from what they are today. The average American home consisted of a dominant male presence. During this time few women were employed and men were responsible for earning a paycheck to support their family. Even if a woman were employed, her salary would be so meager that she could not support a family on her own. Society viewed women as nurturers; responsible for caring for their home and their family. A woman had responsibilities in caring for her husband and children. Due to the lack of equality in the family relationship women often did not have the option to have opinions or make executive decisions as they do now (NWHM Exhibit).

Power generally lies with wealth, but a woman’s income in the 1950’s was dependent upon her husband. The marriage rates in the United States were at an all-time high, it is no wonder why they were so high. Society made it nearly impossible for a woman to live independently. The pay structure is, and always has been related to education. The United States Census Bureau reported in 2000 that the average high school graduate will earn an annual salary of approximately $30,000 while a college graduate with a bachelor’s degree would earn an annual salary of approximately $52,000 (“Job Salary Earnings Comparission”). Generally speaking, the higher one’s level of education, the more possibilities for employment, and the higher the pay. This would have made a substantial difference to men, but educated women were frowned upon. They were considered unfit for marriage. Women were expected to go to college to receive a M.R.S. degree, which frankly meant to find a husband who would take care of them (“American Experience”).

Previously, women had been excluded from the education system. The level and manner of women’s education in America was largely dependent on race, class, and location. The United States census from 2000, showed that of all American women over the age of 65, only 69% had graduated from high school, and a mere 11% had obtained a bachelor’s degree (“United States”). These women would have been at least18 years of age, or older in 1953. In general, the purpose of women’s education in colonial America was to become skilled at household duties and chores in order to find a suitable husband. A woman who was highly educated in academics was thought to be unusual and not sought after (NWHM Exhibit).

Women today often take education for granted, and commonly forget about the sacrifices made to attain the right to an education. In the past, women with little education were often forced to believe that they were not capable of things like participating in politics, having a career, or even owning property. Women who were brave and fortunate enough to have received a quality education, were considered to be pioneers for all women(NWHM Exhibit).

Autherine Lucy is one of the women who made a difference, not only was she a woman; she was African American. She was the first African American to attend the University of Alabama. One can only imagine the challenges presented to a young African American female entering a predominantly white, male campus. Lucy pursued her dream with the odds against her and on Monday February 6th, 1953 she attended her first class at the University of Alabama. On her way to class, she was forced to pass through a hostile crowd of approximately 300 protesters who wanted nothing more than to see her leave. After this debacle, she was forced by university officials to be escorted in a vehicle to her next classes. Officials feared for her safety from the large mob of mostly white students who were gathering outside, waiting for Lucy. They shouted “Keep ‘Bama White!” and “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Autherine’s gotta go!” Regardless of the distractions, Autherine Lucy was determined to go to her next class (LaBelle).

Even with escorts Lucy quickly discovered that she would not be able to easily go to class. After her class was finished she made her way to her awaiting escort vehicle, where she was surrounded by angry white students who pelted her with eggs. Lucy had to wait several hours to be safely escorted home, and on the way, she had to lie in the back seat so no one could see her. This woman was finally receiving an equal education, but society still managed to treat her as a second class citizen. Lucy was not only female at a predominately male school, but she was an African-American female. Lucy received many death threats and her home had to be constantly patrolled by the black community. The same night, the University of Alabama’s Board of Trustees voted to expel her from the University for her own safety (Katez).

Autherine Lucy may have only attended the University of Alabama for a few days, but the fact that she attended at all, would change history for all women, regardless of race. Her heroic act gave women motivation and an example to live by. Women were changing society whether society was ready to accept it. Women wanted options, and to be more than just second class citizens. Autherine Lucy was the voice that was so desperately needed. She was the first black student to attend, but two other black students, one male and one female, followed to help desegregate the university (Katez).

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled segregation as unconstitutional. The government immediately took aggressive action to enforce this ruling, but certain states felt they did not have to comply. One of these states was Alabama, under Governor George Wallace. Wallace is considered one of the most controversial, political figures in history. In 1963 two black students; Vivian Moore and James Hood, attempted to desegregate the University of Alabama. Governor Wallace would not allow the students to enter the campus, and he dispatched state troopers to enforce his decision. The federal government responded quickly to the disruption caused by Governor Wallace. President John F. Kennedy wasted no time in assembling the National Guard to the University of Alabama. After seeing the challenges placed in front of him, Governor Wallace submitted to President Kennedy. The University of Alabama was desegregated on June 10, 1963 (“University of Alabama Desegregated”).

The desegregation of the University of Alabama was only the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. The United States faced a much larger problem. The country failed to recognize not only women, but minorities as equal citizens. In order for the country to advance in all aspects, society would need to drastically change, and the country would need to unite. President John Kennedy would be the driving force needed to begin the litigation of the Civil Rights Act.

A main support of the Civil Rights movement was the youngest man ever to be elected President of the United States; President John F Kennedy. He was killed after only two years and ten months as chief executive and the youngest president to die while still in office. His assassination was a very rough time for our nation. He was visiting Texas to help fix a campaigning problem to help with the future election in which he planned to run. The assassination happened on November 22, 1963 as he traveled the streets of Dallas. (Garrow).

He suggested the Civil Rights Bill to Congress, which they eventually passed. The African-American demand for equal rights was one of Kennedy’s main issues during his presidency. In a nationally televised address on June 6, 1963, Kennedy expressed to the nation the importance of every American being treated equally regardless of race. Kennedy suggested a civil rights bill that would include voting rights, public accommodations, school desegregation, and nondiscrimination in federally assisted programs. Kennedy was assassinated before the bill was passed, but it did not stop Congress from passing the bill and President Johnson signed it into law (Our Documents).

The civil rights movement was a fight for the minorities in America to become equal citizens. In the fight for civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr. played a major role in the civil rights movement: “He had a magnificent speaking ability, which enabled him to effectively express the demands of African-Americans for social justice” (Garrow). King had magnificent speeches that were able to motivate those to fight for their rights, but using non-violent methods.

Dr. King played a major role in organizing the March on Washington with his fellow civil rights leaders: “The March on Washington was intended to highlight African-American unemployment and to urge Congress to pass Kennedy’s bill” (Garrow). There were over 200,000 Americans present for the rally, including blacks and whites. During this rally King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, which had a huge impact on the civil rights movement and left an impression in history. The combination of the rally and the speech is credited with getting congress to pass Kennedy’s recommended civil rights bill.

In 1964 Congress passed the Public Law bill. Part of the bill forbade the discrimination on the basis of sex and race in hiring, promoting, or firing. The word sex was added to the bill last minute by a Southern representative, who was against civil rights, to try and kill the bill. The thought was that the men in congress would be against the women’s rights (Civil Rights Act of 1964).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was Johnson’s way of dealing with the ever growing demands of blacks for equal rights. The bill specifically prohibited the discrimination in voting, education, and the use of public facilities. The federal government had the power to desegregate schools for the first time since the Supreme Court had ordered the segregation of all public schools (The 1964 Civil Rights Act to the present).

In early 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed, but was not enough to calm the violence among blacks. A black slum in Los Angeles exploded in violence and left 34 people dead. The rioting only got worse as blacks in all major cities across America as blacks moved for independence (The 1964 Civil Rights Act to the present).

Integration was well under way; by 1967, 22% of the black students in the 17 Southern states and border states were in integrated schools. This did not stop the continuing separation of blacks and whites. “In 1968 when the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders issued a report that said ‘Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white- separate and unequal’” (The 1964 Civil Rights Act to the present). The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. only made things worse. That summer there were riots in 125 cities across the United States (The 1964 Civil Rights Act to the present).

The United States had made intense progress in the decades preceding the 1970’s, but the country still needed radical change. The role of women in the United States had dramatically changed since the 1940’s, but women were still not equal to men. Women’s rights would not even begin to develop until the 1960’s. In 1963, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act; which made it illegal for employers to pay women less than men in the same position. The Civil Rights Act would follow in 1964, prohibiting the discrimination of employment based upon race and gender. Even though the government was finally recognizing women as individuals of this country, there still needed to be great strides made for equality. On paper, there did not appear to be segregation between men and women, but in reality the segregation was real and evident (Imbornoni).

The government was not solely responsible for the inequality of men and women. Society had created an unequal definition of a woman for decades, and it would not be easily changed overnight. Even before the United States was formed, women were often thought of as property of men. Their sole responsibility was to be a wife and a mother (“First Women's Rights Movement”). Educated women were frowned upon and often seen as unfit by society for marriage. Regardless of the acts passed by Congress, it would take brave individuals to change society’s view on women.

One of the most influential women of the 1970’s was Emily Howell Warner. Warner was one of the women who would not accept the fact that she could not have a career simply because she was female. Warner was born in 1939, and grew up during a time where women had few rights. However, she chose not to let that influence her during her adult life. Her original goal was to become a stewardess, but she discovered a passion for aviation in the process (Wise and Witvliet). .

Regardless of the challenges she faced, Emily Warner began flight training in 1958. Warner excelled in her training, and quickly achieved multiple ratings. She went on to become a flight instructor for Clinton Aviation. Over the next twelve years, she would receive numerous promotions and gain thousands of hours of experience. In 1967, Warner realized she had outgrown the aviation school and began applying to commercial airlines. This act in itself was monumental, as women did not work for commercially scheduled airlines in the United States. Even though the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, companies still discriminated against women (“Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.”). The aviation industry was an industry with a reputation for being a man’s industry. There were no female commercial airline pilots; women were not considered strong enough to handle the planes (Wise and Witvliet).

Even with the odds against her, Warner still applied. She applied over and over again, until she was finally granted an interview with Frontier Airlines. Emily Warner’s interview was successful, and in 1973 she became the first female pilot to work for a commercially scheduled United States airline. Warner would become one of the brave individuals to change an industry, and progress women’s rights toward real equality (Wise and Witvliet).

During the 1970’s the controversies were not limited to women’s rights in employment but instead were more intimate. The laws in the United States were vague and they did not recognize a woman as having control over her sexual well-being. Information on contraceptives was considered obscene and banned until the late 1930’s. It would be approximately thirty years before the Food and Drug Administration would recognize approve birth control. Even then the methods were unsafe and had serious side effects. Although birth control was approved by the FDA, married women were denied access until 1965. The technology behind the contraceptives was fairly new and often failed; as a result many women were forced into unwanted pregnancies. In the early 1970’s women had extreme difficulty in receiving safe abortions, regardless of the advancements that were already made in women’s rights (“Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.”).

As monumental as the previous achievements in women’s rights were, they would not compare in controversy to the impact one woman would have in 1973. One of the most controversial court hearings in our entire history occurred in 1973. The United States Supreme Court heard the case of Roe v. Wade (“What happened in 1973”). At the time abortion was illegal in many states and women felt that their individual state laws violated their constitutional rights. The actual case of Roe v. Wade originated from Texas. It was filed on behalf of Norma McCorvey who believed that the Texas state laws violated her constitutional rights. For the hearing McCorvey was given the alias “Jane Roe”. After hearing the case, the Supreme Court would go on to vote and all but two members voted for the passing of legalization of abortion in the United States. This was historic for women across America. The verdict meant that the individual state laws on abortion were now null and void as they violated women’s constitutional rights. Even today this is still a controversial subject through the United States (Lewis).

The United States is and has been considered a ‘Superpower’ since World War II, but the country could not fully advance, without first uniting as one nation, with all citizens equal. From 1953 through the late 1970’s women and minorities fought for their right to be considered first class citizens. The value this has brought to our society has been priceless. Once given the opportunities in education, employment, and personal decisions, these two groups were able to contribute monumental accomplishments to our nation. By recognizing all citizens as equal our country will continue to move forward as a ‘Superpower’.

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