Lesson or Essay Question: How impactful were economic boycotts on the Civil Rights Movement?

Answer:_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Evidence of Successful Boycotts
Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

ECONOMIC WITHDRAWAL DURING THE NASHVILLE SIT-INS

For most Americans, the 1950s were years of increasing personal prosperity. The booming economy brought about the growth of suburbs, as homeownership came to symbolize success and respectability in America. Even so, the culture and politics of the “Affluent Society” were shaped mostly by the world’s anxiety over the Cold War. This dynamic created several of the most important factors contributing to the rise of American black protest, including the return of black soldiers from foreign service during the Second World War, the growth of an urban black middle class, the growing influence of television and other forms of popular culture, the embarrassment Americans experienced as they tried to present their nation to the world as the paragon of democracy while racial injustice persisted at home, and the political mobilization of northern blacks. These factors brought the nation’s social and racial problems more sharply into focus.

After decades of struggles, an open crusade against racial intolerance and discrimination began in the 1950s. At the onset of the modern Civil Rights movement, Montgomery, Alabama, was one of the first cities where economic pressure was used to combat segregationist practices. According to Bruce J. Dierenfield’s account in The Civil Rights Movement, bus company records indicated that 99% of the usual 30,000 black riders walked, hitchhiked, bicycled, and used car pools to make their way about the city after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Black Montgomery’s boycott caused the bus company, downtown businessmen, and the city to lose approximately $1 million. The economic boycott and a favorable ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the 1956 Brown vs. Board of Education case, desegregating Montgomery’s city buses, brought about a major civil rights victory. Infused with an economic component, the Montgomery boycott succeeded in establishing a new form of racial protest based on passive resistance, which soon spread throughout the South and the nation at large.

When black leaders and students in Nashville began their formal sit-in movement, they, too, added an economic prong that devastated downtown merchants and business owners. The Nashville sit-ins, which were the largest and best organized of the sit-ins across the South, began in November and December 1959 when black leaders and students challenged the exclusionary racial policy of downtown eatery’s in the major department stores. Approximately one month after students began their full-scale movement in February 1960, Fisk University professor Vivian Henderson estimated that blacks in Nashville poured approximately $50 million a year into the coffers of white businesses. This sum was
particularly significant since many white customers were moving to the suburbs, leaving downtown merchants increasingly economically dependent on Nashville's black population. The Reverend Kelly Miller Smith and Henderson organized a boycott of downtown stores just before Easter, an important shopping holiday. Empowered with their slogan, "No Fashions for Easter," the black community's "economic withdrawal" deprived storeowners of incalculable amounts of business.

By the beginning of April 1960, Nashville department stores were virtually empty as whites also stayed away. Many joined in the boycott as a show of support for the student demonstrators. A few white women mounted their own form of protest by turning in their credit cards at their favorite stores. "No Fashions for Easter" had achieved its goal. In its wake, one store merchant commented, while looking at the deserted downtown streets, "You could roll a bowling ball down Church Street and not hit anyone these days." Black women, through daily phone calls, mobilized the boycott in a display of unity with the students and sustained the "economic withdrawal" for almost seven weeks. Downtown retail merchants lost approximately 20 percent of their business. Downtown's empty streets and cash registers caused merchants to seriously consider dismantling Jim Crow customs in Nashville's retail district.

As the student demonstrators continued in their efforts to dismantle the Jim Crow system, Nashville businessmen met behind closed doors to discuss their predicament. As Time magazine described them, most of the storeowners were "pocket book integrationists." They were more committed to their bottom line than they were to the city's proscriptive system of racial segregation. Nashville's merchants realized the inevitability of desegregation, but they did not want to become catalysts for social change. However, the disruption of business and the boycott made it economically unsound for them to carry on without coming to some resolution. "It is inevitable," said Fred Harvey, Sr., in a telegram directing his store's treasurer, Greenfield Pitts, to desegregate. Pitts, also chair of the Chamber of Commerce's Retail Merchants Division, and Cain-Sloan President John Sloan, worked diligently with storeowners to ease Jim Crow out of Nashville's downtown. Refusing under the pressure of the economic boycott, six stores, led by Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, rendered service to Nashville blacks on May 13, 1960.

By the middle of 1960, the Civil Rights movement in Nashville gained momentum as downtown stores and restaurant owners surrendered to the economic demand for desegregation. They saw no advantage to losing black trade (and the profits that accompanied it) and provoked continued disruptions. Between 1961 and 1963, protests shifted to movie theatres (by May 1961 theatre owners capitulated), employment practices, downtown hotels, and every other type of public accommodation. By the spring of 1963, Nashville witnessed daily demonstrations against segregation, unfair employment practices, and discrimination against blacks in general. In March, the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference announced a "full-scale assault" on segregation practices in Nashville. In addition to using marches, leaders and students of the Nashville movement implemented the proven weapon of an Easter economic boycott against downtown merchants and department stores to protest against unfair employment practices. By 1964, segregation had all but disappeared in most of the city's public accommodations. On July 2 of the same year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, one of the nation's most important and most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation.

Department store owners had no excuse for discriminating against black Nashvillians at lunch counters or in the provision of other services, especially when they accepted their dollars for goods and services. The decrease in dollars flowing into the cash registers of downtown merchants and businessmen helped cause the walk of racial segregation to fall. Nashville blacks effectively used the premise put forth by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932, when they put into action economic and political pressures that "exert[ed] coercion upon the white man's life" and, more importantly, adversely affected his businesses.

--Linda T. Wynn
Civil Rights Boycotts

Boycotts consist of withholding business or involvement as a form of protest. Mississippians frequently used boycotts as political tools in the civil rights movement to challenge particular forms of discrimination. Boycotts were ways of forcing issues by making situations difficult and potentially unbearable for the targeted people or businesses. Civil rights activists frequently used the phrase *selective buying* to make clear that they were giving their business only to people who treated them with respect or who had clearly rejected Jim Crow practices.

Boycotts often began after a dramatic incident—an act of violence or insult. The murder of George Lee in Belzoni, the attempted murder of George Metcalfe in Natchez, and the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis all led immediately to boycotts. In Clarksdale the decision to prohibit African American musicians from marching in a parade sparked a boycott. Some boycotts began as parts of broad strategies to force change, while others addressed very specific issues.

The boycotts of white-owned businesses often involved grievances regarding issues outside the stores. Boycotters addressed school segregation, violence, hiring practices, the makeup of local government agencies, and other matters. In some cases boycotters demanded greater access to government. Boycotts also dramatized issues involving the stores themselves, such as the refusal to allow African Americans to eat in restaurants or to try on clothing before purchasing it. “Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Eat” was a common demand. Other boycotts involved what activists called “courtesy titles”—that is, African Americans’ right to be called “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Miss” rather than by their first names. And some involved demands that stores hire African Americans in positions other than the most menial.

Boycotts are intriguing forms of protest, because unlike strikes, marches, pickets, or other forms of direct action, they consist of *not* doing something: authorities have difficulty arresting people for staying out of stores. By *not* shopping, boycotters could also uphold an ideal of self-control, saying that some ideals outweighed the need for certain goods or conveniences such as riding a bus. Women were especially important in boycotts, in part because they were often the primary shoppers in their households. Ministers often made the point that boycotting was an expression of high moral principle, sometimes encouraging people to avoid spending money on new clothing for Easter or Christmas when higher goals were at stake.

Activists grew quite ready to boycott, especially after the tactic proved effective. Charles Evers led boycotts in Natchez and Fayette and showed he was ready to use force against African Americans who continued to patronize the boycotted stores. The 1965–66 Natchez boycott ended with a complete victory for Evers and his fellow activists: according to Evers, “Everything we asked for we have gotten concessions on, and then some.”

White Mississippian who opposed the civil rights movement responded to the boycotts in a variety of ways. Sometimes they tried to ignore the boycotts, hoping the
protesters would run out of energy and nerve. Increasingly, however, authorities tried to make boycotts illegal. Boycotters in Jackson, Clarksdale, Natchez, and Greenwood faced arrest for “conspiring to commit acts injurious to public trade.” In 1966 Mississippi senator James O. Eastland suggested that the federal government should make boycotting illegal, and in 1968 the Mississippi legislature passed a law prohibiting certain types of boycotts. Business leaders in Port Gibson and Vicksburg sued activists, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for money supposedly lost because of the boycotts.

Some white Mississippians used organized boycotts against groups they felt were becoming too friendly to the goals of the civil rights movement. Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, a small group organized in Natchez in 1963, condemned and sometimes boycotted businesses, especially national chain stores without strong Mississippi ties, that changed their traditionally discriminatory practices.


Written by Ted Ownby, University of Mississippi