**"Assessing the Chicago Freedom Movement,"**

by James Ralph May/June 2006 issue of **Poverty & Race**

The Chicago Freedom Movement was the most ambitious civil rights mobilization ever launched in the North. The product of an alliance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO—a coalition of Chicago civil rights groups), the Chicago Freedom Movement lasted from 1965 to 1967. It built upon the hard work of the CCCO in contesting racial inequality in Chicago, especially in its public schools. And it attracted national attention in the summer of 1966 when it launched a series of marches to expose persistent housing discrimination in metropolitan Chicago. On one open-housing march, Martin Luther King, Jr. was struck on the head by a rock. “Frankly,” he said, “I have never seen as much hatred and hostility on the part of so many people.”

**Faintly Remembered Today**

What is striking, on the occasion of its 40th anniversary, is how faintly the Chicago Freedom Movement is remembered today. While there are museums devoted to the famous civil rights campaigns in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, there is no museum commemorating the Chicago Freedom Movement. In fact, the city of Chicago lacks even historic markers acknowledging the important sites of the Chicago movement. In Atlanta, the National Park Service maintains the childhood home of Martin Luther King. In Memphis, the Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated in 1968, is the centerpiece of an impressive civil rights museum. In Chicago, by contrast, the North Lawndale apartment building where King lived for a time in order to be close to African Americans confined to Chicago’s West Side ghetto was torn down many years ago and now is a vacant lot.

The custodians of that deemed important in American history—the textbooks and the surveys—second this lack of public acknowledgment of the Chicago Freedom Movement. The fifth edition of *America’s History* does not mention it. Nor does the most recent edition of *American Journey*. The same is true for the second edition of *American Destiny: Narrative of a Nation* and the fifth edition of *Out of Many*. In each of these textbooks, Martin Luther King’s and SCLC’s earlier Birmingham and Selma campaigns are discussed. Even James Patterson’s prizewinning history of America from 1945 to 1974, *Grand Expectations*, is silent on the Chicago movement.

A critical question, then, is how can this discrepancy in the public memory of the Chicago Freedom Movement and King’s and SCLC’s other campaigns be explained.

The explanation stems in part from the popular judgment that the Chicago Freedom Movement was a defeat, especially compared to the Birmingham and Selma initiatives. The verdict of failure circled the Chicago movement even before it came to an end. Dissatisfied activists helped to fuel such a reading when in the wake of the Summit Agreement—a pact reached in late August 1966 between Martin Luther King, Al Raby (convenor of the CCCO) and other civil rights leaders, and Mayor Richard J. Daley and civic, business and religious elites to bring a halt to the open-housing marches and to take concrete steps to end the racial divide in the region—they decided to stage a march in Cicero, long known for its hostility toward blacks.

As Robert Lucas, who led the march in Cicero in September 1966, has stated, “King went up against Richard J. Daley, and he lost.” Over the decades, this assessment has been the dominant one in Chicago. Surveying the state of the city’s West Side 20 years after the Chicago Freedom Movement, one African-American resident concluded, “Nothing really happened.” And recently, Leon Despres, a supporter of civil rights who opposed the Daley administration during the 1960s, has said that results of the Chicago campaign were “not much of a victory for Martin Luther King, Jr.”

This bleak reading of the Chicago Freedom Movement shaped the perspective of the first major biography of King, written by David Levering Lewis in 1970. “The Chicago debacle” was how Lewis categorized its outcome. Many later scholars arrived at the same conclusion. In *America in Our Time*, published in 1976, Godfrey Hodgson stated that “Martin Luther King went to Chicago and was routed . . .” Nearly a decade later, Alonzo Hamby, in *Liberalism and its Challengers*, concluded that the Chicago Freedom Movement “undeniably was more failure than success.” In the early 1990s, in his survey of the Civil Rights Movement,*Freedom Bound*, Robert Weisbrot argued that “In many respects, the Chicago freedom movement had emerged as a debacle to rival the Albany [GA] movement.”

The assessment of the Chicago Freedom Movement as a defeat is not the only reason for its diminished place in the country’s public memory. That the Chicago movement was more focused on changing local conditions than were the Birmingham campaign and especially the Selma campaign also accounts for its modest national standing. During their initiatives in the South, King and SCLC were much more attentive to the national response (and corrective federal legislation) than they were in Chicago. The Chicago campaign, they hoped, would inspire similar nonviolent movements in other Northern cities.

The Summit Agreement, which marked the end of the most active phase of the Chicago Freedom Movement, was in fact the strongest local agreement King and SCLC had ever negotiated in any of their city projects. The settlement that ended the Birmingham campaign was fuzzier than the Summit Agreement. But, as Taylor Branch has recently noted in his new book, *At Canaan’s Edge*, its weaknesses “disappeared in a rippling tide that dissolved formal segregation by comprehensive national law.” Though the Chicago Freedom Movement was part of the constellation of forces that led to the passage of a federal fair housing law in 1968, housing discrimination, residential segregation and inner-city slums have not disappeared the way that segregated lunch counters and blatantly racist voting registrars have.

Even a recent outpouring of scholarship focusing on the Civil Rights Movement in the North is unlikely to boost the reputation of the Chicago Freedom Movement. New books like Matthew Countryman’s *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* and Martha Biondi’s *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* point to a growing recognition of the importance and complexity of the fight for racial equality in the North. So rich is Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard’s *Freedom North*, a new collection of essays about Northern activism, that the conventional view of the Civil Rights Movement as confined to the South in the 1950s and 1960s is destined for revision. But the place of the Chicago Freedom Movement in this new scholarship is ambiguous. Putting a spotlight on the Chicago campaign deflects attention from the wide array of local movements in the North and suggests that Northern protest relied on the influence of Martin Luther King and Southern-based civil rights organizations.

**An Alternative Reading**

The prevailing wisdom, then, is that the Chicago Freedom Movement was not one of the most noteworthy or significant episodes of recent history. Yet looking back after 40 years, there is a strong case for an alternative reading.

First, there is the overwhelming evidence that the Chicago project—whose motto was “End Slums”—was decisive to Martin Luther King’s evolution as a national leader for social justice. As his leading biographers, David Garrow and Taylor Branch, have shown, King’s encounter with the slums and racial inequality in Chicago propelled him to agitate for more searching reform and to focus on the need to eliminate poverty throughout the country.

There is also a strong argument to be made for the centrality of the Chicago Freedom Movement in the overall trajectory of the broader Civil Rights Movement and contemporary American race relations. Over 20 years ago, Allen Matusow placed the Chicago Freedom Movement at the center of his history of the 1960s. In *The Unraveling of America*, Matusow pointed to the uneven record of accomplishment of the Chicago movement, but, more significantly, he viewed its unfolding as illustrative of the challenge of confronting Northern racial inequality. “Civil Rights in the North,” he wrote, “was a drama in three parts—schools, housing, and jobs—played out in Chicago and featuring Mayor Richard J. Daley, Lyndon Johnson, and Martin Luther King.”

The Chicago Freedom Movement was more, however, than an illuminating transitional episode. It also produced substantial achievements, achievements that have become more evident with the passage of time. The focus of the Movement’s direct action campaign—housing discrimination—was an eleventh-hour decision and was initially questioned by many activists and observers. But over time, the prescience of this focus has become clearer. As Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have argued in *American Apartheid*, housing segregation is at the heart of inequality in contemporary America. Where one lives is highly determinative of one’s quality of life. The poor in America—especially those of color—too often find themselves confined to bleak settings, isolated from the country’s currents of opportunity and prosperity.

The Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, the one long-lasting product of the Summit Agreement [but see Box, p. 17], was a pioneer for four decades in developing new strategies to open up housing opportunities for all. Because of its work and that of other fair-housing groups, residential segregation—while still severe—is not as rigid as it might have been if housing discrimination had not been challenged over the past 40 years.

The Chicago Freedom Movement also recognized that good jobs were essential to the fortunes of all Chicagoans. The Chicago chapter of Operation Breadbasket, established in 1966 with Jesse Jackson at its helm, turned to selective buying campaigns in order to break racial barriers in employment. For the past four decades, Jackson and his supporters—subsequently as Operation PUSH and today as the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition—have fought to open up the American economy to minorities.

**Non-Violence**

The Chicago Freedom Movement is increasingly seen as a critical stage in the application of nonviolent direct action to promoting social change. The Chicago movement represented the first time a nonviolent campaign was launched in a sprawling metropolis. The city of Selma, Alabama, consisted of roughly 30,000 residents in 1965; Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 numbered only about 300,000. Chicago, with three million residents in the city proper, dwarfed them. To this day, two of the leading architects of the Chicago Freedom Movement, James Bevel and Bernard LaFayette, view the Chicago campaign as a decisive episode in the history of nonviolence. Bill Moyer, a member of the staff of the American Friends Service Committee and the original formulator of the open-housing strategy in 1966, and David Jehnsen, a staffer with the West Side Christian Parish in the mid-1960s, drew from the lessons learned during the Chicago Freedom Movement in spreading the message of the power of nonviolent movements in subsequent years. And there are others—veterans of the Chicago campaign—who have continued to promote the nonviolent way. Any contemporary history of nonviolence should acknowledge the radiating influence of the Chicago Freedom Movement.

Finally, the Chicago Freedom Movement—more than any Southern civil rights campaign—speaks directly to the importance of developing a broad coalition in confronting injustice. The Chicago open-housing marches, which were contemporaneous with the rising influence of Black Power, were interracial and represented a wide range of social classes. Moreover, the Chicago movement saw the limitations of viewing race relations through a binary lens. In its demands, it sought equal opportunities for “whites, Negroes, and Latin Americans.” In this sense, it prefigured Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign and Jesse Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition.” The Chicago Freedom Movement, then, went beyond the black/white orientation of Southern campaigns for civil rights. It envisioned a multicultural future.

*James Ralph is a professor of history at Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT. He is author of*Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement*(Harvard Univ. Press, 1993).*