Many people are aware that C. T. Vivian (1924-2020) was a noted African-American civil rights crusader, who worked closely with Martin Luther King in racist southern towns and eventually received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. But few Americans know much about his life, which is a remarkable story of social commitment, and his only book, *Black Power and the American Myth* (1970), remains little-known—although it's an insightful, thought-provoking analysis of the African-American struggle.

Cordy Tindell Vivian was born on July 28, 1924, in Howard County, Missouri. His father, Robert Vivian, was an impoverished laborer who had married C. T.'s mother, Euzetta Tindell, in 1919. Soon after their only child was born, they were divorced. According to a short biographical account, *Challenge and Change: The Story of Civil Rights Activist C. T. Vivian* (1993), written by Lydia Walker, his mother was soon married again, to "a white, Carthage, Illinois, businessman," and the small boy lived much of the time with his grandmother, Annie Woods Tindell. It was she who taught him how to read before he started school. And in 1930 she decided to move to Macomb, Illinois, a town of about 8,000 people, where the schools had been integrated for generations and Western Illinois State Teacher's College was located, so that C. T. eventually would have "the best opportunity to get a college education." His mother, who became divorced again, soon joined them.

C. T. attended Lincoln Grade School, Edison Junior High School, and Macomb High School, and he was a fine student who became an avid reader. Although he encountered some racism as a youth, because neighborhoods and many occupations in Macomb were segregated, the town had only 114 Blacks in 1930, so there was little racial conflict. He was baptized in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, known as Brown's Chapel. And he enjoyed his church experience, which included teaching Sunday School and heading the church's youth group. The minister, Rev. Robert Thomas, became a role model for the outgoing boy, who eventually decided to enter that field, too.

C.T. was a very bright, popular youngster. During his high school years, he participated in many student organizations and had a wide range of friends. As he later said in a brief memoir, "I was the president or an officer of almost every organization at Macomb High School," and regarding his white and Black friends, he asserted, "we had great times together." Although he was not invited to some parties because the parents of white friends often had racial bias, he declared that his Macomb experience "also taught me how good people can be, regardless of race."

Upon finishing high school in 1942, C. T. enrolled at Western Illinois State Teacher's College (which fifteen years later would become Western Illinois University). His major was English and his minor was social science. He did well in classes and wrote articles on sports for the student newspaper during that freshman year. He also belonged to the Student Council. Although he apparently did not encounter racial prejudice from students, he was not allowed to join the Canterbury Club, which was for English majors, because the teacher who headed the department and led that club was biased against Blacks.

After that initial year, young Vivian dropped out of college and went through a period of uncertainty about his future. For example, according to Lydia Walker, he spent the summer of 1943 in Denver, where he waited on tables at a restaurant, and then he moved to Peoria, Illinois, which had about 105,000 people, including over 10,000 Blacks. There he applied to join the U. S. Army—for the nation was in the midst of World War II. But he was rejected.

However, Vivian was soon hired as Assistant Director of the Boys Division of the Carver Community Center, which had been named to honor George Washington Carver, the famous Black agricultural scientist who had taught at the Tuskegee Institute and had also promoted racial harmony and Christian ideals. Located in the city's Black neighborhood, it had been developed to serve local Blacks through both moral uplift and practical assistance.

Also, because conditions in Peoria were difficult during the 1940s—including a forty percent unemployment rate for Blacks—Vivian did some things that initiated his civil rights activism: he

joined the Interracial Fellowship, interacted with local civil rights activists, engaged in sit-ins that ended restaurant segregation, and became involved in movements to desegregate housing and labor.

But the committed young man realized that his future would be limited without more education, so he also returned to Macomb, during his mid-twenties, where he again attended Western Illinois State Teacher's College, while living with his mother and grandmother. Early in 1945 he married Peoria resident Jane Teague, and by the following fall they had a daughter. To provide some much-needed income, he opened a shoe shine parlor in a store basement located on the Macomb square.

After three years, that marriage ended in divorce, and Vivian still did not have a degree. He returned to Peoria, and on February 23, 1953, he married Octavia Geans, who had been hired in 1952 as the Women and Girls Director of the Carver Community Center. She had a degree in social work and eventually wrote a biography of Coretta Scott King, so they were a good match. (Their marriage lasted for fifty-eight years, until her death in 2011, and they produced half a dozen children.) In 1953 he also became president of the Peoria chapter of the NAACP.

Vivian wanted to study for the ministry, so he and his wife moved to Nashville late in 1954, and he enrolled in the American Baptist Theological Seminary, where he received a bachelor's degree three years later. He also served as pastor of the First Community Church for five years, 1956-1961.

And in that city he became increasingly involved in civil rights work. In fact, he helped to organize the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, which spoke out against unjust local practices and strove to desegregate lunch counters. In April, 1960, Vivian led a massive nonviolent march that achieved desegregation of the downtown area of Nashville, and he was soon active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, focused on Freedom Rides.

In 1961 Vivian accepted the pastorate of the Cosmopolitan Community Church in Chattanooga. Naturally, he also did civil rights work there. Among other efforts, he helped to organize the Tennessee contingent for the 1963 March on Washington.

Consequently, he was invited to join the staff of Martin Luther King, who led the huge Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and that took him to Atlanta. At King's behest he directed the affiliates of the S.C.L.C. and traveled around the South to do civil rights work in various cities. Robert D. McFadden later summarized his efforts, in a July 17, 2020, *New York Times* article following Vivian's death,

"He was the national director of some 85 local affiliate chapters of the S.C.L.C. from 1963 to 1966, directing protest activities and training in nonviolence as well as coordinating voter registration and community development projects.

In Selma and Birmingham, Ala.; St. Augustine, Fla.; Jackson, Miss., and other segregated cities, Mr. Vivian led sit-ins at lunch counters, boycotts of businesses, and marches that continued for weeks or months, raising tensions that often led to mass arrests and harsh repression.

Televised scenes of marchers attacked by police officers and firefighters with cattle prods, snarling dogs, fire hoses, and nightsticks shocked the national conscience, legitimized the civil rights movement, and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965."

In 1966 Vivian left Martin Luther King's staff and moved to Chicago, where he directed the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission. He also became co-founder and president of the Black Strategy Center, a think-tank for the Black struggle, and was coordinator of the Coalition for United Community Action, which fostered new agreements for Black workers in Chicago. He also interacted with Black Power groups, including the Black Panthers, and he wrote his only book, *Black Power and the American Myth.*

Vivian moved to Atlanta in 1972, but he served as a minister at Shaw University (1972-1973), in Raleigh, North Carolina, and then as dean of the Seminary without Walls program (which

he co-founded) at that university's divinity school (1974-1978). So, for six years he commuted between those two cities.

After Vivian left Shaw University, he worked in Atlanta, where he subsequently founded or co-founded a variety of educational and civil rights organizations. Among them are the Black Action Strategies and Information Center, a consulting firm focused on workplace race relations, which he directed for many years; the Anti-Klan Network (later the Center for Democratic Renewal), devoted to monitoring hate groups and promoting a diverse society, and the C. T. Vivian Leadership Institute, dedicated to revitalizing communities. He also lectured and consulted widely on civil rights issues.

Because he was increasingly recognized for his achievements and civic contributions, Vivian received many awards, including honorary doctorates from the New School of Social Research (1984) and Western Illinois University (1987). He was also featured in a civil rights documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (1987), and he became the focus of a PBS documentary, *The Healing Ministry of Dr. C. T. Vivian* (1995). In 2013 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama—which made him even more well-known. When he passed away in 2020, at age ninety-five, Vivian was celebrated as a noted civil rights crusader.

Although he left behind various short writings, *Black Power and the American Myth* is his most significant work. It helps modern readers comprehend the momentous effort for Black equality during the 1950s and 1960s—what he calls "The Movement"—and provides insight into the American vision of its notable author. By combining his personal experience with historical knowledge, sociological awareness, and psychological analysis, it explains both the roots of race prejudice and the nation's resistance to coping with it effectively.

Early in the book, Vivian asserts that the modern Civil Rights Movement was a new, and deeper, kind of response to the Black situation in America, which went beyond helping African Americans find jobs and emerge from poverty. And for that, he credits his famous associate, whose murder in 1968 surely helped to prompt the frustration that led to *Black Power and the American Myth:* "It was Martin Luther King who removed the Black struggle from the economic realm and placed it in a moral and spiritual context."

He then discusses the ultimate cause for the inequality and suffering of modern Blacks, by briefly dealing with the horrific abuses during slavery and, afterward, in the Jim Crowe South. One of the most significant aspects of *Black Power and the American Myth* is the author's awareness that severe psychological issues developed—not only for Blacks but for poor whites, who were "pitted against Blacks by the powerful men who exploit them both." He realized that struggling southern whites "had their insecurities and frustrations channeled into hatred for Blacks," and as a result, "they have been incapable of even perceiving their true plight, let alone attacking the real sources of their misery." Of course, the misleading of poor, little-educated Americans by those who strive to exploit them remains an issue in the twenty-first century.

Vivian then launches into a brief account of the recent Civil Rights Movement—which he knew from personal experience. As he says at one point, depicting the Birmingham campaign of 1963, "We saw the heads of our brothers, sisters, wives, and children split by sticks, their flesh gnawed by wolfish dogs, their bodies spun skittering across the pavement by the force of the hoses." But those abuses of nonviolent protesters generated a positive response, for "Each day there were more who could no longer stand and watch," so finally, "our numbers were so great that we simply could not be contained."

But while Vivian praises the success of the nonviolent protests, he also asserts that, despite all their efforts, "Racism is . . . fundamental to American life." So, he was an early commentator on what is now called "systemic racism." And he cites examples of the violence that was occurring as a result of that prejudice:

"In Newark, national guardsmen open fire on Black citizens who are simply looking out their windows. In Chicago, a fourteen-year-old girl is murdered for stepping in front of the broken window of a furniture store. In Detroit, policemen and soldiers take Blacks into a commandeered motel, to torment, torture, and execute them. The list is endless."

And he blames a variety of causes for racism's perpetuation. First of all, he indicts the government itself, because "Dozens of our people [have] lost their lives through lynchings, bombings, and murders, trying to put federal laws into effect, in situations in which the government was unwilling to act." And he criticizes the Christian culture in America, too, for its betrayal of Christ's values, declaring—from his extensive knowledge as a Baptist minister in the South—that "The churches are havens of intolerance." And he indicates, "It is no accident that the rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan is steeped in Christian piety." So, he asserts that the cultural assumption of freedom and opportunity for all, in America, is a myth, a falsehood: "It will no longer do to claim that America is a free country where anyone who really wants to get ahead can do so," for 'That is a lie. . . ."

And as he points out, one result of that unchecked racism is "a violent Black revolution" that is mounting, in 1970, as militants are "stockpiling arms and ammunition for urban guerilla warfare." So, whites must take "Black needs and Black demands seriously," realizing that African Americans have been "driven to desperation by bondage to intolerable conditions." Vivian naturally pleads for "public alternatives to armed revolt."

Black Power and the American Myth is, then, a forceful condemnation of the nation's failure to respond effectively to the obvious problem of systemic racism. And as that suggests, in many ways Vivian's book remains a thoughtful call for greater understanding of American racial prejudice in our own time.

It is not surprising that he closes his probing book by advocating a deeper response to the crisis of race prejudice: "We must learn to think radically [i.e., far more deeply] about the causes of the Black condition, about the effects of that condition, and about a cure"—which will involve "reshaping this nation so that human values are supreme." In other words, the gifted Black minister and nationally acclaimed civil rights crusader declares that "we must heal ourselves." So, in *Black Power and the American Myth* C. T. Vivian views the lingering crisis of American race prejudice as an inner matter, to be dealt with by greater awareness of Black suffering and struggle, as well as by spiritual growth. And long after its publication, in our own time of continuing conflict over racial prejudice, his book still effectively contributes to that purpose.

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