The White Citizen's Council of Montgomery, 1955-1958: The Politics of Countermovement, Moral
Culture and Civic Bigotry

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"You've got a good family…good community. When was the last time you locked your door at night? Never! If you give in what do you think is going to happen to this city? What do you think will happen to this family?"

"Uncle Tucker" from the motion picture, *Long Walk Home*

Introduction

The 1990 Richard Pearce directed film, *Long Walk Home* co-starring Sissy Spacek and Whoopi Goldberg characterizes two separate ideas of civic virtue during the 1955 boycott of Montgomery. Uncle Tucker provides a fictional yet historical embodiment of the typical white male southern sentiment regarding civic virtue. Many southerners saw collective inherited values of civic virtue threatened by what was perceived as subversive, immoral, and unpatriotic advances of malevolent blacks and radical northerners. Tucker's line of progression in his segregationist thinking revealed the inevitability of an attack on the family, secondly a siege of the community, and thirdly the loss of personal safety and security. As a citizen, as a man, and as a southerner, Tucker appealed to the ego of his brother to assert his responsibility in preserving the stability of the home and the community.

During the post-*Brown* years in Alabama, reaction to advances of civic equality increasingly took the form of virulent racism enshrouded in the verbiage of virtuous civic duty. In response to a growing pseudo-moral culture, unpopular activity of the Ku Klux Klan and mobilization of pro-integration organizations, the White Citizens' Council of Montgomery formed an image of respectable resistance. As a result of this nefarious organization's crusade against the 'immorality of integration,' the city of Montgomery witnessed an exponential gain in the number of council members in the earliest months of the bus boycott of 1955. The speedy mobilization of this organization was closely aligned with the framing of shared values and an identity of moral citizenship and civic responsibility among Southern whites.

As the White Citizen's Council sought to find meaning and frame a collective idea by the means of a civic virtue and moral citizenship in Montgomery, much of the ideology developed out of contentious politics between Southern patricians, black activists, northern integrationists and other less 'respectable' groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. This moral insurgency resulted in a widely sympathized and effective

countermovement epitomized in the infamously racially prejudiced White Citizens' Council. This paper intends to explore how "contentious cycles" between segregationists and integrationists created and redefined the meaning of civic virtue that ultimately led to the mobilization of the highly organized and 'respectable' White Citizen Council of Montgomery, Alabama.

Civic Morality and the Formation of Citizen's Councils

The White Citizens' Council was formed directly as a reaction to the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954. Michael J. Klarman in an article entitled, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Blacklash Thesis," argues that the *Brown* decision indirectly served as a fundamental component of mobilization for several groups. *Brown*, he asserts, "seared the consciences of indifferent northern whites, provided legitimacy for demands by blacks…and crystallized southern resistance to social change."[1] Furthermore, *Brown* effectively doomed much of the Southern body of law that supported a system of white supremacy that many if not most Southerners perceived as morally acceptable and respectable.[2]

The Citizens' Council saw the *Brown* decision directly as a threat to Southern white autonomy and more pointedly as detrimental to the Southern moral culture. In an article entitled, "The Ideology of Southern White Supremacy," James Wilfred Vander Zanden lists three Southern white moral ideologies that were ultimately challenged by the *Brown* case. First, he holds that segregation was natural and eternally fixed in the minds of many Southerners. Second, he purports that many whites of the south adhered to the belief that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Thirdly, Zanden argues that many whites perceived that the end of segregation would lead to disastrous effects of amalgamation of races.[3] As evidenced later in this paper, the idea of white Southern Christian morality was closely aligned to ideals of racial superiority and the inviolability of racial segregation.

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[1] Michael J. Klarman, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *The Journal of American History Volume 81, Issue 1 (June, 1994)*, 81-82.
[2] John Hope II, "Trends in Patterns of Race Relations in the South Since May 17, 1954, *Phylon* (1940-1956), *Volume 17, Issue 2, (2nd Quarter, 1956)*, 104.
[3] James W. Vander Zanden, "The Ideology of Southern White Supremacy," *Journal of History of Ideas*, Volume 20, Issue 3, (June-September, 1959), 385-386.

The decision of May 17, 1954 is demonized in nearly every publication of Council literature.[4] Segregationists perceived the ruling of *Brown v. Board* as somewhat of a second nadir in Southern life. Disdain for the *Brown* decision eclipsed all previous notions of Southern resentment toward Northern intervention and black resistance.[5] Response to the *Brown* decision was the rally point for many Southern segregationists to begin coalition building among themselves.

Different from previous racist and redemption movements in the South, the Citizens' Councils emerged as an openly accepted and deceivingly benign form of respectable resistance. 'Respectable resistance' refers to the idea of an increasing number of Southern whites that opposition to both federal and African American demands for equality under the law were justified as long as the actions were non-violent. Two 'legitimate' methods of opposition espoused by the Councils were coined as *nullification* and *interposition*. Nullification meant that 'Southern law-abiding citizens' were not compelled in anyway to adhere to any federal legislation that they saw to be unjust. Interposition meant that Southern states should interfere with the implementation of federal legislation by any possible means. Surprisingly, they perceived themselves as partaking in some form of civil disobedience.

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[4] The publications that the Council produced are plentiful. However the journal and the newspapers of the organization must be considered carefully for two reasons. The newspapers and pamphlets of the Citizens' Council were produced largely as a means of propaganda and often obviously overstate and understate otherwise sensible facts and statistics. *The Citizens' Council,* a newspaper sponsored and published by the Citizens' Council in Jackson, Mississippi is a primary source that is valuable in understanding the central ideology that contributed to the motivational framework of the Citizens' Council. Originally the newspaper was "…designed to provide a means of examining authoritative information among the *responsible movements* throughout the South" and to "…present something of the Southern view to the North and West." The primary objective of using the Council's newspaper in this research was to provide a better understanding of the aims and purposes of the council movement. The nature of the paper was quite similar to other publications of that decade. Each monthly issue included clever political cartoons, a summary of council activity in each state and often international snippets on relevant news. Importantly, *The Citizens' Council* served not only as a source of information but also a source of mobilization literature. The information provided was not only for current members but also for prospective members. Secondly, *The Citizens' Council* provided a way to sell other publications, books, and materials to members of the organization. The monies received from the ads published within these publications, along with dues, were the sole sources of funding for Citizens' Councils.

[5] By 1956, the *Brown* decision often referred to as "Black Monday," was loathed more than the Emancipation Proclamation in the Councilor's mind. (See Klarman, 88.) Arguably, many white Southerners had come to terms with the immorality of slavery yet were still unwillingly to concede to racial equality on full and unrestricted terms. There is virtually no reference to the emancipation in *The Citizens' Council* and other Council literature. The reconstruction era is moderately alluded to in connection to the imposition of federal mandate over southern tradition and practice. Arguably, the *Brown* decision became a symbol within and among white Alabamian Council resistance even more firmly embedded than it had been as a symbol of progress within the black civil rights movement. Brown served as a mobilizing symbol for both blacks and whites. For blacks, Brown became a symbol of what could ultimately be possible, for whites what must ultimately be avoided at all costs.

Fundamentally the Citizens' Council differed from the Ku Klux Klan in that it sought to implement 'legal' encumbrances to the progress of civil rights in the South. As mentioned previously, the ideology of *interposition* and *nullification* were espoused as rightful and dutiful tools of resistance for southern citizens. Although, the Citizens' Council often challenged federal authority it upheld regional or local government. Members of the Citizens' Council viewed themselves as vicarious upholders of the law.

Evocatively reminiscent of the Civil War and Reconstruction period, councilors viewed themselves as preservers of the region or their respective states first and preservers and interpreters of federal uniformity second.[6] An article that appears in *The Citizens' Council* invokes the idea of nullification and interposition in this light. It asserts, "…states have the right to declare null and void and to set aside in practice any law of the federal government which violates their voluntary compact embodied in the U.S. Constitution."[7] Furthermore, Citizens' Council interpreted interposition as a tool of mobilization. An article explaining the necessity of organized and deliberate opposition assumed a correct understanding of interposition would "arouse people to a sense of their own power" and went on to identify interposition as the "lodestone of the Citizens' Councils."[8]

Agitated by the *Brown* decision, councilors and other self-proclaimed protectors of Southern moral culture counter-mobilized against integrationists, desegregationists, white moderates and other segregationist groups. In most simple terms, the Council tended to mobilize against anyone who was not a member of the organization or likely to join. As a case study, the development and interaction of the White Citizens' Council in Montgomery, Alabama provides a glimpse of dynamics of contention between three groups based on varying interpretations (and misinterpretations) of moral authority and idealistic citizenship.

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[6] As Vander explains at great length, "There has been a long going doctrine of states' rights and nullification which rested upon the premise that the Union was brought into existence by agreement between the states…only certain rights were surrendered to the federal government, all others were reserved to the states…doctrine of states' rights was to become a major Southern weapon in the defense of its sectional interests as it progressively became doomed to a minority position within the republic." (30)

[7] "Interposition—Basic Principle of States Rights," *The Citizens' Council* January 1956, Vol. I. No.4, 1

[8] *The Citizens' Council* January 1956, Vol I. No.4, 1

Increasingly, Southerners perceived themselves as moral superiors to their Northern counterparts. In moral terms, this holier-than-thou legitimization had less to do with spiritual conviction or religious fervor than it did with an assumed illumination on political culture.[9] In a similar manner to the Ku Klux Klan, the Citizens' Councils of Alabama polarized many regional issues about race, class, and gender as moral issues. There is an historical precedent for the tradition of this quasi-moral countermovement. C. Vann Woodard in *Origins of the New South* explains that the attitude of the South resembled that of European countries that sought to suppress religious dissent.[10] Similar to the periods of religious intolerance in Europe, the efforts and means endorsed by southern segregationists against integration were often fanatical and could be justified only by some assumed moral assumption that pledged inspiration by some greater cause.

Upper-class involvement within the Citizens' Councils also reveals how the idea of moral citizenship helped forge this countermovement. Largely, the status quo in the South was enforced and protected by ideals of patricians and elites. Proclaiming to work in "the best interests of the people," many Alabamian aristocrats incited and exploited fear in the minds of lower-class whites to further their own ambitions.[11] Montgomery was no exception to the Southern political culture of fear and racism. Members of the Montgomery chapter included the mayor and the commissioner of the city council; both were reelected into office based on their promise to solve the racial problem that was perceived as threat to Southern society.

Shortly after the Brown decision, no sense of shame was afforded among these individuals. Southern racism had been unabashed in years before but recently the Brown decision appeared to reinvigorate the Southern cause of segregation with a renewed sense of moral legitimacy. The new nature

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[9]Although the ideas of civic virtue stem from religious conviction mixed with public perception and civil religion, the way these ideas are perpetuated and defended are mainly from a political perspective. An article entitled "Religion and Political Legitimation" by Dwight B. Billings and Shauna L. Scott affirms that, "When religious conflicts undermine political legitimization based on civil religion, political conflict also transforms religious legitimations…when religious activists struggle to legitimate their moral claims in the public arena, they find it necessary to play more by political rules than by religious rules." 178.

[10] C. Vann Woodard, *Origins of the New South*, (quoted in Zanden 49)

[11] Aldon D. Morris, The *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, (New York: Free Press, 1984), 258

of white resistance reveals this legitimacy. Unlike the Klan, among councilors there was no mask-wearing and there were no secret oaths. The public profession of membership by important statesmen and local government leaders vouched for the 'respectable' authenticity of the Council that the Ku Klux Klan had lost in recent years. To many Montgomerians, joining the Citizens' Council was not a private engagement but rather a public acknowledgment of outstanding citizenship. Above all, good citizenship and Christian duty among councilors was contingent upon a complete disdain for any ideas of integration, egalitarianism, and progressivism. During this period, the preservation of the rapidly deteriorating status quo was romanticized and reverenced in a highly moralized discourse. Thus, among many Southern whites, adherence or even sympathy with any progressive views was perceived as immoral and subversive.

Interestingly, the goals of the bus boycott and eventually the civil rights movement were also fixated on the precedent of good citizenship. A *Montgomery Advertiser* article on December 6, 1955 identified the Negro gathering of 5000 to petition of all "citizens" of Montgomery to refrain from riding buses until the situation is cleared up to the satisfaction of the "citizens" who ride and patronize them. As thousands of African Americans packed into the Baptist church on Holt St. on the night of December 5, the loudspeakers blared down the street and the whites gathered in the street blocks away to listen to the messages.[12]

As the speakers one by one asserted the congregation's desire for "freedom and equality," the idea of *moral citizenship* became an integral aspect of the black movement. African Americans prided themselves in being *Americans* and living the *American* way. They affirmed that blacks were true Americans and were proud of democracy. Joe Azbell, editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that the crowd swelled into the loudest uproar when the remark was made, "We will not retreat one inch in our fight to secure and hold our American *citizenship*." The second most punctuated remark of that night he asserts was "And the history book will write of us as a race of people who in Montgomery County, State of Alabama, Country of the United States, stood up for and fought for their rights as American *citizens*, as

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[12] Joe Azbel, *The Montgomery Advertiser*, December 7, 1955

citizens of democracy." Later that same month, when MIA leaders meet with the bus officials to reach an agreement concerning the bus boycott, the four-point resolution that was presented included two points that specifically dealt with citizenship.[13]

Defining 'Respectable' Resistance

Among boycotters, councilors and Klansmen, the idea of collective resistance was central to each party's respective view of citizenship. In *Power in Movement*, Sidney Tarrow stated, "The coordination of collective action depends on the trust and cooperation that are generated among participants by shared understandings and identities…or on the collective action *frames* that justify, dignify, and animate collective action." He went on to explain that framing defines the "us" and "them" in social movements.[14] For the councilors, the identity formed through 'respectable' resistance took many forms but almost always distanced itself away from the more confrontational methods of the Klan. Consequently, the "us" for the White Citizens Council was formed by a 'respectable' demarcation from the "them" (the Ku Klux Klan and integrationists).

The Klan had gone into a decline by the end of the 1920s chiefly because of changing perceptions of its usefulness and methods. Increasingly the Southern upper-class and respectable citizens in general came to view the Ku Klux Klan as being a troublesome gang-like organization.[15] By the late 1940s, Alabamians began to voice increasing disdain for the Klan. As Glenn Feldman remarks in an article entitled "Klan-Sponsored Terrorism in Alabama," the opposition to the Ku Klux Klan came not necessarily as a response to what the Klan did but rather what the federal government might do to impose

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[13] Joe Azbel, *The Montgomery Advertiser*, December 7, 1955. "Bus Official Agree to Meet With Negroes," *Alabama Journal*, Montgomery AL, December 6, 1955, 1.
[14] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 21.
[15] Zanden, 58.

order.[16] By the 1950s, the Klan had become a secondary force in the South and lost the majority of its members to the White Citizens' Council.[17]

This framed understanding of citizenship helps to explain the smug determination that characterized the maneuvers of the Citizens' Councils. A certain factor of legitimacy undergirded the bourgeoisie middle-class small-town Christian businessman-like atmosphere of Citizens' Councils. However, the Montgomery Council chose not to publicize their methods like many other councils of the Deep South region because the Montgomery White Citizens' Council seemed the most adverse to being characterized as "manicured Klanism."[18] Once again, the us-them demarcation becomes evident. Montgomerian councilors recognized themselves a civic-minded gentility and did everything possible to distance themselves from clannish behavior.

In an article in the March 1956 issue of *The Citizens' Council*, a front page article entitled "Citizens Council No Place for Klan; Leaders Place Guard Against KKK" appeared.[19] Robert Webb, author of the article, Council advocate and staff writer of the *Jackson State Times* retorted that claims of "Klanism" against the Council by northern liberals were unwarranted and that "…the high-principled community leaders who founded the Councils…are among America's finest citizens."[20] Once again, the Council's idea of possessing a superior moral citizenship and a disdain for lawlessness is apparent.

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[16] Glenn Feldman, "Soft Opposition: Elite Acquiescence and Klan-Sponsored Terrorism in Alabama, 1946-1950," *The Historical Journal*, Volume 40, Issue 3 (September, 1997), 759.

[17] Robert A. Goldberg, *Grassroots Resistance: Social Movements in Twentieth Century America*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 89.

[18] *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 13, 1955.

[19] *The Citizens' Council*, March 1956, Jackson Mississippi, Vol. I, No.6 This article was reproduced from the Jackson State Times. It should be noted that by 1956 the Citizens' Council had developed a centralized information center for the segregation issue and state's rights. Members from the council from various regions mailed in relevant information to create somewhat of a independent news agency specifically in regard to southern issues. Although, the Councils were always loosely affiliated, there was a certain sense of interstate mobilization. The first issue of the *Citizens' Council* (October 1955, vol. I) addressed the loose affiliation, "To all the CC members in TX, LA, AR, AL and SC; to members of the TN Society for the Maintenance of Segregation; Tennessee Federation For Constitutional Government; American States' Rights Association of Birmingham; Georgia States' Rights Association; Patriots of North Carolina; Defenders of State Sovereignty of Virginia; The Virginia League. We want you to feel that "The Citizen's Council is your newspaper just as much as it is for Mississippians." After some time of relying on a centralized base of information, it is only predictable that the Citizens' Councils coalesced into a national organization named the Citizens' Council of America in May of 1956. The new interstate organization included Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

[20] *The Citizens' Council, March 1956, Jackson Mississippi, Vol. I, No.6* This article was reproduced from the Jackson State Times

Recruitment, Mobilization, and Periods of Sustained Interaction

The recruitment of the Citizens' Council was highly effective not only in Montgomery but throughout the entire region of Southern hardcore states. This was due in part to the political climate of the Council and the region. In an unpublished dissertation Zanden outlines four levels of southern white sentiment towards integration. The first sentiment he describes as staunch integrationist, that is, those who wanted saw integration as a public good and desired that it come lawfully and immediately as it was prescribed.[21] A second group sentiment characterized by Zanden were those that wanted to uphold the law regardless of their personal or regional opinion. For this group the law became the focal point and not necessarily ideas of personal preference of regional authority. The third group is identifiable as those who viewed integration as inevitable but who attempted to stall it as long as possible. This sentiment was especially apparent during the Montgomery Bus Boycott when Montgomery attorney Jack Crenshaw commented on the inability for boycotters and company officials to end boycott said there was "…no intention of hiring Negro bus drivers now but who can say what will happen in 10 years."[22] The last and most extreme sentiment toward integration held by southern whites were those that espoused the rebellious mentality that the South must never be integrated by any means.

The Citizens Council of Alabama was successful because it had skillfully appealed to three of the four sentiments mentioned above. Unlike the Klan, the Council of Alabama presented itself with an alleged doctrine of moderation that appealed to those who disagreed with the decision of integration, those that wanted to delay the implementation of integration, and underhandedly endorsed those that downright resisted integration by any means. Councils effectively ostracized whites that disagreed with

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[21] Interestingly, within the Montgomery Bus Boycott there was a Lutheran minister by the name of Robert S. Graetz that adhered to this sentiment. He was reported in the *Montgomery Advertiser* (December 7, 1955) by Joe Azbel as being the only white man in the church (other than reporters) the night of the call for the boycott. The 1956 January edition of *The Citizens' Council* reported on him tongue-in-cheek as hoping "…that his example will show Negroes that is possible for a white person to be a Christian."

[22] *The Citizens' Council,* December 1955, Vol I. No.3, 1

segregrated practices. Using economic terrorism or coercion, they were able to displace the voice of adherents of a sympathetic sentiment or to incorporate them into the council them by intimidation.[23]

Ultimately, Councils were highly effective in recruiting because they had claimed to characterize moral and political certitude bar none. Effectively any opposing voice to the Council was viewed as immoral, illogical, and in many cases subversive to democracy. The effects of this moral hegemony created a polarized political climate that totally eliminated moderation. An example of the Council effective is the routing of the gubernatorial election.

Alabama governor, "Big" Jim Folsom had originally been perceived as a moderate candidate among blacks and whites in the south and had even introduced some rather progressive legislation. However, due to the increasing polarization of the southern political climate created by mounting pressure from Citizens' Councils statewide, the gubernatorial contest in Alabama was reduced to a bid reserved for the most radical Jim Crow endorser available. Competition shifted from between conservative and moderates to a contest between racist radicals—Jim Patterson and George Wallace. Wallace lost the 1958 gubernatorial election to Patterson but vowed that he would never outdone on the issue of segregation again.

Although much reform was needed in Alabama, previous to the *Brown* decision the climate had been somewhat moderate. Governor Jim Folsom was quite moderate on many issues prior to the *Brown* decision and especially the dilemma of improving public education. Granted the severe racial climate in Alabama was more of a *de facto* racism prior to the *Brown* case, the racial tension in state politics soon intensified. After the *Brown* decision, the growing influence of many council-like groups forced most of Alabama's politicians to take hard-line positions on racial issues. Montgomery, Alabama was no exception to the hard-core development of regional politics.

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[23] The terms erosion and nonconversion are useful to examine this process. Erosion and nonconversion are two modes of nonparticipation which may ultimately lead to the death of a social movement. 'Erosion' refers to the loss of sympathizers to another cause. 'Nonconversion' refers to the inablilty to convince sympathizers to mobilize. The Citizens' Councils were partially responsible for the erosion of the Ku Klux Klan sympathizers and the mobilization of many non-sympathizers through assumption of the moral high ground of civic virtue. They essentially killed two birds with one stone. They depopularized the Klan and mobilized the indifferent. For more on erosion and nonconversion see Dirk Oegema and Burt Klandersman, "Why Social Sympathizers Don't Participate: Erosion and Nonconversion of Support," *American Sociological Review*, Volume 59, Issue 5, (October 1994), 703.

Simultaneously, Councils were growing exponentially throughout the region. The Citizens'

Council of Montgomery, Alabama recruited new members similar to the fashion of other councils

throughout the region. In addition to distributing subscriptions to the *Citizens Council*, the Council also

distributed a number of pamphlets and brochures that not only encouraged citizens to take a stand against

the evils of integration but also to become active members in organizing and starting chapters of their

own to 'respectably' oppose integration.

Effectively the Citizens' Councils were partially responsible for the destruction of the middle

ground politics and southern moderate political culture. Indifferent individuals were often ostracized and

eventually coerced into joining the Council or being addressed as part of the problem. Prior to the bus

boycott, Montgomerians had a population of liberals and moderates. Robert Graetz, a white liberal

Lutheran minister of a black congregation, was a member of one of the few integrated groups in Alabama

called Montgomery Council on Human Relations (MCHR). He stated that businessmen had great

difficulty in supporting his group and they were few and far between. Those that did help opted to

contribute anonymously. The more common phenomenon was the wives becoming involved in the

MCHR and the husbands taking part in the White Citizen's Councils.[24] After the boycott began to hurt

Montgomery's businesses, the Council pressured even more whites into taking a stand against integration.

The Citizens' Council as a Countermovement

In an article entitled "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," John D.

McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald and define a *countermovement* as "a set of beliefs and opinions in

population opposed to social movement."[25] The chief characteristic of a countermovement is *opposition*

[24]Robert Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir : The Montgomery Bus Boycott (*Montgomery : Black Belt Press, 1998), 50.
[25] John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 82, Issue 6, (May 1977), 1218.

and not necessarily political alignment. A countermovement may be defined as a movement mobilized against another social movement whether it is right-wing or left-wing.[26]

Countermovement theory came into existence as during the 1960s scholars witnessed opposition to movements resembling the social protesters that they opposed.[27] Clarence Y. H. Lo, in an article entitled "Countermovements and Conservative Movements in the Contemporary U.S.," argues that over time branch fundamentalism evolved into Christian anti-communism which like fundamentalism of the 1920s and 30s sought to maintain exclusive membership and had the propensity to criticize liberal Protestants.[28]

Examining countermovements like the Citizens' Council, the political structure opportunity model evaluates the Citizens' Council's as being enabled but also dissatisfied by the state. In this case, the Council viewed the state as a means of power and interpreted the federal government as a challenger. David S. Meyer in an article entitled "Movements, Countermovements and the Structure of Political Opportunity" argues that interaction between movements and countermovements increase when the state enables challengers to exist but fail to meet their demands.[29] Arguably, the evidence of the mobilization of the White Citizens' Council challenge previous notions that large numbers of people will not protest in opposition to social movements unless they are likely to succeed. Controversially, Meyer argues and this research suggests that countermovement do in fact *share* many of the same objects of concern as the social movements they oppose.[30]

Can it be possible a group of the most bigoted racists in the history of the United States shared the same concerns as Martin Luther King, E.D. Nixon, Ralph Abernathy and other figures of the movement? This is where the ideas of civic virtue and citizenship are vital. The idea of citizenship was central to both of these movements. The conflict between the Citizens' Council, Ku Klux Klan and MCHR, MIA,

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[26] R.H. Turner & L.M. Killian *Collective Behavior*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall,1957),316, quoted in Clarence Y. H. Lo, "Countermovements and Conservative Movements in the Contemporary U.S.," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 8 (1982), 118.
[27] David S. Meyer, "Movements, Countermovements and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 101, Issue 6 (May, 1996), 1631.
[28] Lo, 123.
[29] Meyer, 1628.
[30] Ibid., 1632.

NAACP fixated on interpretations of citizenship and more-less the maintenance of a virtuous societal structure. The problem was that one vision of societal structure was supplanted by racism and intolerance while the other was determined on the implementation of an egalitarian society. Perhaps most importantly in this interaction between movement and countermovement new identities and objectives are formed. In this manner, "a countermovement may generate a countermovement that is different from the original movement."[31]

Specifically, the Citizens' Council forged an identity not only to counter that of blacks and other integrationists in Montgomery but also against the identity of other segregationists. The Council attempted to distance itself from the identity of the Ku Klux Klan by presenting an image of 'respectability.' To further complete dynamics of interaction, the Council of Montgomery also forged assumptions of propriety and comportment in the manner that it dealt with other whites who were sympathetic or indifferent to the boycott.[32] In a news interview the Mississippi Senator James Eastland, a staunch segregationist and prominent Councilor, glared into the camera and retorted, "In the last few years there has been a number of backsliders on the segregation issue… The Citizens' Council is out to utterly destroy those people."[33]

The issue of class was also a factor in the formation of identity among council members in Montgomery and throughout the south. At the end of Reconstruction, racial issues tightened along lines of class. Zanden identifies the proponents of redemption politics as being a middle-class, with industrial outlook and having little in common with the old planter class.[34] The Klan was becoming increasingly unpopular nationwide and most white Montgomerians who supported segregation didn't want to be identified with a poor, ignorant, unruly movement.

The ratio of whites to blacks also influenced the type of resistance that was implemented by Southern segregationists. Council members found that locally endorsed economic terror could be more

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[31] Mayer N. Zald and Bert Useem, "Movement and Countermovement Interaction: Mobilization, Tactics and State Involvement," (*Social Movements in and Organizational Society*, New Brunswick, NJ.: Transaction, 1987), 247-71, quoted in Meyer, 1632.
[32] Not only were the Councils engaged in forms of resistance against blacks within the south but also against intervention of federal agencies and specifically the Supreme Court.
[33] *Eyes on the Prize*, Vol. I
[34] Zanden, 48

effective than physical terror when whites were severely outnumbered. Typically, many areas of the South where Citizens' Councils were founded began in rich agricultural counties of the black belt similar to the conditions in Mississippi.[35]   In the areas that Councils developed in Alabama, whites were considerably outnumbered. In many of these counties the black population exceeded 65%.[36]

When Senator Sam Engelhardt and his associates formed the Central Alabama Citizens' Council late in 1955, the Central Alabama Citizens' Council became the nucleus from which much of the Alabama organization including the Montgomery chapter outgrew. [37]   In these areas where whites were engulfed by blacks, the WCC served as a protective 'legal' mechanism to hedge whites from "mongrelization" or miscegenation with blacks. Consequently, the Citizens' Councils worked not only to preserve the legal identity and civic values of southern whiteness but also to preserve the biological identity of southern whites by maintaining strict racial barriers.

The collective behavior model is also useful in examining the countermovement of Montgomery's Citizens' Council. The collective behavior model asserts that at times of rapid, large-scale transformations, the emergence of collective behavior is often evidenced as religious cults, secret societies, political sects, etc. These groups have double meanings that reflect the inability of institutions to achieve social cohesion. Countermovements may also attempt to react to crisis situations through the development of shared beliefs that base new identities for collective solidarity.[38] Commenting on the phenomenon of conflict, James W. Vander Zanden asserted that, "conflict has served not only to magnify the differences in ideology within America, but to buttress, identify and solidify them through the heightened consciousness engendered by the ensuing struggle…Movement has begot countermovement; ideas has begot counter-ideas."[39]   The shared moral culture of a segregated South provided a common ideological identity that allowed segregationists to face the foreboding 'crisis' of integration

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[35] McMillen, 43.
[36] McMillen, 43 and 45.
[37] Bartley, 89.
[38] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1999, 4.
[39] James W. Vander Zanden, "The Ideology of Southern White Supremacy," *Journal of History of Ideas*, Volume 20, Issue 3, (June-September, 1959), 402.

In Montgomery, the Council's actions against the boycotters can be traced by the actions of the city council. Several members of the city commission were admittedly Council members. Undoubtedly, the desires of the Council were implemented by some of the highest officials in Montgomery. McMillen asserts "The Citizens' Council appeared content to leave the problem in the hands of lawmakers…many of whom…were councilors themselves."[40]

When the composition of the city boards and commissions are taken into consideration and the intervals of contention are examined it become evident that the Citizens' Council used the local government as a puppet to 'lawfully' pursue their agendas. Several examples in Montgomery from 1955-1957 suggest that persecution of boycotters by local government coincided with mobilization of the council and illustrates sustained interaction.

An example of contentious politics implemented through a political opportunity structure is the use of Title 14, Chapter 20 of Alabama Code of 1940 to circumvent the efforts of the boycotters. Deliberately misapplying this outdated anti-boycott law, circuit judge Eugene Carter was used by the Montgomery Citizens' Council as an intermediary to counteract the boycott. Under the old law, "Two or more persons without a *just cause* or *legal excuse* for doing so enter[ing] into any combination, conspiracy, agreement, arrangement or understanding for the purpose of hindering delaying, or preventing any other person firms, corporation, or association of persons from carrying on any lawful business, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor."[41]

The key to the interpretation of this law was the *just cause* or *legal excuse*. Here once again, the idea of civic virtue is important because to the Council integration was not a *just cause* but an immoral and subversive one. Thus the Council not only reinterpreted the law according to their views on justice but also expropriated the authority of the legal system to justify their claims.[42] The county charged some

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[40] McMillen, 220.

[41] *The Montgomery Advertiser*, February 15, 1956.

[42] In *The Montgomery Advertiser*, April 3, 1956 an article appears stating that leaders of the Montgomery boycott also asked the City Commission for a permit to form a new bus company "to provide adequate transportation for our people." Mayor W.A. Gayle, speaking for the commission (and the Citizens' Council) refused to grant such a request and chided that they should ask the Montgomery City Lines to operate buses exclusively for them.

100 boycott leaders of with the breaking of the 1940 Code which led to their eventual arrest. Despite this manipulation and misinterpretation of the law, the boycott continued.[43]

Also consider, Mayor W.A. Gayle's "get tough policy." In the same manner, the Council made use of the existing legal structures to support their agendas. Under this policy, the conditions for the boycott were made extremely difficult. People involved in the car pool could be arrested for operation of an illegal taxi service. Even blacks waiting for rides or walking could be threatened with arrest for vagrancy.[44]

Another example of heightened interaction through political opportunity occurred in 1956 after Mayor W. A. Gayle and the city commissioner joined the Council. King reported at an MIA Executive Board Meeting that "The minute it was announced that the commissioners had joined the White Citizens Council, we received 20-25-30 threatening calls each day."[45] When the commissioner of the police became a member of the Citizens' Council, he legitimized lawless behavior by his affiliation with the organization. Although councilors cannot be directly linked to these increased occurrences of anonymous threatening calls, they can certainly be suspected.

Countermovements often mobilize in the event of political opportunity or in response to a social movement but not necessarily. In some instances the countermovement may simultaneously develop with the movement that it opposes. In the summer of 1955, the NAACP had gained an increased number of petitions in Alabama. The high mobilization of the integrationists in Montgomery was capitalized by the bus boycott of December that same year. Consequently, the Council countered this grassroots mobilization through intensive recruiting measures. By March of 1956, Council membership had reached 65,000 members with 52 chapters.[46] The bus boycott definitely bolstered Council membership but it was already increasing numbers prior to December of 1955.

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[43] Steven E. Barkan, "Legal Control of the Southern Civil Rights Movement," *American Sociological Review*, Volume 49, Issue 4 (August 1984), 555.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Burns, Stewart ed., *Daybreak of Freedom*, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 149.
[46] Zanden, 95.

Contentious cycles are also visible within the Montgomery boycott.[47] As the boycott increased in mobilization (mass meetings in December and January), an increase in funds and organization allowed the MIA to utilize political opportunity structures to address the segregated buses (filing of *Browder v. Gayle* and petition). As a response to increasing mobilization, Klansmen responded by bombing the houses of King and Nixon. Consequently, the White Citizens' Council counter-mobilized against both the efforts of the MIA and the Ku Klux Klan through the implementation of the "get tough" policy and the organization of a mass meeting in the Montgomery Agricultural Coliseum with nearly 12,000 in attendance.

The February 10, 1956 rally in Montgomery was the apex of Montgomery's Council activity. Thousands crowded into the coliseum to hear Senator James O. Eastland. This gathering was not only a counteraction against the mobilizing of the MIA and MCHR but also an attempt to demonstrate civil protest in against Governor James Folsom's pledge to end mob rule. The Council agreed on the decision to end the terrorist tactics of the Klan but disagreed with Folsom's lukewarm policy toward blacks.[48] At this 1956 rally, Montgomery's segregationists counter-mobilized against another social movement as well as institutionalized authority.

Conclusion

Arguably, the ideas of African American citizenship in Montgomery, national views of civic virtue and the Citizens' Councils' interpretation of these ideas created an atmosphere of contention that recycled and continued to evolve the idea of moral civic responsibility in the South and throughout the rest of the nation. Divergent meanings of civic virtue and an assumed moral authority framed the identity of the Citizens' Council. Levels of fluctuating interaction between the Citizens' Council, the Ku Klux

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[47] 'Contentious cycles' is in reference to Sidney Tarrow's theory of contentious politics. According to Tarrow, "Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces with elites, authorities, and opponents." See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics 2nd Edition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

[48] *Montgomery Advertiser*, 1A 3-1-1956. Folsom as many other Alabama authorities had become increasingly averse to the violence and lack of control over acts of racist vigilantism. Folsom pledged to take "…necessary steps…to insure the safety [sic] of all University students and to prevent mob violence."

Klan and African Americans affected the identity and ideology of the Citizens' Council as a countermovement and the underlying ideals of citizenship in southern moral culture.

In conclusion, virtuous citizenship in Montgomery and much of the South in the post- *Brown* years was relative to the degree of interaction of the Citizens' Councils and its opponents. The meaning of civic virtue and moral citizenship in Montgomery and much of the South developed out of conflict between these groups and ultimately determined the effectiveness of the countermovement. The legitimizing factors of civic virtue and moral authority not only framed meaning within the Citizens' Council but also contributed to its success.

Given the strong sentiments of many southern whites that supported segregation based on southern ideals of civic morality, there was apparently a disparity in interpretations of ethical citizenship among blacks and whites. How did two groups who claimed to worship the same God, reverence the same sacred texts, and live in the same country under the same constitution develop such different perceptions of virtuous citizenship? How could two groups of people that shared so many social rituals develop such different modes of propriety?

Connections with the past and the present also exist. One may notice that many of the proposed solutions to racial discord suggested by the Citizens' Council are still considered today---although in 'less threatening' or more 'respectable' disposition. For example, the dilemma with school integration is still a key agenda for the Citizens' Council of America (yes it still exists) and continues to be an issue that sparks political debate. Considering the imminence of the defeat and the impending integration of public schools, the Council searched for other ways to circumvent the process of integration. Some of those methods included private schooling, home schooling and the redrawing of districts. Nearly fifty years after *Brown* and the boycott, our schools, our neighborhoods, our society and even many of our buses remain segregated.

Similar to the manner in which Michael Klarman identifies McCarthyism as a "temporary impediment" to the Civil Rights movement after the war, this generation witnesses a growing disapproval

of egalitarian legislation among many of its 'respectable' citizens.[49] Metaphorically speaking, although the cards have been shuffled the deck remains stacked. We are in essence playing the same game with the deck stacked or fixed in favor of segregated schooling in this country. Decades later, we daily confront the same issues that we had assumed to be resolved long ago.
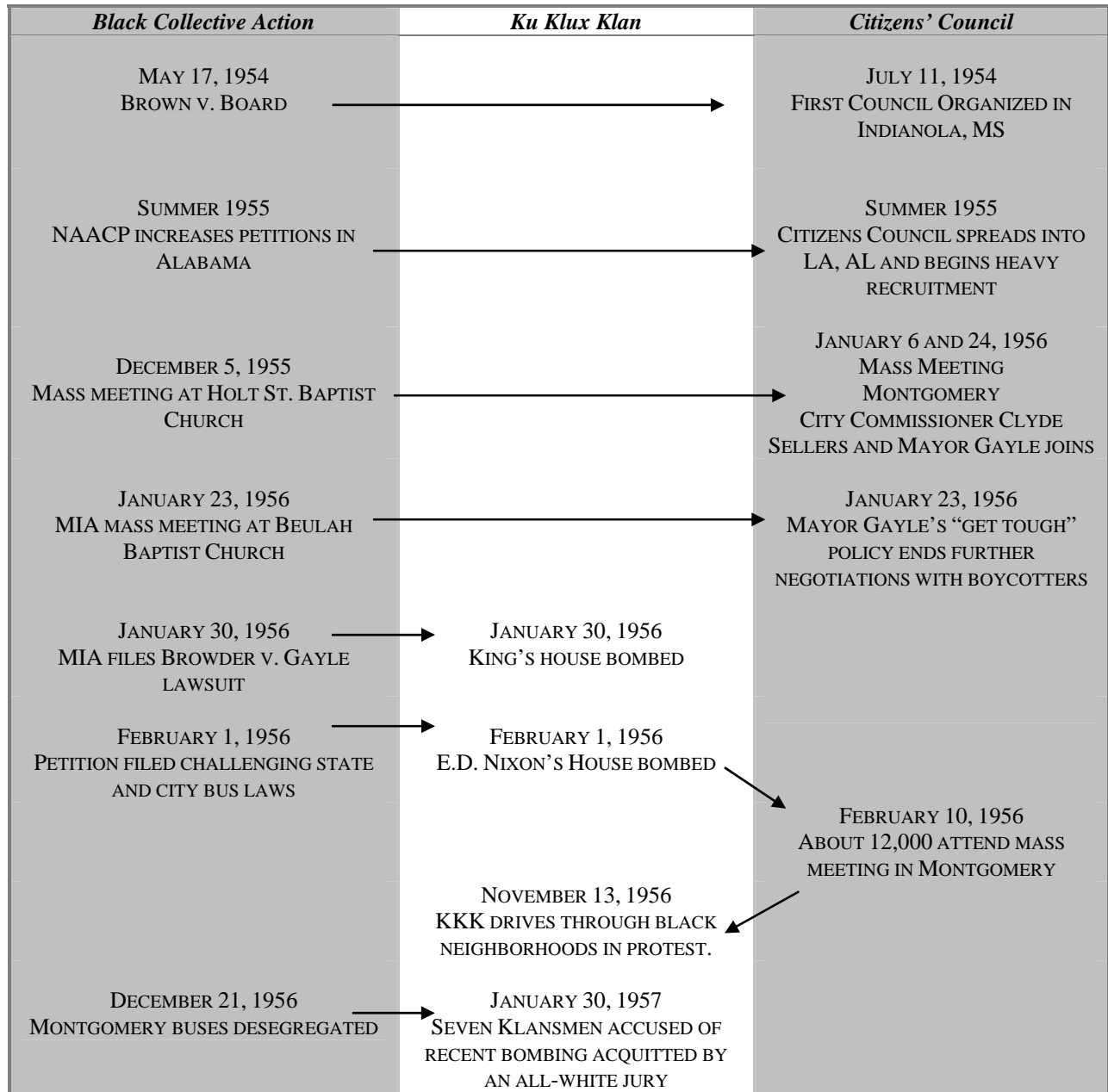
Central to racial and political discourse then and now is the idea of civic moral culture. Under close scrutiny one may find that citizenship underlies every racial debate or discussion on civil rights. Unfortunately, decades later, the ideas about civic virtue among African Americans and Caucasian Americans continue to diverge. When blacks and whites continue to disagree on the fairness of affirmative action, on the implementation of foreign and domestic policy, and what it ultimately means to be patriotic, will the racial impasse ever be resolved?

Of course it is easy to dismiss the Citizens' Council as being completely irrational and racist in retrospect. However, some of the same complex contentious politics that consolidated power in the Council during the post-*Brown* years are still in effect today. The dynamic relationship that exists between blatant racism, discreet racism, and institutionalized racism must be addressed and completely dismantled. Perhaps the most complex variable to be addressed in this equation is how can one deal with the underlying dilemma of racism, when a moral structure exists that condones and fosters it?

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[49] Michael J. Klarman, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *The Journal of American History Volume 81, Issue 1 (June, 1994)*, 90. Also see Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective*, (New York, 1990)

Chronology of Countermovement and Contentious Politics 1954-1957

Black Collective Action	*Ku Klux Klan*	*Citizens' Council*
MAY 17, 1954 BROWN V. BOARD		JULY 11, 1954 FIRST COUNCIL ORGANIZED IN INDIANOLA, MS
SUMMER 1955 NAACP INCREASES PETITIONS IN ALABAMA		SUMMER 1955 CITIZENS COUNCIL SPREADS INTO LA, AL AND BEGINS HEAVY RECRUITMENT
DECEMBER 5, 1955 MASS MEETING AT HOLT ST. BAPTIST CHURCH		JANUARY 6 AND 24, 1956 MASS MEETING MONTGOMERY CITY COMMISSIONER CLYDE SELLERS AND MAYOR GAYLE JOINS
JANUARY 23, 1956 MIA MASS MEETING AT BEULAH BAPTIST CHURCH		JANUARY 23, 1956 MAYOR GAYLE'S "GET TOUGH" POLICY ENDS FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS WITH BOYCOTTERS
JANUARY 30, 1956 MIA FILES BROWDER V. GAYLE LAWSUIT	JANUARY 30, 1956 KING'S HOUSE BOMBED	
FEBRUARY 1, 1956 PETITION FILED CHALLENGING STATE AND CITY BUS LAWS	FEBRUARY 1, 1956 E.D. NIXON'S HOUSE BOMBED	FEBRUARY 10, 1956 ABOUT 12,000 ATTEND MASS MEETING IN MONTGOMERY
	NOVEMBER 13, 1956 KKK DRIVES THROUGH BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS IN PROTEST.	
DECEMBER 21, 1956 MONTGOMERY BUSES DESEGREGATED	JANUARY 30, 1957 SEVEN KLANSMEN ACCUSED OF RECENT BOMBING ACQUITTED BY AN ALL-WHITE JURY	

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