

**Civil Rights Strategy Unit**

**Document-Based Question**

Debatable Issue

**The Civil Rights movement proved that Martin Luther**  **King’s strategy of non-violence was more effective than a radical ‘any means necessary’ strategy would have been.**

Overview

Racial strife plagued the United States since its beginning. This strife became explosive during the 1950s and 60s. “Confrontation, violence, and social disorder indeed seemed almost ubiquitous in America during the mid- and late 1960s.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This era, known as the Civil Rights Movement, was an opportunity for African Americans to strive for equality among other Americans. The Civil Rights Movement encouraged African Americans to speak out against injustices caused by de jure and de facto discrimination. Different groups fought against this discrimination in a myriad of ways. Some groups chose a non-violent approach by utilizing civil disobedience measures, such as boycotts and sit-ins. Other groups chose a more militant approach, arguing that non-violence would not achieve the equality they longed for quickly enough. The nonviolent method was lead in large part by Martin Luther King Jr and Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC). The militant approach was spread among several groups, the most famous being the Black Panthers, who were largely impacted by the ideology of Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael. Although both perspectives wanted to establish a more equal America, their methods and rationale varied greatly. The question then becomes: Violent vs. non-violent, which made more sense for America in the 1960s?

Documents & Questions

**Document A Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Power of Non-Violence Speech,” April**

**4, 1957**

From the very beginning there was a philosophy undergirding the Montgomery boycott, the philosophy of nonviolent resistance. There was always the problem of getting this method over because it didn’t make sense to most of the people in the beginning. We had to use our mass meetings to explain nonviolence to a community of people who had never heard of the philosophy and in many instances were not sympathetic with it. We had meetings twice a week on Mondays and on Thursdays, and we had an institute on nonviolence and social change. We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually.

**NOT TO HUMILIATE BUT TO WIN OVER**

Another thing that we had to get over was the fact that the nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding. This was always a cry that we had to set before people that our aim is not to defeat the white community, not to humiliate the white community, but to win the friendship of all of the persons who had perpetrated this system in the past. The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. A boycott is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption.

Then we had to make it clear also that the nonviolent resister seeks to attack the evil system rather than individuals who happen to be caught up in the system. And this is why I say from time to time that the struggle in the South is not so much the tension between white people and Negro people. The struggle is rather between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory it will not be a victory merely for fifty thousand Negroes. But it will be a victory for justice, a victory for good will, a victory for democracy.

Another basic thing we had to get over is that nonviolent resistance is also an internal matter. It not only avoids external violence or external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. And so at the center of our movement stood the philosophy of love. The attitude that the only way to ultimately change humanity and make for the society that we all long for is to keep love at the center of our lives. Now people used to ask me from the beginning what do you mean by love and how is it that you can tell us to love those persons who seek to defeat us and those persons who stand against us; how can you love such persons? And I had to make it clear all along that love in its highest sense is not a sentimental sort of thing, not even an affectionate sort of thing.

**AGAPE LOVE**

The Greek language uses three words for love. It talks about eros. Eros is a sort of aesthetic love. It has come to us to be a sort of romantic love and it stands with all of its beauty. But when we speak of loving those who oppose us we’re not talking about eros. The Greek language talks about philia and this is a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends. This is a vital, valuable love. But when we talk of loving those who oppose you and those who seek to defeat you we are not talking about eros or philia. The Greek language comes out with another word and it is agape. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. Biblical theologians would say it is the love of God working in the minds of men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on this level you begin to love men not because they are likeable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. It is the type of love that stands at the center of the movement that we are trying to carry on in the Southland—agape.

**SOME POWER IN THE UNIVERSE THAT WORKS FOR JUSTICE**

I am quite aware of the fact that there are persons who believe firmly in nonviolence who do not believe in a personal God, but I think every person who believes in nonviolent resistance believes somehow that the universe in some form is on the side of justice. That there is something unfolding in the universe whether one speaks of it as a unconscious process, or whether one speaks of it as some unmoved mover, or whether someone speaks of it as a personal God. There is something in the universe that unfolds for justice and so in Montgomery we felt somehow that as we struggled we had cosmic companionship. And this was one of the things that kept the people together, the belief that the universe is on the side of justice.

God grant that as men and women all over the world struggle against evil systems they will struggle with love in their hearts, with understanding good will. Agape says you must go on with wise restraint and calm reasonableness but you must keep moving. We have a great opportunity in America to build here a great nation, a nation where all men live together as brothers and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. We must keep moving toward that goal. I know that some people are saying we must slow up. They are writing letters to the North and they are appealing to white people of good will and to the Negroes saying slow up, you’re pushing too fast. They are saying we must adopt a policy of moderation. Now if moderation means moving on with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, then moderation is a great virtue that all men of good will must seek to achieve in this tense period of transition. But if moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of the deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all men of good will must condemn. We must continue to move on. Our self-respect is at stake; the prestige of our nation is at stake. Civil rights is an eternal moral issue which may well determine the destiny of our civilization in the ideological struggle with communism. We must keep moving with wise restraint and love and with proper discipline and dignity.

**THE NEED TO BE “MALADJUSTED”**

Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word “maladjusted.” Now we all should seek to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things. I call upon you to be as maladjusted to such things. I call upon you to be as maladjusted as Amos who in the midst of the injustices of his day cried out in words that echo across the generation, “Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, “All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization. And then we will be able to move from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

Argument-Based Questions

1. How does King respond to the critique or counter-argument against non-violent protest that

it is cowardly, passive, and complacent?

2. How does King use the Greek concept of *agape* to support his critique of violent protest that it would create long-lasting bitterness and hostility between whites and blacks?

3. How does King re-define “maladjusted”? What is the kind of maladjustment that King advocates, and what is his implicit evidence that this form of maladjustment is righteous?

**Document B Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Excerpt,**

**April, 1963**

[Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in April, 1963, for his role, and that of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in a civil disobedience protest in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. King wrote this famous letter in response to a statement released on April 12, 1963, by eight white southern clergymen, titled “A Call for Unity,” which acknowledged racial injustice in America but urged African-Americans to seek slow and gradual change.]

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait."

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you no forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Argument-Based Questions

1. How does King challenge the credibility of the source of the southern clergymen who

argued in 1963 that the non-violent civil rights movement was pushing its agenda too quickly, that it should be patient and go slower in its quest for racial equality?

2. Identify the evidence King uses that is based in the experience of black children and families for his refutation of the “slow down” argument of the white clergymen. What makes this evidence especially effective in support of his argument?

3. Of the remaining evidence King uses to support his argument, formulate two distinct labels – e.g., “racism is killing the childhood ideals of children” – and cite which evidence from the letter applies to which label.

**Document C Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech,”**

**Washington D.C., Capitol Mall, August 28, 1963**

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. … No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Video of the “I Have a Dream” speech -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I47Y6VHc3Ms>

Argument-Based Questions

1. King seems to want to counter the advantages claimed by the other side for physical force with what he calls in this speech “soul force.” What do you think he means by this evocative term? What references to the text of the speech can you make to support your explication (i.e., elaborated definition) of this term?

2. One argument made by the radical militants against King is that non-violent protest would take too long to achieve results. Quote a passage in the speech in which King appears to be addressing this argument. Is this passage a persuasive rebuttal to the militants’ argument? Why or why not?

3. When it comes to white people, King makes an implicit argument against the radical militants. Summarize King’s argument for non-violence and against militancy that references white people.

**Document D Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots [Excerpt],” a speech to the**

**Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, New York City, November 10, 1963**

So we are all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You are nothing but an ex-slave. You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the "Mayflower." You came here on a slave ship – in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the "Mayflower." You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers. They were the ones who brought you here.

We have a common enemy. We have this in common: We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have this common enemy, then we unite on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy – the white man. He’s an enemy to all of us. I know some of you all think that some of them aren’t enemies. Time will tell.

Argument-Based Questions

1. Malcolm X places a lot of emphasis in the first paragraph of this speech excerpt distinguishing the status – the cultural status, the historical status, possibly the legal status – between black people and white people in the United States. What argumentative claim for militancy and against civil disobedience might this distinction support? Go further, and provide the reasoning that explains the connection between the claim and this distinction (which here functions as evidence in this argument).

2. What counter-argument is Malcolm X making in the second paragraph against King’s argument in his “I Have a Dream” speech related to white people? What is Malcolm X’s evidence for his counter-argument about white people?

3. The second paragraph of the speech excerpt above contains an evaluation criterion for determining which side is right in their arguments about white people. What is this evaluation criterion?

**Document E Malcolm X, “The Battle or the Bullet Speech,” Cleveland Ohio, April**

**3, 1964**

Dr. Martin Luther King is a Christian minister down in Atlanta, Georgia, who heads another organization fighting for the civil rights of black people in this country; … well, I myself am a minister, not a Christian minister, but a Muslim minister; and I believe in action on all fronts by whatever means necessary.

Although I'm still a Muslim, I'm not here tonight to discuss my religion. I'm not here to try and change your religion. I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem, a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you're educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you're going to catch hell just like I am. We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.

Now in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. Whether we are Christians or Muslims or nationalists or agnostics or atheists, we must first learn to forget our differences. If we have differences, let us differ in the closet; when we come out in front, let us not have anything to argue about until we get finished arguing with the man. If the late President Kennedy could get together with Khrushchev and exchange some wheat, we certainly have more in common with each other than Kennedy and Khrushchev had with each other.

If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out -- time has run out!…Those Honkies that just got off the boat, they're already Americans; [Polish people] are already Americans; the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet.

Well, I am one who doesn't believe in deluding myself. I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn't need any legislation; you wouldn't need any amendments to the Constitution; you wouldn't be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now.

Argument-Based Questions

1. Paraphrase the steps Malcolm X walks in this speech on the issue of the question as to whether radical militants are anti-white. Do you think he is effective on this topic in this speech?

2. Thinking about our debatable issue, why do you think Malcolm X is intent in this speech on calling for black unity and the diminishment of differences within the black community?

3. Malcolm X makes an argument from analogy that blacks in the U.S. are not Americans, even if they were born in this country. What is the analogy he uses to make this point? What is the implication of this argument on the civil rights strategy debate – how is it relevant to the civil disobedience vs. radical militancy question?

**Document F “The Black Panther Party Program,” 1966**

[The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary communist organization providing militant and armed support to the Black Power movement of the mid- to late-1960s. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1966, called the Black Panther Party the greatest threat to U.S. internal stability.]

**What We Want and What We Believe**

1. *We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.*

We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

2. *We want full employment for our people.*

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. *We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community.*

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules was promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of black people. We will accept the payment as currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over twenty million black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

4. *We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.*

We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

5. *We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.*

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

6. *We want all black men to be exempt from military service.*

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.

7. *We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.*

We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

8. *We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.*

We believe that all black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. *We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.*

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the black community from which the black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the black community.

10. *We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.*

Argument-Based Questions

1. Which of the ten demands of the Black Panther party do you think is least reasonable and subjects the group to the most effective rebuttal from opponents of their radical militancy? Explain and justify your answer.

2. Which of the ten demands of the Black Panther party do you think is the most reasonable and has the potential to garner radical militancy the most additional support? Explain and justify your answer.

3. Explain the Black Panther Party’s argumentative reasoning to justify its positions on:

(a) Reparations

(b) Education

(c) Military Service

(d) Political Self-Determination

**Document G Stokley Carmichael, Chairman, Student Non-Violent Coordinating**

**Committee, “What We Want,” *New York Review of Books*, 1966**

One of the tragedies of the struggle against racism is that up to now there has been no national organization which could speak to the growing militancy of young black people in the urban ghetto. There has been only a civil rights movement, whose tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites. It served as a sort of buffer zone between them and angry young blacks. None of its so-called leaders could go into a rioting community and be listened to. In a sense, I blame ourselves – together with the mass media – for what has happened in Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Cleveland, Omaha. Each time the people in those cities saw Martin Luther King get slapped, they became angry; when they saw four little black girls bombed to death, they were angrier; and when nothing happened, they were steaming. We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and be beaten again. We helped to build their frustration.

For too many years, black Americans marched and had their heads broken and got shot. They were saying to the country, “Look, you guys are supposed to be nice guys and we are only going to do what we are supposed to do – why do you beat us up, why don't you give us what we ask, why don't you straighten yourselves out?” After years of this, we are at almost the same point – because we demonstrated from a position of weakness. We cannot be expected any longer to march and have our heads broken in order to say to whites: come on, you're nice guys. For you are not nice guys. We have found you out.

Argument-Based Questions

1. Summarize Carmichael’s main idea in his first paragraph. What argumentative claim might his analysis of the black rioting support?

2. What does Carmichael say has happened to black Civil Rights marchers typically and up till then? What reasoning does he use to connect these consequences to his implicit claim that the Civil Rights movement cannot succeed in obtaining its objectives?

3. How do you think King would counter the argument coming out of Carmichael’s second paragraph above? Imagine two counter-arguments King might make to Carmichael.

**Document H Gil-Scott Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Song**

**Released April, 1971**

You will not be able to stay home, brother.  
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.  
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and  
skip out for beer during commercials.  
Because the revolution will not be televised.  
  
The revolution will not be televised.  
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox  
In four parts without commercial interruptions.  
The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon  
blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John  
Mitchell, General Abrams and Mendel Rivers to eat  
hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary.  
  
The revolution will not be televised.  
The revolution will not be brought to you by the  
Schaefer Award Theatre and will not star Natalie  
Woods and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia.  
The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal.  
The revolution will not get rid of the nubs.  
The revolution will not make you look five pounds  
thinner, the revolution will not be televised, Brother.  
  
There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mays  
pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run,  
or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance.  
NBC will not be able predict the winner at 8:32  
on reports from 29 districts.  
The revolution will not be televised.  
  
There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down  
brothers in the instant replay.  
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being  
run out of Harlem on a rail with a brand new process.  
There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy  
Wilkens strolling through Watts in a Red, Black and  
Green liberation jumpsuit that he had been saving  
For just the right occasion.  
  
Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville  
Junction will no longer be so god damned relevant, and  
women will not care if Dick finally screwed  
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people  
will be in the street looking for a brighter day.  
The revolution will not be televised.  
  
There will be no highlights on the eleven o'clock  
news and no pictures of hairy armed women  
liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose.  
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb or  
Francis Scott Key, nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom  
Jones, Johnny Cash or Englebert Humperdink.  
The revolution will not be televised.  
  
The revolution will not be right back  
after a message about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.  
You will not have to worry about a dove in your  
bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.  
The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.  
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.  
  
The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised,  
will not be televised, will not be televised.  
The revolution will be no re-run brothers;  
The revolution will be live.

Recording -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGaoXAwl9kw>

Argument-Based Questions

1. What is the implicit overall argument that Heron’s song makes about the relationship between black power revolutionary politics and mainstream American culture in the early 1970s.

2. What might be the consequences to political revolution if it were televised, based on what the song seems to imply? What evidence from the lyrics supports your claim?

3. What do these lines tell us about what the revolution will look like on the streets: “There will

be no pictures of you and Willie Mays/pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run,/or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance”?

1. Patterson, James, Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)