

**Civil Rights Strategy Unit**

**Final Assessment [KEY]**

Key responses in red. Note that other effective responses are possible. We also recommend giving partial credit for partially effective responses.

Assessment Parts

**I. Argumentative Claims and Reasoning**

**Argumentative Claim 1:**

One important reason that civil disobedience was more effective as a protest movement strategy

than radical militancy would have been is that civil disobedience sought to build support for civil rights among other groups – especially the majority white population – whereas radical militancy deteriorated relations with those groups.

**First Piece of Evidence:**

According to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in his “Power of Non-Violence Speech” on April 4, 1957, “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.”

**Reasoning:**

King here is emphasizing that the final goal of all civil rights protest was “reconciliation,” and a

more harmonious society. Civil disobedience respected that goal, in contrast to the violence of

radical militancy, which blocked it due to the bitterness that its violence generated.

**Second Piece of Evidence:**

King also made this powerful statement in his “I Have a Dream” speech on the Capitol Mall on August 28, 1963. “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.”

**Reasoning:**

King makes the point explicitly: not all white people are racists, some white people are the friends

and allies of civil rights. In failing to come to terms with this distinction, radical militancy

substantially weakened itself, according to King.

**Argumentative Claim 2:**

In addition to the point that it build stronger coalitions to support civil rights, another significant

reason that civil disobedience was more effective strategically is that it better tapped into America’s moral conscience and its moral principles expressed in its founding documents.

**First Piece of Evidence:**

In Martin Luther King’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written while he was incarcerated for protesting segregation in Alabama in April, 1963, King emphasized that racism is impossible to explain or have make sense to children.

**Reasoning:**

Civil disobedience leaders routinely discussed the basic, essential immorality and unfairness of

racism, whereas radical militant leaders emphasized its exploitativeness and cruelty. Civil

disobedience leaders directly appealed to Americans’ sense of fairness, and belief that they

themselves were good people. This passage from King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” is an

example of this strategy. If children cannot make sense of racism, and if it violates their sense of

fairness, the implication is that it has to be morally wrong.

**Second Piece of Evidence:**

Later that same year, King again in his “I Have a Dream” speech developed this very famous metaphor. “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.”

**Reasoning:**

In this section of what may be the most famous speech in American history, King connects the

civil rights struggle back to the promises made in the founding documents of the United States.

While radical militants were going about separating African-Americans from their Americanness,

civil disobedience leaders, most notably King, were showing how civil rights are a part of the most

fundamental political terms of our nation.

**II. Counter-Argument and Refutation**

**Counter-Argumentative Claim:**

Some people might argue that radical militancy would have failed since it could not have built a strong coalition of support for civil rights.

**Refutation:**

The problem with this argument, however, is that ignores the deep compromises that the civil disobedience leaders had to make to build their alliance with white leadership during the Civil Rights movement. Malcolm X even called Martin Luther King an “Uncle Tom” during his speeches of 1964 because, in appealing to white leadership’s support of civil rights, he gave up an aggressive defense of true equality and integration for black people. The radical militants were right that there was no “coalition option” during the 1950s and 1960s in favor of genuine civil rights.

**III. Evidence Selection**

**A. Argumentative Claim:**

Civil disobedience’s spiritual aggressiveness matches radical militancy’s physical aggressiveness.

**Evidence:**

Martin Luther King stated in his “Power of Non-Violence” speech of 1957: “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.”

**Reasoning:**

King in this speech recognized that a primary critique of civil disobedience was that it was passive

and complacent, that it wasn’t nearly as active in its opposition to racism and segregation in the

U.S. as the radical militancy that began to gain adherents as the 1950s wore on. He rebuts this

point of view, however, by broadening the definition of “resistance” and even “aggressiveness.” He

says that if we accept that there is moral and spiritual force, as well as physical force, than civil

disobedience is just as forceful as radical militancy in advancing the civil rights movement.

**B. Argumentative Claim:**

Only radical militancy had leaders who were accepted as credible and authentic by average people in black neighborhoods.

**Evidence:**

In an article in the *New York Review of Books* in 1966, SNCC chair Stokely Carmichael wrote, “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.”

**Reasoning:**

Carmichael here is criticizing the leaders of the civil rights movement who favored the use of civil

disobedience by asserting that they do not connect with the anger and disaffection found in black

communities. He accuses these leaders of being too willing to compromise with and buddy up to

the white establishment. By inserting the phrase “up to now” he puts the radical militants forward

as a group of leaders who do authentically represent the anger and unhappiness among African-

Americans at continued racial injustice, and he thereby implies that radical militancy can be more

effective at leading their true cause.

**C. Argumentative Claim:**

Instead of trying to work through the media, radical militancy rejected the media as a tool and a mechanism of white domination and the corrupting of a truly revolutionary movement for equality.

**Evidence:**

As Gil Scott-Heron’s 1971 song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” put it, “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.”

**Reasoning:**

Gil-Scott-Heron’s powerful and influential song captured the skepticism and suspicion that radical

militants had for the media during the civil rights period. The use of repetition in the line “white

tornado, white lightning, or white people” underscores that media imagery was all about, and all

for, white people. The media broadcast white supremacy, according to the militants. Toward the

end of this passage from the song, Heron separates “the revolution” from all of the ways that

corporate sponsorship trivializes things. The revolution, in not being a part of the white corporate

media, will finally give black people the power that they deserve and have been denied.

**D. Argumentative Claim:**

Civil disobedience doesn’t complacently accept unjust conditions, it morally rejects them and refuses to adjust to them.

**Evidence:**

In his 1957 “Power of Non-Violence” speech, King connects civil disobedience in the Civil Rights

movement to a “maladjustment” to what a moral conscience cannot accept in society. He refers to

the biblical figure Amos’s demand for justice and righteousness, Lincoln’s refusal to accept slavery,

Jefferson’s bold decree that “all men are created equal,” and even Jesus Christ’s radical view that

God loves every human being equally and that all mankind are brothers.

**Reasoning:**

King here is redeeming the psychological term “maladjustment” by showing that the greatest

leaders in western and Judeo-Christian culture have refused to adjust themselves to injustice. This

is another way that King made the point, quite powerfully, that there is nothing resigned, or

passive, or complacent about civil disobedience. Rather, it is in the highest tradition of mental,

behavioral opposition and resistance to wrong, and effective support for progressive change.