Name: _____

Jack Miller Center
Founding Civics

Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement

Objective: Analyze primary source readings and editorial cartoons to better understand the purpose and tactics of the Civil Rights Movement while exploring connections with contemporary issues.

Required Materials:

1. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
2. Selected editorial cartoons from the period
3. "The 1964 Civil Rights Bill Explained in 8 Minutes" Video, Made From History
4. Key provisions of Civil Rights Act of 1964

Civil Rights: guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics. (Source: Britannica)

I. Civic Rights and Rhetoric (Persuasive Speech)

Perhaps no individual in American history was more eloquent and moving than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Below are two passages from his now world-famous 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Dr. King addressed it to local ministers who had criticized him for causing civil disorder in the city. Read the excerpts from the letter and respond to the reflection questions.

Part I.

> While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms…
>
> When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind anesthetizing security of stained glass windows…
>
> I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have

watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?... Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Reflection Questions:

1. What is Dr. King's goal in the first paragraph of his letter? Why does he refer to his critics as "men of genuine good will" and their "criticisms sincerely set forth"?

2. Why is he critical of religious leaders in Birmingham?

Part II.

> Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience…It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.
>
> We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws…
>
> I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant starts of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.
>
> Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

*In 1956 Hungarians rose up and attempted to overthrow their tyrannical pro-Soviet government. Russian forces invaded and brutally suppressed the rebellion, killing an estimated 25,000.

Reflection Questions:

1. What does Dr. King mean by "civil disobedience"?

2. What is his point in comparing what he and African Americans are doing to the Boston Tea Party?

3. Why would his reference to Germany be effective?

Historical Overview: Protest Today

During Dr. King's era, protesting injustice entailed marching, boycotting, meeting in churches, and other forms of physical activity. Though there are still public protests today, much activism has shifted online in the form of Twitter mobs, doxing individuals, sending screenshots of earlier messages and/or images they have posted to individuals' schools or employers, etc. Much of this form of activism is anonymous.

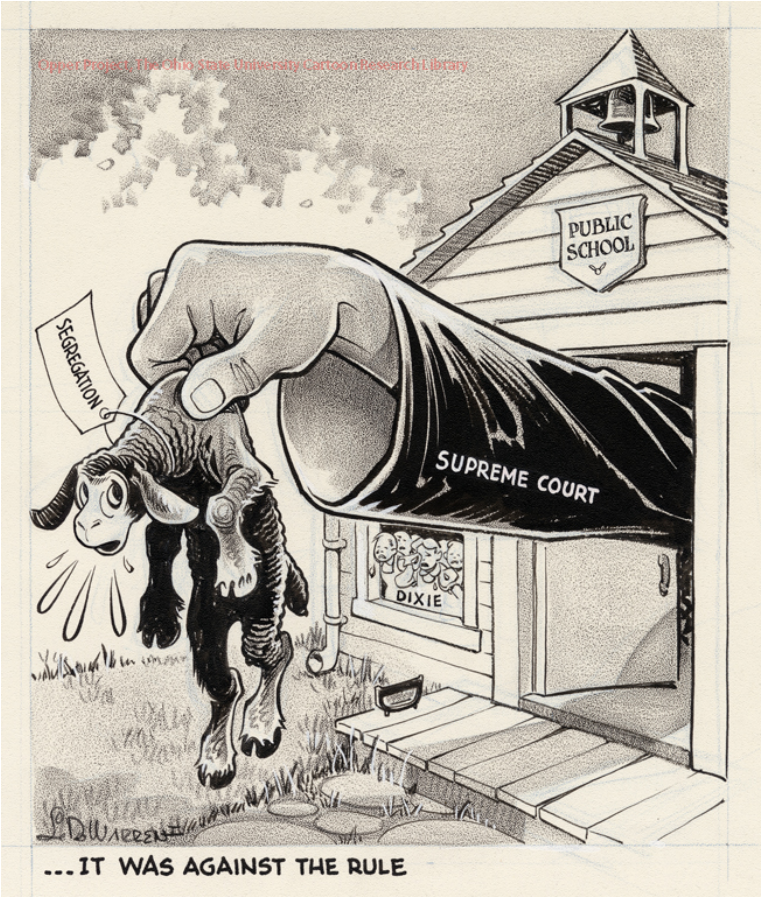
What are your thoughts on this new form of activism compared to that which King and his supporters employed? Is it equally courageous and effective? Does it encourage us to become better human beings as Dr. King had hoped? Be prepared to discuss with the class.

II. Cartoon Analysis

Editorial cartoons have long been an illuminating means of expressing opinions on current events. Visual images can be as effective, if not more so, in exposing peoples' hypocrisies, inconsistencies, and immorality. When looking at them, the first thing to determine is the point of view. Is it negative or positive? Is it for or against a specific issue? What is the purpose of the cartoon? Is it simply ridicule, or is it designed to change someone's opinion? Is it meant to help people to see an issue in a different light?

Below are four cartoons. Study them and answer the reflection questions

A.



Cincinnati Enquirer, 1954

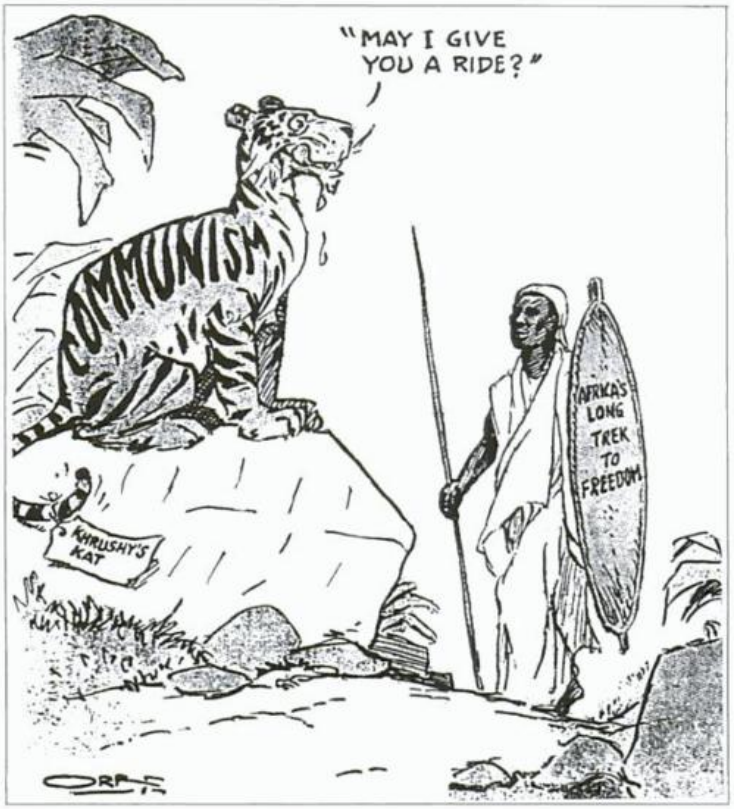
1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?

2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?

3. What are some details you notice?

B.

"THE KINDLY TIGER"



(The tag on the tiger reads "Khrushy's Kat")

This famous editorial cartoon won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960.

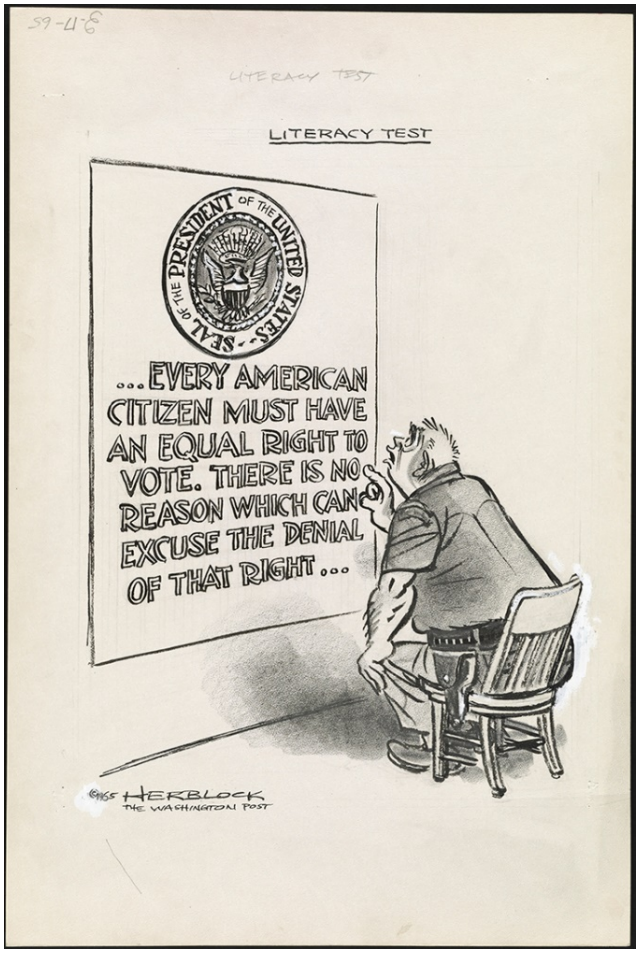
Context: After World War II, African and Asian peoples began winning their independence from colonial powers. The United States and the Soviet Union both attempted to win over the support of these newborn nations, often offering financial and technical assistance. "Khrushy" is short for Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union.

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?

2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?

3. Who would have a better chance of winning over the support of African and Asian peoples, the Americans or the Soviets?

C.



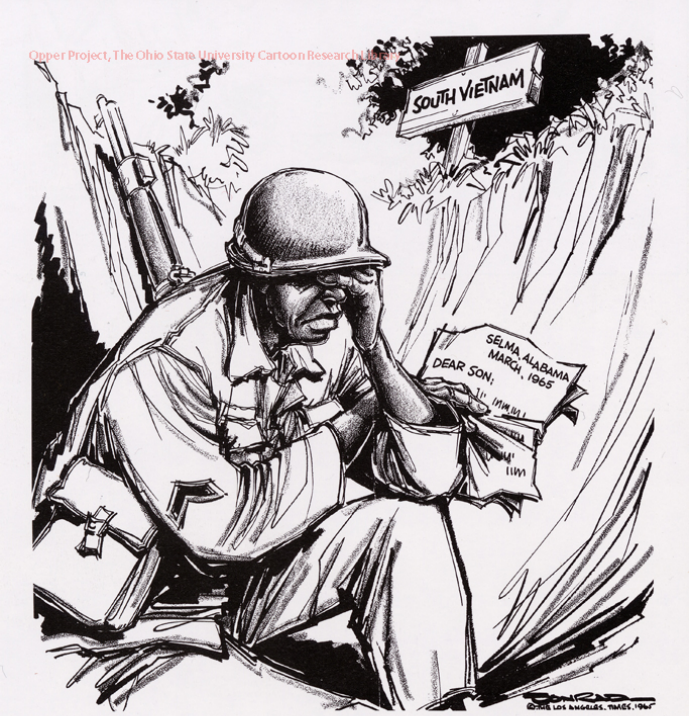
March 17, 1965

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?

2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?

3. What are some details of the cartoon that you notice?

D.



A Letter from the Front

Los Angeles Times, 1965

Context: In 1965, Alabama state police viciously attacked a large peaceful group of African American marchers in Selma. It was filmed and thus became a major news story.

1. What is the point of view of the cartoon?

2. What is the purpose of the cartoon?

3. What are some details of the drawing you notice?

III. Primary Source Analysis

In 1964 Congress passed, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Watch the video, an overview of history behind the bill and how it finally became law. Then read the key provisions of the act and answer the reflection questions.

Video (8 minutes):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVMH5u6bPGA&ab_channel=MadeFromHistory

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Some of the key provisions of the historic legislation:

1. Barred unequal application of voter registration requirements.

2. Criminalized discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in all public accommodations engaging in interstate commerce, i.e., restaurants, hotels, motels, theaters. Private establishments or clubs were exempt.

3. Prohibited state and local governments from denying access to public facilities (e.g., public swimming pools) on grounds of race, color, religion, or national origin.

4. Provided legal mechanisms for the desegregation of public schools.

5. Expanded the Civil Rights Commission which studies, researches, investigates and publicizes discriminatory practices.

6. Prevented discrimination by government agencies that receive federal funding.

7. Prohibited discrimination by employers with 15 or more employees on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.
8. Criminalized discrimination against any individual because of his or her association with another individual of a particular race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, (e.g., an interracial marriage).

9. Allowed for moving civil rights cases from state courts, which often had segregationist judges and all-white juries, to federal courts.

Reflection Questions:

1. Which three provisions do you think would have done the most to change American society? Rank the three from 1st to 3rd and explain your reasoning.

2. Why is #6 so important and consequential?

3. Do you see any loopholes that will allow for continued discrimination?