

Tailwinds of the '60s

LONNIE G. BUNCH III

The civil rights movement brought this nation some of its most memorable moments — the most memorable being the 1963 March on Washington.

What happened that day in the nation's capital had significant impact on the 50 years that followed. Years later, women would march for equal rights; so would gays, and environmentalists, and the coalitions supporting equal rights for Native Americans, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Taken as a whole, what the civil rights movement gave people — all people — was the sense that profound change was possible (see pages 10–17).

Almost every movement that followed found some element of the civil rights movement to adapt to its cause.

The civil rights movement revealed that a mass showing in the streets worked, not only to bring media attention, moral grounding and leadership skills, but to inspire people to believe they were participating in something personally important. The marches for the Equal Rights Amendment showed that passion and theatricality were a good combination.

It was also essential to have a charismatic leader. Cesar Chavez spoke for the beleaguered farm workers during the late 20th

century. When a leader for the burgeoning gay rights movement was needed, Harvey Milk led the crowds in San Francisco in the 1970s.

What was understood by the worldwide movements that grew up around the civil rights movement was the need for coalitions, ones that could push for legislation. The National Organization for Women was founded on that model.

It is part of the American story that legislation and court rulings are needed to solidify the work done on the ground. For the 1960s activists, the achievements came in the passage of several bills, beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The breakdown of the old ways opened the way to political office. Then the causes of the street became the centerpieces of political platforms and legislative agendas. Woven into the successful Title IX legislation (which requires women to get the same opportunities as men in educational programs receiving federal money) and today's rapidly changing laws and views on same-sex marriage are the tenets the civil rights legislation demonstrated.

And laws have led to new activism. Today, the women's movement has nurtured 98 women in the current U.S. Congress and 20 world leaders. Those results were the core of everyone's dreams 50 years ago. ■

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As director of Smithsonian's Museum of African American History and Culture, due to open next year, Lonnie Bunch sees the long view.