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Revision

Marcus Garvey and civil rights

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Consider the following question on Marcus Garvey, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

'Marcus Garvey was the most successful individual African American civil rights leader in the period from 1865 to 1992.' How far do you agree with this view?

Student answer with commentary

Garvey was important in the civil rights struggle in America in the period from 1865 to 1922. Not only did he realise the need for economic enterprise and improvement, supported by greater education, but he created an organisation, the UNIA (The Universal Negro Improvement Association). This had a membership of some four million, the largest of such organisations. However, he was not the most successful leader, as he failed to bring about legal changes in the position of black Americans or win the support of white Americans. He may have inspired many black Americans to have pride in a separate identity, but his imprisonment for embezzlement meant he was an isolated figure. It was Philip Randolph who, through his understanding of the power of non-violent demonstrations, and Martin Luther King, who built on his achievements who were the most successful, bringing about considerable changes in the legal position of black Americans.

The opening does focus on the named person, Garvey, and acknowledges his contribution. There is good, detailed knowledge shown of Garvey and his career, which may be absent from a number of responses which will focus on other leaders. However, it offers an alternative view that both King and Randolph were more important and offers a brief explanation as to why. A thesis has been established, which should be built on throughout the essay.

It was Randolph and Martin Luther King rather than Garvey who won the support of US governments to bring about legal changes in the position of black Americans. Garvey was not interested in working with the American government, seeing it as a sign of weakness, emphasising instead the strength, worth and separateness of black Americans. In contrast, both Randolph and King achieved considerable advances. Randolph helped to influence Roosevelt to end discrimination in the war industries in the 1940s and, most importantly, was able to persuade Truman to end segregation in the US armed forces after the Second World War. However, it was King who really built on this and was

able to bring about more fundamental changes than Randolph, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 under Johnson. The success of Randolph and King can also be contrasted with Malcolm X, whose violent methods which urged black Americans not to reject any means for change which alienated the government. It was therefore the more peaceful approaches of Randolph and King that had the greatest impact on US government in bringing about change.

A thematic approach is adopted, the response does not simply go through each of the major civil rights leaders and explain what they contributed. The thematic approach allows the candidate to compare the contributions of the different leaders and reach a judgement after each theme as to who was the most important. The first main paragraph deal with the issue of influencing government and compares Randolph and King with Garvey, using detailed knowledge of the 1940s and 1960s, before comparing them with Malcolm X and reaching a judgement.

King was also successful in winning white support for the civil rights cause, but he was not alone in this. Both Du Bois and Washington co-operated with white Americans. Washington won support from the industrialist Carnegie with his policy of self-improvement and his policies did lead to him becoming an informal adviser to both Theodore Roosevelt and Taft. It can be argued that his cooperation led to the progress that was made in the 1960s. Du Bois also worked with whites, seen most notably in the NAACP — but its domination by whites, with Du Bois the only black American to hold office in the organisation, limited his importance. In contrast, King won support from many white people, seen in the numbers who attended the March on Washington, unlike both Garvey and Malcolm X who were more concerned with promoting separation — Garvey's slogan was 'Africa for the Africans at home and abroad', whilst Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement was also in the separatist tradition. King was therefore the most successful in gaining white support for civil rights, but he was able to build on some of the earlier actions of Washington and Du Bois.

Similarly, another theme, white support, is examined. The paragraph covers a wide range of leaders and again comparisons are made across the whole period, using the early examples of Washington and Du Bois. There is also strong comparison made between King, Garvey and Malcolm X before a supported judgement is made.

Although Garvey claimed to have four million members of the UNIA, it was King who undoubtedly was the most successful in achieving mass support. However, the scale of Garvey's organisation was far greater than anything else before 1917 and would not be matched again until the mass movements under King in the 1960s. Malcolm X was never able to achieve such support with membership of the NOI reaching just 400,000. Randolph, like Garvey, also saw the value in mass demonstrations with his 1917 march in New York. It was this that inspired King with his March on Washington, which was actually organised by Randolph, and also encouraged the Selma to Montgomery march. The scale of King's activity helped to pressure the government into change and was therefore much successful than Garvey and other leaders, but again he was able to build on the impact of the non-violent protests of Randolph.

The response continues to follow a thematic approach considering the issue of mass support. Once again, comparisons are made between the named person and other leaders. There is detailed knowledge used to support the argument and good range of the period is covered. A supported judgement is reached.

The tactics of both Garvey and Malcolm X were important in inspiring pride among black Americans. Both stressed the worth and strength of black Americans, but this limited their appeal to black Americans and the violence of the Black Power Movement alienated many, even though it was successful in bringing about economic and social improvement at local level through housing schemes and providing help with food. However, both Garvey and Malcolm X did achieve a higher level of awareness among black Americans, but their tactics did not bring about positive change. On the other hand, the non-violent protests of Randolph helped to move the civil rights movement on and paved the way for the spectacular success of King's marches in Atlanta in 1961 and, most notably Birmingham in 1963, where the actions of the Police chief, Eugene 'Bull' Connor did much to win widespread support. Moreover, King's speeches, particularly the 'I have a dream' speech, the marches and the sit ins were given national coverage in the media, providing excellent publicity for the cause. However, although King was the most successful, he was not without his critics, as some believed he was hesitant and not radical enough and, like Du Bois and Washington, co-operated too readily with whites.

The thematic approach continues to dominate and there is clear evidence of synthesis with the comparison of Malcolm X and Garvey before the impact of their tactics is compared with Randolph and King. It might have been helpful if there had been some more precise details about the social and economic work of the Black Panthers at a local level. However, there is detailed knowledge of King and some comparison with the earlier part of the period, but again the co-operation of Du Bois and Washington with whites might have been developed.

Garvey did not achieve his aims despite his following; pan-Africanism was not achieved and his economic ventures were a failure. His imprisonment left him isolated. Similarly, Washington's achievements were limited as he was seen as being too concerned about angering white opinion, however his stress on economic improvement and co-operation was successful to some extent, particularly in the 1960s. It was Malcolm X rather than King who was more successful in bringing about economic and social improvement in the daily lives of black Americans. However, in terms of legislation, it was Randolph and King who were most successful in achieving their aims, although even King failed to bring about economic improvements or policy change over the Vietnam War. No leader was completely successful, seen in the progress that still needs to be made today.

The final paragraph considers their success in achieving their aims. Once again, the paragraph opens by looking at the named person before considering other leaders. Greater comparison might have been expected, but this is the only paragraph where the synthesis is less than excellent. Once again a judgement is reached, which has been shown in the main body of the paragraph.

It was King not Garvey who was the most successful of the black American leaders. He brought about the biggest change in the position of black Americans. Garvey may have inspired many to be proud of their African heritage and culture, but it was King who brought about practical and legal changes in the lives of many black Americans. However, he was able to build on the earlier work of Du Bois and Washington, but most notably Randolph whose non-violent protests and mass marches did much to inspire King and, we should not forget that it was Randolph who actually organised the March on Washington. Despite this, it was King who was the most successful leader, inspiring both black and white Americans and forcing the government to introduce the greatest changes since Reconstruction.

The conclusion, quite rightly, focuses on the named person and compares him with others in concluding that he was not the most successful. The conclusion is also able to make links between the different leaders and suggest that later leaders built on earlier achievements, a point that has been made in the main body of the response. It reaches a supported judgement which is based on the interim judgements at the end of each paragraph. As a result of the constant comparisons and judgements this response would reach the top level. This is a very large subject and examiners would not expect every issue to be covered, but they would expect there to be comparisons across the whole period and that has been achieved.

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