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THE SIMPLEST WAY TO INSPIRE CHANGE



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16



Rosa Parks and the Science of Revolution



ONE MORNING IN THE SPRING OF 1955, an African American woman climbed aboard a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, during the hustle and bustle of rush hour. Not long after taking her seat, the bus began to fill up. Eventually, the seats in the white section at the front of the bus were all taken so the driver, Robert Cleere, stopped the crowded bus and ordered three young black women to give up their seats to a few recently boarded white women. When one of the African American women refused to move, Cleere flagged down a pair of police officers.

“Who is it?” one officer barked.

"That's nothing new," Cleere said pointing dismissively to the woman. "I've had trouble with that *thing* before."

"Aren't you going to get up?" the two officers asked her.

"No sir," she muttered.

"Get up!" they shouted.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she raised her voice at them. "I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right!"

Each officer grabbed one of her arms and hoisted her into the air, sending the books on her lap flying into the aisle. The event was a first for both of the young officers, still in their mid-twenties, and so they weren't exactly sure what to do. After debating for a few moments, they decided to handcuff the woman and dragged her out of the back of the bus and into the back of their squad car.

On the way to the city jail, they harassed and humiliated her. The two men took turns guessing her bra size and making degrading remarks about her body. Alone in the back seat, she refrained from shouting back. She closed her eyes and tried to drown them out with prayer: *Our father, who art in heaven. . . . I will fear no evil, for the Lord is with me. . . .* The white officers never referred to her by name. They referred to her only as "bitch" and "whore." Eventually she arrived at the jail where other police officers and prison guards continued with the jeers and the taunting.

After what felt like a lifetime, the woman's pastor, Reverend H. H. Johnson, came to bail her out. By that time she had stopped fighting back the tears and found herself weeping like a child. Years later she would recall with pride the words Reverend Johnson spoke to her on the drive back to her King Hill neighborhood. "I'm proud of you," he said. "Everyone prays for freedom. We've all been praying and praying. But you're different—you want your answer the next morning. And I think you just brought the revolution to Montgomery."

Indeed she was the first person to put her fear and personal safety aside and take real action against Montgomery's bus segregation statute. Today, everyone knows that Rosa Parks'

decision to stay seated inspired a revolutionary change that eventually ended racial segregation in America.

There is just one problem with this story: Rosa Parks wasn't there.

In fact, Mrs. Parks was at home getting ready for work when the first African American woman openly defied segregation on a Montgomery bus. That young woman was a 15-year-old high school student named Claudette Colvin.¹ A month after Ms. Colvin defied the unjust law, an 18-year-old woman named Aurelia Browder followed suit. Then came Susie McDonald, who was followed by Jeanette Reese, and then Mary Louise Smith. Finally on December 1, a full nine months after Claudette Colvin's brave act, Rosa Parks became the *sixth* African American that year to take a rebellious stand—or *sit*, as it were.

And yet today, it is Rosa Parks who is known as “the mother of freedom.”

Why?

The short answer is that Edgar Daniel Nixon, the president of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, made a change decision.



THE MOBILE MIDDLE AND THE EDGY ELITES

Prior to that fateful spring morning in 1955, Edgar Nixon had spent months anticipating an opportunity to openly challenge the bus segregation law in Alabama and potentially use that as a major stepping-stone to launch a much broader movement. Support seemed to be gathering. But he wanted to transition the civil rights movement to the next level. Nixon intuitively knew that if his group of activists in Montgomery were going to change their city, let alone their state and their nation, they would need to spark action from the throngs of dissatisfied but still largely inactive masses of African Americans, as well as sympathetic—or at the very least *curious*—middle-class white Americans. They needed to send a new signal to these people. Then one day, out of the blue, Claudette Colvin's courageous

act seemed to give Montgomery's change leaders exactly what they had been looking for.

Problem was that same spring the 15-year-old Colvin became pregnant.

Social scientists who have spent the past century and a half studying political revolutions have found that successful change movements must tap into at least three key factors—a disillusioned middle class (a mobile middle); a subset of the nobility and intellectuals who are part of the elite class of society, but who don't conform to the values system of their social class (edgy elites); and then some sort of unifying motivation that articulates the cause in such a way that it brings the two dissenting groups together to work toward the same cause (a rebel yell).²

All three of these factors were at play in Nixon's decision to make Rosa Parks the face of revolution instead of Claudette Colvin. In the modern era of *16 & Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, Ms. Colvin's status as an unwed teen mother might not seem like such a big deal. But in 1955, it would almost certainly have created a stumbling block for many of the more morally conservative, yet socially sympathetic revolutionaries among middle-class blacks and whites. Many would-be supporters around the country who didn't fully understand the magnitude of the discrimination in Alabama might have written off Colvin—and the movement she represented—as merely a band of troublemakers and rabble-rousers trying to stir things up and grab headlines.

Rosa Parks, however, sent a very different message. That was no accident.

"The storyline that quickly emerged about Mrs. Parks as a ladylike figure, a woman who had worked all day and was simply too tired to move when she was ordered to get up out of her seat was itself an effective tactic," wrote Fred Gray, the young African American lawyer who represented both Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks in court. With her horn-rimmed eyeglasses and her neatly groomed hair, her conservative dress, and her soft facial features, Rosa Parks looked like an ordinary,

hard-working, middle-class American wife. She looked like your neighbor or your mother or your sister, maybe even your child's Sunday school teacher, the local librarian, or even *you*. Rosa Parks presented the image of a person who would make ordinary folks all over the country sit up and take notice if they saw her on the front page of the morning newspaper getting hauled off to jail in handcuffs.

Nixon's decision *not* to trumpet Claudette Colvin's case also signaled an internal change for the burgeoning movement. It told the other members of Montgomery's local NAACP chapter that a blind passion for justice was no longer enough to make their movement succeed. His decision signaled that they would now align themselves around a carefully orchestrated, highly inclusive strategy directed at the kinds of people that the movement had failed to attract before—the everyday person, rather than only the highly informed and uber-socially conscious activist types.

On top of that, Nixon also recognized the need to involve a reasonable percentage of influential, upper-middle-class members of both the black and white communities—the edgy elites. The mobile middle alone rarely have either the money or the influence to overturn the ruling regime on their own. That's true for organizations, communities, and entire nations.

Think once again about the American Revolution. Without the money, influence, and organizing capacity of the rebellious colonial *elites* like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Sam Adams' cousin John, the militias and plucky frontiersmen would have been little more than persistent thorns in the side of King George. They would have been a nuisance and maybe even a bona fide terrorist cell, but not a revolutionary force. They would have been irritating to England only in the way a mosquito is annoying right before you squash it. With the support of some influential elites, however, everything changed.

Even though popular history presents America's founding fathers as ordinary, everyday *aw shucks* kind of guys, they were in fact the aristocrats of their era. Ben Franklin, the creator of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, was anything but poor by the time the

seeds of revolution were being sown—by many estimates he was the richest man in America. George Washington was the wealthiest landowner in Virginia. John Adams was a Harvard-educated lawyer. Thomas Jefferson was a lawyer, scientist, philosopher, and plantation owner who fluently spoke six languages. John Hancock was the wealthiest merchant in the country rivaling Ben Franklin for wealthiest person overall. Even though all except Thomas Jefferson came from humble roots, as adults the Founding Fathers were all part of the influential ruling class. What history and social scientists have proven overwhelmingly is that grassroots movements led exclusively by “commoners”—no matter how much we like to romanticize them in our storytelling—never succeed without eventually securing the support of more influential members of society or the organization.

This is the truth that Edgar Nixon intuitively knew when he made his decision about Claudette Colvin. He knew that revolutionary change can and often should start from the average people lower down in the hierarchy—whether those people are Marx’s oppressed peasants in industrial societies or the front-line workers in big organizations who have the best line of sight to ever-changing customer needs. But the change movements can’t stay in the middle. Eventually, every revolution needs to social climb. It has to crawl up the social hierarchy and reach a subset of thought leaders and power-wielders who have a naturally rebellious streak or some other reason to sympathize with the mobile middle’s cause.

Earlier in the civil rights movement the edgy elites included people like the decidedly intellectual and outspoken former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt whom Edgar Nixon had coincidentally bumped into on a train car he was working in after writing letters to her requesting her support for a USO branch for black servicemen in Alabama. It was also people like Clifford Durr, a wealthy white former Rhodes scholar who practiced law in Montgomery and supported his wife Virginia’s full-time activism in the community.

In order to reach a critical mass, the movement would require both the mobile middle and the edgy elites working toward the same end. What they still needed was a rebel yell—a unifying motivation that channeled all the angst and discontent and diverse ideologies into a single cause. That was no easy task. Even within the tiniest subsets of the group, disagreements were rampant. For example, at a meeting of local black ministers in Montgomery there was disagreement about how far to push the white power structure. Some wanted full cooperation with the white leaders and feared a harsh backlash, while others wanted to stand apart and not compromise their convictions for anyone—especially white leaders. The impasse threatened to stop the bus boycott in its tracks just days after Rosa Parks was arrested. Only when a charismatic 26-year-old minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. stood up to say he wasn’t afraid of the backlash, did the group forge ahead.

To overcome future ideological and practical skirmishes like this, the group needed something that all strata of the loosely connected community could get behind, without their differences getting in the way. That *something* turned out to be a *someone*: Rosa Parks. Like Tony Soprano’s character, she was the unexpected black queen of diamonds that caused Americans to reconsider what they thought they knew about race relations in their country.

Even though you might not have your heart set on a coup within your organization, we can still take a lesson from the study of political revolutions. Every change movement inside an organization needs an executive sponsor (an edgy elite) and a group of people—whether a department or a project team or an employee base—to move the change forward (mobile middle). To align both sets of constituencies you need a common focal point that both groups understand and care about.

Effective change leaders in organizations today are able to align people both from the bottom up and from the top down.