

American Protest Movements

The death of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street with the knee of a police officer on his neck has generated protests throughout our country and some foreign countries. In thinking about this, I asked myself the question – Do protest movements in the US actually accomplish something? As we all remember from our American History classes, there was a protest movement in December 1773 when colonists protested against British rule. It was called the Boston Tea Party and was part of the beginning of the eight-year American Revolution, so it did accomplish change.

There have been many protests against slavery going back to a Quaker petition against slavery in April 1688, which accomplished nothing until 1780 when the Pennsylvania passed a law to gradually emancipate slaves. Of course, we had a Civil War on that question in the 1860s including the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 which said that slaves of the Confederacy would be freed. It did not free slaves in the Union.

In July 1848 the first convention for woman's rights called the Seneca Falls Convention was held demanding among other things, the right to vote for women. In 1920 the 19th amendment to the US Constitution became law granting women the right to vote. So, change was accomplished.

In July 1932, about 20,000 unemployed Veterans, mostly from WWI converged on Washington to demand promised bonus payments from Congress and President Herbert Hoover. The US military led by Douglas MacArthur using tear gas and force removed the protesters. MacArthur accused the protesters of trying to take over the government. In 1936, Congress overrode an FDR veto and provided the funds to pay the WWI bouses. So, change was accomplished.

In 1936 workers walked into the General Motors plant in Flint MI, sat down and stopped working. After a month and half, GM signed an agreement recognizing the union and workers rights. So, change was accomplished.

In December 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus in Montgomery, AL. She was arrested and fined. The black community came together and refused to use city buses in a protest that lasted over a year and forced Montgomery to integrate its bus system. It was the beginning of the civil rights movement. In 1965 major civil rights legislation was passed into law with the support of President Lyndon B Johnson. So, change was accomplished.

In mid to late 1960s, the US saw anti-Vietnam War protests throughout the country, including Moorhead. It resulted in LBJ deciding not to run for another term and let to violent protests during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. The war ended in 1973. Did the protests help end the war? Probably.

Will current protests accomplish change? Probably. As we've seen, sometimes change happens rather quickly such as the forming of a union at GM plants. More often change takes a long time such as the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to 1920 with the 19th Amendment.