

US- Civil Rights Movement

The Movement Begins

The Civil Rights Movement was a period of grassroots efforts to put an end to racial discrimination, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Grassroots means from the people, as opposed to the government; grass has roots that go wide and deep, even though grass isn't very tall. Protests against segregation had begun decades earlier, but WWII helped raise more awareness – particularly among African Americans veterans – of the hypocrisy in fighting for freedom abroad while inequality persisted at home.

Brown v Board of Education

One of the first targets was segregation. The NAACP challenged this law in the early 1950s, on the basis that many “separate but equal” public schools for black kids were inferior to all white schools in the same district. That was a violation of the 14th Amendment, which states that all US citizens are entitled to the equal protection of the law. The parents of a girl named Linda Brown sued her school district when she wasn't allowed to attend the all-white school that was closer to her home in Topeka, Kansas. The Supreme Court heard the arguments in the case of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1952. Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer for the NAACP who would become the first African American Supreme Court Justice, presented arguments for the Brown family. He convinced the court to make landmark ruling on May 17, 1954, that placing African Americans in “separate but equal” schools was unconstitutional because things that are separate are never actually equal. In a case the next year (*Brown II*), the Supreme Court required that all segregated public schools integrate “with all deliberate speed.” The Court did not give a deadline, so some schools delayed integration for years.

The Little Rock Nine

In September of 1957, an Arkansas high school as ordered by a judge to admit 9 black students. Arkansas governor Orville Faubus was a segregationist, and he sent the Arkansas national Guard to stop the students from going in. One of the Little Rock Nine, Elizabeth Eckford, was threatened with lynching. For three weeks, the students were kept out. President Eisenhower ordered Faubus to allow the students in, and when Faubus continued to ignore these orders, Eisenhower sent paratroopers to escort the students and enforce the law in order to preserve National supremacy over states. In the United States, states are allowed to have different laws from each other, so long as they do not conflict with a national law. When there is conflict, the National law is supreme. During the Civil Rights era, Southern States resisted the Supreme Court decisions and vowed not to enforce them, in a strategy called Massive resistance. Furthermore, various governors proposed to interject the state government between the federal government and its citizens in a tactic called State interposition. Eisenhower, however, stood firm, and used federal troops to enforce the law.

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

City busses were segregated too. Black riders were required to give up their seats if white riders wanted them. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a woman named Rosa Parks refused. She was arrested and fined. In response, African Americans organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which lasted for more than a year. Most people who rose the busses were black, so the boycott cost the city a lot of money and also cost it its reputation when the national media picked up the story. Boycotters organized carpools or walked, even when faced with violent segregationists and the KKK. On November 13, 1956,

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the Supreme Court ruled that the bus segregation law had been unconstitutional in the first place. The boycott had worked.

Martin Luther King Jr.

A young reverend named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK Jr.) rose to prominence during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. His talent for speechmaking made him popular. In 1957, he helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a key organization in the civil rights movement. MLK Jr. was influenced by A. Philip Randolph and by Mohandas Gandhi (also known as Mahatma or "Great Soul", who had protests in India against British foreign rule using nonviolent tactics of civil disobedience.

Sit Ins

One of the most efficient forms of nonviolent protest was the Sit In – sitting in protest. On February 1, 1960, four black students sat at a whites only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, at a restaurant called Woolworth's. Although the lunch counter staff refused to serve them, the students returned each day with more and more people. Eventually, store owners desegregated to prevent further disruption of their business. An organization called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed to help people launch sit-ins across the South. The Grassroots civil rights movement – which consisted of large numbers of young people – was growing and making its mark.

John F Kennedy

In the election of 1960, John F. Kennedy (JFK), a young Democratic senator from Massachusetts, challenged the incumbent (currently in office) Republican Vice President Richard Nixon. JFK came from a prominent political family, and was a WWII navy war hero. The Kennedy-Nixon debates were the first televised presidential debates. Americans saw that Kennedy was more youthful than Nixon. Although some people thought a Catholic like Kennedy would be more loyal to the Pope than to the American people, Kennedy reassured them, and he promised supporters a "new frontier" on domestic reforms, a call for public service, vigorous federal government, and strong anti-communist foreign policy. The election was close, but Kennedy won. He and his wife, Jacqueline, were exciting, stylish, and popular, and their time in the White House is sometimes referred to as Camelot, because they were the modern American version to many people. Kennedy didn't immediately pursue the reforms he had promised, in order to avoid upsetting Southern Democrats. Civil Rights leaders criticized him for not bringing about change fast enough.

Freedom Riders

In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent blacks and whites to ride together as Freedom Riders on interstate busses to segregated stations in the South. They planned to refuse to obey racial restrictions. The Freedom Riders faced some violent attacks, but they continued riding. That Autumn, the Interstate Commerce Commission began enforcing desegregation in bus depots. Another nonviolent protest had worked.

Outrage in Birmingham

In spring 1963, the SCLC staged a major nonviolent protest in Birmingham, Alabama. Its members urged business leaders to end segregation in restaurants, stores, and facilities. Birmingham police attacked nonviolent protestors, including children, with high pressure water jets and police dogs. When the

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national news media captured images of the violence, the public (outside of the South) was outraged. During these protests, in April 1963, MLK Jr was arrested and spent over a week in jail. He wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in which he eloquently laid out the causes for protest and the philosophy of nonviolence. He wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The March on Washington

JFK spoke on national television about the need for civil rights and introduced a bill on the issue. In support of this bill, MLK Jr led a quarter of a million people in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. The March was the scene of his "I Have A Dream Speech".

The Kennedy Assassination and the Civil Rights Act of 1964

On November 22, 1963, while campaigning in Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy was shot and killed. His assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was killed by a nightclub owner Jack Ruby shortly after on live television. A commission later confirmed that Oswald, a communist sympathizer, had acted alone. Kennedy's vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson, was sworn in as president, and he prioritized the civil rights bill in order to honor the late president's memory. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed quickly. It outlawed discriminatory voter registration practices; ended segregation in establishments that affected interstate commerce, which was broadly defined as "any place of public accommodation" such as hotels, restaurants, gas stations, etc.; ended segregation in public places, and especially public schools; established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; and allowed the government to enforce the law.

Freedom Summer

Once desegregation became law, the civil rights movement tackled voting rights. In the Summer of 1964, after the 24th Amendment (which banned poll taxes) was ratified, the SNCC organized Freedom Summer, during which students from the North came to the South to conduct voter registration drives. Three volunteers were murdered by the KKK. In early 1965, the SCLC and MLK Jr. led a protest in Selma, Alabama, including a march to Montgomery, during which protestors were attacked by state troopers. Americans watched in horror on national television. President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, allowing the federal government to protect all people's right to vote. It significantly increased the number of registered African American voters.

The Great Society

President Johnson proposed a sweeping plan to address economic inequality, called the Great Society, because that was the goal. Great Society programs – many of which still exist – included the "War on Poverty", the establishment of Medicare (government run and government subsidized health insurance for the elderly) and Medicaid (government health insurance for the needy), funding for public schools, funding for environmental protection, the establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Transportation.

Alternative Civil Rights Tactics

Some leaders – such as Malcolm X, a member of the black Muslim group Nation of Islam – blamed the slow pace of reform on the nonviolent strategies. He proposed that black should embrace violence for self-defense and separate to form their own society. He later changed his mind, instead advocating for a

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peaceful coexistence. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, but he inspired the Black Power Movement, which SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael popularized. Black Power was a movement led by some African Americans for political and economic power, as well as cultural pride, to promote racial equality and justice. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the radical Black Panther Party, which carried arms and demanded equality in housing, education, and employment.

The MLK Assassination

As protests against discrimination continued and frustration about the slow pace of change mounted, race riots increased. They took place in major urban areas like Watts in Los Angeles, Harlem, and Detroit every summer from 1965 to 1967. "Long Hot Summer" is often used to refer to the summer of 1967, when there were many race riots. By the spring of 1968, the riots had another cause when Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated on April 4th, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Check your Knowledge - Respond in complete sentences on lined paper.

1. How did WWII help raise awareness about civil rights issues among African American veterans?
2. Why were separate but equal schools a violation of the 14th Amendment?
3. Under what circumstances were the Little Rock Nine finally able to attend school?
4. How did Mohandas Gandhi influence MLK Jr?
5. How did television help Kennedy get elected?
6. What were the Freedom Riders riding and why was this their strategy?
7. What were Northern Volunteers doing in the South during Freedom Summer?
8. Name the programs of the Great Society.
9. Compare the different groups and their strategies.