

America's History

James A. Henretta , Rebecca Edwards , Robert O. Self ,

Walking to Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement

1941-1973

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this chapter and the related materias, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What was it like to live under Jim Crow?
2. What are the origins of the Civil Rights Movement?
3. How did World War II and the Cold War shape the Civil Rights Movement?
4. How did Japanese Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans deal with discrimination?
5. What are the major differences between the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement, 1955–1966, and the second stage, the period between 1966 and 1973?

The Emerging Civil Rights Struggle, 1941–1957

Life under Jim Crow

Racial segregation and economic exploitation defined the lives of the majority of African Americans in the postwar decades. Numbering 15 million in 1950, African

Americans were approximately 10 percent of the U.S. population. In the South, however, they constituted between 30 and 50 percent of the population of several states, such as South Carolina and Mississippi. Segregation, commonly known as Jim Crow, prevailed in every aspect of southern life. In southern states, where two-thirds of all African Americans lived in 1950, blacks could not eat in restaurants patronized by whites or use the same waiting rooms at bus stations.

In the North, racial segregation in everyday life was less acute but equally tangible. Northern segregation took the form of a spatial system in which whites increasingly lived in suburbs or on the outskirts of cities, while

African Americans were concentrated in downtown neighborhoods.

There was greater freedom for African Americans in the North and West than in the South. Blacks could vote, participate in politics, and, at least after the early 1960s,



enjoy equal access to public accommodations. However, poverty and racial discrimination were also deeply entrenched in the North and West.

Origins of the Civil Rights Movement

A series of factors came together in the middle of the twentieth century to make a broad and unique movement possible. An important influence was World War II. In the war against fascism, the Allies sought to discredit racist Nazi ideology. Committed to an antiracist ideology abroad, Americans increasingly condemned all forms of racism, even those at home.

The Cold War placed added pressure on U.S. officials. To inspire other nations in the global standoff with the Soviet Union, President Harry Truman explained, “we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.”

Among the most consequential factors was the growth of the urban black middle class. Historically small, the black middle class experienced robust growth after World War II. Its ranks produced most of the civil rights leaders. Churches, for centuries a sanctuary for black Americans, were especially important. So were African American college students—part of the largest expansion of college enrollment in U.S. history—who joined the movement, adding new energy and fresh ideas.

Labor leaders were generally more equality minded than the rank and file, but trade unions such as the United Auto Workers, the United Steel Workers, and the Communication Workers of America, among many others, were reliable allies at the national level.

The new medium of television also played a crucial role. When television networks covered early desegregation struggles, such as the 1957 integration of Little Rock High School, Americans across the country saw the violence of white supremacy firsthand.

World War II: The Beginnings

During a war “to make the world safe for democracy,” America was far from ready to extend full equality to its own black citizens. Black workers faced discrimination in wartime employment, and while more than a million black troops served in World War II, they were placed in segregated units commanded by whites. On the home front, activists pushed two strategies. **A. Phillip Randolph**, whose Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was the most prominent black trade union, called for a March on Washington in early 1941. Randolph planned to bring 100,000 protestors to the nation’s capital if African Americans were not given equal opportunity in war jobs.

To avoid a divisive protest, FDR issued Executive Order 8802, prohibiting racial discrimination in defense industries, and Randolph agreed to cancel the march. The resulting **Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC)** was weak, but it set an important precedent: federal action in support of civil rights.

A second strategy was the “**Double V Campaign,**” a patriotic racial slogan that spread like wildfire through black communities across the country. African Americans would demonstrate their love of country by fighting the Axis Powers. But they would also demand, peacefully but emphatically, the defeat of racism at home.



Double V Campaign

Those efforts met considerable resistance. In war industries, factories periodically shut down in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities because of “hate strikes”: the refusal of white workers to labor with black workers. Race riots were one manifestation of white resistance to change. On a hot summer day, whites from the city’s ethnic neighborhoods taunted and beat African Americans in a local park. Three days of rioting ensued in which thirty-four people were killed, twenty-five of them black. Federal troops were called in to restore order. Despite and because of such incidents, a generation

was spurred into action during the war years.

Cold War Civil Rights

African American leaders also had hopes for President Truman. Although capable of racist language, Truman supported civil rights on moral grounds. He understood, moreover, the growing importance of the black vote in key northern states, a fact driven home by his surprise 1948 victory. Lacking support in Congress for civil rights legislation, Truman turned to executive action. In 1946, he appointed a Presidential Committee on Civil Rights, whose 1947 report called for robust federal action on behalf of civil rights. In 1948, under pressure from A. Phillip Randolph’s Committee against Jim Crow in Military Service, Truman signed an executive order desegregating the armed forces.

The Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union shaped postwar civil rights in both positive and negative terms. In a time of growing fear of Communist expansionism, Truman worried about America’s image in the world. The Soviet Union routinely used American racism as a means of discrediting the United States abroad. McCarthyism and the hunt for subversives at home held the civil rights movement back. Civil rights opponents charged that racial integration was “communistic,” and the NAACP was banned in many southern states as an “anti-American” organization. Black Americans who spoke favorably of the Soviet Union, such as the actor and singer Paul Robeson, or who had been “fellow travelers” in the 1930s, such as the pacifist Bayard Rustin, were persecuted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. The fate of people like Robeson showed that the Cold War could work *against* the civil rights cause just as easily as for it.

The Legal Strategy and *Brown v. Board of Education*

With Dwight Eisenhower as president, civil rights no longer had a champion in the White House. In the meantime, however, NAACP lawyers Thurgood Marshall and

William Hastie had been preparing the legal ground in a series of test cases challenging racial discrimination. In 1954, they hit pay dirt.



Thurgood Marshall

A landmark civil rights case, the ***Brown v. Board of Education*** decision involved Linda Brown, a black pupil in Topeka, Kansas, who had been forced to attend a distant segregated school rather than the nearby white elementary school. The NAACP’s chief counsel, **Thurgood Marshall**, argued that such segregation, mandated by the Topeka Board of Education, was unconstitutional because it denied Linda Brown the “equal protection of the laws” guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. In a unanimous decision on May 17, 1954, the

Supreme Court agreed, overturning the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

In the South, however, the call went out for “**massive resistance.**” A **Southern Manifesto** signed in 1956 by 101 members of Congress denounced the *Brown* decision as “a clear abuse of judicial power” and encouraged their constituents to defy it. That year, 500,000 southerners joined **White Citizens’ Councils** dedicated to blocking school integration. Some whites revived the old tactics of violence and intimidation, swelling the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan to levels not seen since the 1920s.

President Eisenhower accepted the *Brown* decision as the law of the land, but he thought it was a mistake and was not happy about committing federal power to enforce it. A crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, finally forced his hand. In September 1957, nine black students attempted to enroll at the all-white Central High School. Governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to bar them. Then the mob took over. Every day, the nine students had to run a gauntlet of angry whites chanting “Go back to the jungle.” As the vicious scenes played out on television night after night, Eisenhower acted. He sent 1,000 federal troops to Little Rock and nationalized the Arkansas National Guard, ordering them to protect the black students. Eisenhower thus became the first president since Reconstruction to use federal troops to enforce the rights of blacks.

Forging a Protest Movement, 1955–1966

Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

Brown had been the law of the land for barely a year when a single act of violence struck at the heart of black America. A fourteen-year-old African American young man from Chicago, **Emmett Till**, was murdered for flirting with a white woman in a Mississippi store. Photos of Till’s mutilated body featured in the *Jet* magazine brought national attention to the heinous crime.

On December 1, 1955, **Rosa Parks**, a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man. She was arrested and charged with violating a local segregation ordinance.



Rosa Parks

Once the die was cast, the black community turned for leadership to the **Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.**, the recently appointed pastor of Montgomery’s Dexter Street Baptist Church. The son of a prominent black minister in Atlanta, King embraced the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, whose campaigns of passive resistance had led to India’s independence from Britain in 1947. After Rosa Parks’s arrest, King endorsed a plan by a local black women’s organization to boycott Montgomery’s bus system until it was integrated.

The **Montgomery bus boycott** catapulted King to national prominence. In 1957, along with the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, he founded the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**, based in Atlanta. The black church, long the center of African American social and cultural life, now lent its moral and organizational strength to the civil rights movement.

The battle for civil rights entered a new phase in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, when four black college students took seats at the “whites-only” lunch counter at the local Woolworth’s. They were determined to “**sit in**” until they were served. Although they were arrested, the sit-in tactic worked—the Woolworth’s lunch counter was desegregated—and sit-ins quickly spread to other southern cities.

After the Woolworth’s lunch counter sit-in, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and **Ella Baker** helped to organize the **Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee** in order to facilitate sit-ins by blacks demanding an end to segregation. The Congress of Racial Equality organized freedom rides on bus lines in the South to call attention to segregation on public transportation; the activists were attacked by white mobs. Although President Kennedy remained cautious on supporting civil rights, he ordered Attorney General Robert Kennedy to send federal marshals to Alabama to restore order

Legislating Civil Rights, 1963–1965

When thousands of black demonstrators, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., marched to picket Birmingham, Alabama’s department stores, television cameras captured the severe methods used against them by Bull Connors. President Kennedy responded to the incident on **June 11, 1963**, when he went on television to promise major legislation banning discrimination in public accommodations and empowering the Justice Department to enforce desegregation.

Black leaders hailed Kennedy’s speech as the “Second Emancipation Proclamation,” yet on the evening of the address, Medgar Evers, the president of the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP, was shot and killed. To rouse the conscience of the nation and to marshal support for Kennedy’s bill, civil rights leaders launched a massive civil rights march on Washington in 1963, which culminated in King’s “**I Have a Dream**” speech.



King’s eloquence and the sight of blacks and whites marching together did more than anything else to make the civil rights movement acceptable to white Americans; it also marked the high point of the civil rights movement and confirmed King’s position as the leading speaker for the black cause. Some civil rights activists were more radical than King; during the next few years, there were conflicts among the black activists over tactics and goals that were to transform the movement.

Southern senators blocked the civil rights legislation, and there was an outbreak of violence by white extremists; four black Sunday school students were killed when a Birmingham, Alabama, church was bombed.

On assuming the presidency following Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon Johnson made passing a civil rights bill a priority. In June 1964, Congress approved the most far-reaching civil rights law since Reconstruction. The keystone of **the Civil Rights Act**, Title VII, outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, national origin, and sex. Another section guaranteed equal access to public accommodations and schools.

In 1964, black organizations mounted a major campaign in Mississippi. Known as “**Freedom Summer**,” the effort drew several thousand volunteers from across the country, including nearly one thousand white college students from the North. They established freedom schools for black children and conducted a major voter registration drive. So determined was the opposition that only about twelve hundred black voters were registered that summer, at a cost of four murdered civil rights workers and thirty-seven black churches bombed or burned.

The murders strengthened the resolve of the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)**, which had been founded during Freedom Summer. Banned from the “white only” Mississippi Democratic Party, MFDP leaders were determined to attend the 1964 Democratic National Convention as the legitimate representatives of their state. Inspired by **Fannie Lou Hamer**, a former sharecropper turned civil rights activist, the MFDP challenged the most powerful figures in the Democratic Party. When party officials seated the white Mississippi delegation and refused to recognize the MFDP, civil rights activists left convinced that the Democratic Party would not change.

In March 1965, James Bevel of the SCLC called for a march from **Selma, Alabama**, to the state capital in Montgomery to protest the murder of a voting-rights activist. As

soon as the six hundred marchers left Selma, crossing over the **Edmund Pettus Bridge**, mounted state troopers attacked them with tear gas and clubs. The scene was shown on national television that night and became known as “bloody Sunday.” Calling the episode “an American tragedy,” President Johnson went back to Congress.



Troopers wait for protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge

On August 6, 1965 he secured passage of the **Voting Rights Act**, which outlawed the literacy tests and other devices that prevented blacks from registering to vote and authorized the attorney general to send federal examiners to register voters in any county where registration was less than 50 percent. In the South, the results were stunning. In 1960, only 20 percent of blacks had been registered to vote; by 1971, registration reached 62 percent.

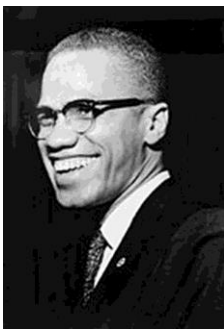
Something else would never go back either: the liberal New Deal coalition. By the second half of the 1960s, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party had won its battle with the conservative, segregationist wing. Democrats had embraced the civil rights movement and made African American

equality a cornerstone of new “rights” liberalism. But over the next generation, between the 1960s and the 1980s, southern whites and many conservative northern whites would respond by switching to the Republican Party.

Beyond Civil Rights, 1966–1973

Black Nationalism

The philosophy of black nationalism signified many things in the 1960s. It could mean pride in one’s community or total separatism; building African American-owned businesses or wearing dashikis to honor African traditions. In the early 1960s, the leading exponent of black nationalism was the Nation of Islam, which fused a rejection of Christianity with a strong philosophy of self-improvement. Black Muslims, as they were known, adhered to a strict code of personal behavior; men were recognizable by their dark suits, white shirts, and ties, women by their long dresses and head coverings.



Malcolm X

The most charismatic Black Muslim was **Malcolm X** (the X stood for his African family name, lost under slavery). A spellbinding speaker, Malcolm preached a philosophy of militant separatism, although he advocated violence only for self-defense. Hostile to mainstream civil rights organizations, he caustically referred to the 1963 March on Washington as the “Farce on Washington.” In 1964, after a power struggle with founder Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm broke with the Nation of Islam. While he remained a black nationalist, he moderated his anti-white views and began to talk of a class struggle uniting poor whites and blacks. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated while delivering a speech in Harlem. Three Black Muslims were later convicted of his murder.

A more secular brand of black nationalism emerged in 1966 when SNCC and CORE activists, following the lead of **Stokely Carmichael**, began to call for black self-reliance under the banner of **Black Power**. Spurred by the Black Power slogan, African American activists turned their attention to the poverty and social injustice faced by so many black people. In some instances, the attention to racial pride led African Americans to reject white society and to pursue more authentic cultural forms. In addition to focusing on economic disadvantage, Black Power emphasized black pride and self-determination.

One of the most radical nationalist groups was the **Black Panther Party**, founded in Oakland, California, in 1966 by two college students, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.



A militant self-defense organization dedicated to protecting African Americans from police violence, the Panthers took their cue from the slain Malcolm X. The Panthers' organization spread to other cities in the late 1960s, where members undertook a wide range of community-organizing projects. Their free breakfast program for children and testing for sickle-cell anemia, an inherited disease with a high incidence among African Americans, were especially popular.

Black Power also inspired African Americans to work within the political system. By the mid-1960s, black residents neared 50 percent of the population in several major American cities—such as Washington, DC, Detroit, Atlanta, and Cleveland. By the end of the century, black elected officials had become commonplace in major American cities. There were forty-seven African American big-city mayors by the 1990s, and blacks had led most of the nation's most prominent cities: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia.

Poverty and Urban Violence

The first “long hot summer” began in July 1964 in New York City when police shot a black criminal suspect in **Harlem**. Angry youths looted and rioted there for a week. Over the next four years, the volatile issue of police brutality set off riots in dozens of cities. In August 1965, the arrest of a young black motorist in the **Watts** section of Los Angeles sparked six days of rioting that left thirty-four people dead. The riots of 1967, however, were the most serious, engulfing twenty-two cities in July and August. Forty-three people were killed in Detroit alone, nearly all of them black, and \$50 million worth of property was destroyed. President Johnson called in the National Guard and U.S. Army troops, many of them having just returned from Vietnam, to restore order.

Following the gut-wrenching riots of 1967, Johnson appointed a presidential commission, headed by Illinois governor Otto Kerner, to investigate the causes of the violence. Released in 1968, the “**Kerner Commission Report**” was a searing look at race in America. Kerner concluded that “Our nation is moving toward two societies,

one black, and one white – separate and unequal." Johnson largely ignored the report as too inflammatory for him to work with.

Stirred by turmoil in the cities, and seeing the limitations of his civil rights achievements, Martin Luther King began to confront the deep-seated problems of poverty and racism facing American blacks. He began to criticize President Johnson and Congress for prioritizing the war in Vietnam over ending poverty at home, and he planned a massive **Poor People's Campaign** to fight economic injustice.

To advance that cause, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike by predominantly black sanitation workers. There, on April 4, 1968, he was assassinated by escaped convict James Earl Ray. King's death set off a further round of urban rioting, with major violence breaking out in more than a hundred cities.

An Historian's View: Assessing the Civil Rights Movement

James T. Patterson - *Ford Foundation Professor of history emeritus at Brown University*, author of *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968* (2006).



James T. Patterson

Assessing the movement is difficult. It produced unexpected policies, such as the establishment of affirmative action, especially in the areas of employment and higher education admissions. It benefited blacks in other ways, too. As they acquired confidence in their ability to organize and to effect political change, they gained greater pride in their cultural strengths and accomplishments, notably (but not only) in the fields of music, dance, film, and sports. The work of black artists, such as photographer Gordon Parks, painter Jacob Lawrence, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and novelist Toni Morrison, received widespread notice and critical praise. In popular culture—films, television shows, ads—ugly stereotyping of black people and black culture became far less widespread. The movement also helped to increase the numbers and percentages of African Americans in middle-class jobs, and the armed forces took steps to end discriminatory recruitment and promotion procedures and to develop integrated forces.

Yet the Civil Rights Movement did not achieve as much as dreamers had hoped for in the mid-1960s. The desegregation of schools, which moved ahead in the 1970s and 1980s, has fallen back, and gaps in educational test scores between black and white students, always high, have widened. In the early 2000s, rates of poverty and unemployment among African Americans remain roughly twice as high as those of whites. For a variety of reasons, including relatively low levels of access to health care, the longevity of African Americans is less than that of whites. Black median income is approximately 70 percent of white income; black median wealth is a tiny fraction of white wealth. Many black inner-city areas feature very high rates of students dropping out of high school, violent crime, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, family breakups, and drug addiction. Rates of arrests and imprisonment of African American men far exceed

those of white men. And the Civil Rights Movement, still suffering from the blows that afflicted it in the late 1960s, lacks power. In 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon Johnson hoped that America, having rallied around effective civil rights acts that promoted legal equality, could move on to tackle serious social and economic inequality—but in the early twenty-first century, that goal still seems out of reach.