

The Civil Rights Movement

by Taylor Branch



Civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, March 1965. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

The word “movement” often designates a cultural shift of less import than the American Revolution, Great Depression, and other capitalized dramas in history. To be sure, some popular movements have gained broader recognition in the sweep of American history. The abolitionist crusade helped precipitate the Civil War. The quest for female suffrage doubled the electorate, and more, while campaigns for and against Prohibition twice amended the Constitution. And credible historians treat the modern Civil Rights Movement as a sub-division of the Cold War Era (1945–1989). That duel of global alliances contrasted sharply with nonviolent marches for civil rights within the United States, but conflicts over freedom and subjugation resonated between the two arenas. Racial advocacy set in motion democratizing change that seeped into every aspect of American life, and transformed the structure of national politics for decades. Inspiration from the national struggle for civil rights filtered abroad to shore up peaceful revolutions against Cold War regimes from Moscow and Berlin to Pretoria, launching an unlikely tide that delivered miracles to the world on the promise of freedom. Although this broad legacy remains unsettled, and not fully claimed, the movement earned at least provisional status for a Civil Rights era in the United States.

Unlike wars, social movements seldom begin or end on a specific date. The Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision holds up fairly well, however, as a catalyst and starting point for wholesale shifts in perspective. Optimists were buoyed by surging confidence from victory in World War II. The US economy was prospering on college degrees financed by the landmark GI Bill, and Jonas Salk’s amazing vaccine had cured polio. As for race, Jackie

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Robinson had broken baseball's color barrier in 1947. President Harry Truman integrated the armed forces, adopted a civil rights platform, and won the upset election of 1948 despite a "Dixiecrat" revolt in his southern base. By 1954, shortly before *Brown*, the Tuskegee Institute discontinued its annual Lynching Letter published since 1912, noting hopefully that no such murders had been reported for two years.

The *Brown* case itself culminated twenty years of legal strategy pursued by lawyers from the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) within a wider continuum of racial protest. At 12:52PM on May 17, the Associated Press flashed a news bulletin that Chief Justice Earl Warren had begun to read out loud from his decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which consolidated five lawsuits against the segregation of public schools by race. Reporters ran from the closed chamber to file updates on the drift of his words, and by 1:20 they announced the stark result. A unanimous Supreme Court had overturned segregation, ruling the practice an unconstitutional breach of equal citizenship. "In the field of public education," wrote Warren, "the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

The earth shook, but then subsided. Nothing changed in some fifteen southern states where segregation governed everything from commerce to marriage, libraries, and water fountains. Experts puzzled a year later over the Court's ambiguous follow-up order mandating school desegregation "with all deliberate speed."

News from Mississippi charged the atmosphere. From Chicago, having just turned fourteen, young Emmett Till visited relatives in Mississippi and disappeared on August 28, 1955, amid clouded rumors that he had whistled or spoken casually to the white female cashier of a country store. Till's corpse surfaced three days later in the Tallahatchie River, tied with barbed wire to a heavy cotton gin. The cashier's husband and brother-in-law admitted kidnapping him from his grandfather's home at night, and all but boasted of committing the murder, but jurors briskly acquitted them after a sham trial steeped in segregation. At the Chicago funeral, Mamie Till demanded an open casket to display her son's disfigured face "for all the world to see," and the photograph became a grotesque icon of white supremacy. Three months later in Alabama, when the politically minded seamstress Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing an order to give a white person her seat, a spontaneous boycott against Montgomery's segregated buses lifted up an orator with a name of historic overtones. "If we are wrong," Martin Luther King told an overflow crowd the first night, "the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. . . . If we are wrong, justice is a lie." Nearly fifty thousand local Negroes—mostly maids and day laborers—sacrificed their vital mode of transportation for 381 consecutive days through 1956, persevering on tired feet through an ordeal of official reprisals and terrorist bombs during the Montgomery bus boycott.

These two sagas—the Till murder and the bus boycott—exposed the extremes of a nation paralyzed in the aftermath of *Brown*. One was grisly and sobering, the other stirring and quaint, but both were remote to most Americans. Among politicians, only southerners issued a unified manifesto—for segregation, as bedrock principle. Early in 1957, thirty thousand African Americans marched to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, where King’s keynote address petitioned for the vote—“Give us the ballot!”—but the event failed to register. President Dwight Eisenhower vaguely counseled patience. Conditioned by his sterling career in a segregated Army with African American servants, Eisenhower signaled unhappiness with *Brown* until Arkansas defied the federal courts by “interposing” state troops to block nine pioneer students who had the courage to integrate Central High in Little Rock. Reluctantly, Eisenhower faced the first armed rebellion over sovereignty since the Civil War. “Well, if we have to do this,” he told his Cabinet in September, “. . . then let’s apply the best military principles.” On his orders the 101st Airborne Division overwhelmed resistance to safeguard corridors at Central High, gaining a yearlong reprieve from the school crisis. Days later, by contrast, Eisenhower embraced full mobilization to answer a different surprise, the satellite *Sputnik*. Congress created a NASA space agency to overtake the galling Soviet precedence in orbit. Can-do budgets sprouted for rocketry, computer research, science education, and even a comprehensive network of interstate highways.

Brown’s mandate continued to stall through the 1950s. Arkansas avoided token integration by closing Little Rock’s public schools in 1958, but courts re-opened them in 1959 just as Virginia was switching from statewide “massive resistance” to segregation by localized control. One Virginia county transferred its public facilities to private academies and managed to exclude all black children for the next five school years. Passions collided from afar. Appeals were shuttled between various branches and levels of government. Not until February 1 of 1960 did something fresh emerge, when four college students from North Carolina A&T—Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond—ignored demands to leave a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. They returned the next day with no strategic plan. Eighty fellow students joined them by February 3, and copycat “sit-ins” multiplied despite persecution and arrest. The contagion baffled those attuned to juvenile college pranks. Of the adult civil rights leaders, only Martin Luther King called the first sit-ins an innovation “destined to be one of the glowing epics of our time.” He said from experience that some human problems demanded sacrifice beyond the power of words, and praised students for taking witness into enclaves no boycott could reach.

In April of 1960, just ten weeks after Greensboro, King hosted a pilgrimage of 300 students from sit-ins in nine states. Nearly all were close peers of Emmett Till in age, haunted by his fate. Most had been raised to shun trouble on a narrow college path, bearing family hopes

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stifled for generations. Many had recoiled from nonviolent politics as a contradiction, or a tool for the weak, but outrage compelled leaps into the unknown. Those who submitted to jail found themselves liberated rather than ruined, sparking a movement by shared discovery. Personal impact touched strangers through the news, and initiates pitched into workshops on nonviolence. At King's conference, Rev. James Lawson of Nashville likened its mystery to nuclear energy from a core of civic and spiritual faith. He extolled a unique army of disciplined nonviolence "to implement the Constitution," but did not flinch from the cost. "Most of us will be grandparents before we can lead normal lives," Lawson predicted. Undaunted, sit-in leaders formed their own Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for protests. In October, succumbing to SNCC invitations, King joined his first sit-in and was yanked off to a chain gang by Georgia officials eager to punish his fame. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy made a furtive condolence call to King—and pundits and historians trace a decisive shift in the 1960 election to this call, winning Kennedy the presidency.

By 1961, when President Kennedy took office, civil rights had risen to the fringe of national discourse. SNCC attracted little notice with anniversary sit-ins across the South in February, because stories had lapsed into police-blotter routine, but hidden change took hold among the students. Nine sit-in prisoners refused bail in South Carolina, choosing to serve thirty days instead, and students from three states joined them at hard labor in Rock Hill. The "jail-in," forged an identity beyond each campus-based struggle. Students expanded awareness more dramatically in May, after mobs attacked the first Freedom Riders, who traveled into the Deep South to test court orders protecting integration on interstate buses. With one commercial bus burned outside Anniston, Alabama, and bloodied riders trapped in Birmingham, the Justice Department arranged a publicized air rescue—only to hear of substitutes materializing overnight. In emergency debates, Nashville students had broken through their assumptions that responsibility for the distant trauma belonged to someone else or another time. What was imperative, they told speechless Kennedy officials, was a continued "freedom ride" to assert nonviolent strength in a just cause. "If they can stop us with violence," said SNCC founder Diane Nash, "the movement is dead."

The replacements withstood harsh intimidation in Birmingham. They maintained nonviolence through a full-scale riot after police vanished at the Montgomery bus station, and bandaged survivors endured an all-night siege with Martin Luther King in a local church. He endorsed, but declined to join, their intrepid push forward into Mississippi. Press covered the growing tension as government leaders vacillated between nominal civil rights, divided federal powers, and the mob furies aroused over who sat where on a bus. To avert more embarrassing clashes, the Kennedy administration condoned a swift but illegal imprisonment of freedom riders by Mississippi authorities. The public spectacle did recede

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behind bars, but jail recruits swelled into legend all summer. Forming bi-racial groups across the country, more than 400 young people followed the original riders into cells at Mississippi's notorious Parchman Prison Farm. Many emerged lifelong activists, welcomed home as minor celebrities. True to their nickname, some "freedom riders" became mobile shock troops for nonviolent demonstrations. Their seasoned witness helped elevate sit-ins into protracted campaigns against local segregation—notably in McComb, Mississippi, and Albany, Georgia. The Freedom Rides enlarged both the scope and conceptual force of a movement for civil rights.

Still, segregation remained almost intact. Eight years after the *Brown* decision, integration had won only isolated victories—on buses in Montgomery, or in Nashville's movie theaters. Not one prominent southern official opposed segregation outright. Instead, in the fall of 1962, Governor Ross Barnett rallied state agencies, troopers, and eventually vigilantes to block court-ordered integration at Ole Miss. President Kennedy, trying vainly to orchestrate cooperation, suffered a white riot that killed three people and wounded 160 US marshals. He turned to more decisive command in the Cuban Missile Crisis, averting nuclear catastrophe, and left a yearlong deployment of 23,000 US soldiers on campus to safeguard James Meredith, the lone black student. Ole Miss troubled Martin Luther King as a Pyrrhic victory. Fearing that galvanized resistance might outlast the freedom movement's window in history, he convened allies to mount a "go for broke" challenge in the segregated citadel of Birmingham. They trained nonviolent volunteers for months, but the phased showdown fizzled in April of 1963. Daily marches toward downtown stores met punishing arrest and reprisal. With observers weary of bothersome protest, King's eloquent letter from jail attracted no press coverage, and, on the verge of surrender, he weighed an extreme proposal to allow under-age marchers.

Despite horrified opposition within black families, newcomers on May 2 boosted Birmingham's daily march fifty-fold until police arrested six hundred teenagers and smaller children, down to six-year-olds. The stupefying sight converted some of their parents. One anguished mother ran alongside shouting, "Sing, children, sing!" The next afternoon, when Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor tried intimidation rather than arrest, fresh waves of children marched into snarling police dogs as high-powered fire hoses blew young protesters down city streets. News cameras transmitted photographs and film of searing impact that defied historical comparison or comfortable analysis. Elected leaders uniformly condemned the use of children in demonstrations as irresponsible, even insane; the Muslim critic Malcolm X called it sheer cowardice. Yet the images melted abstract reservation in millions of viewers. Subsequent headlines—"Birmingham Jails 1,000 More Negroes"—evoked cascading second thoughts, and King's neglected plea was reborn a classic Letter from Birmingham Jail. "We are on a breakthrough," he told numb colleagues. Birmingham lifted race to a vibrant new center of American life for two years. Within

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weeks, sympathetic demonstrations erupted in 186 American cities and towns, generating 14,733 arrests. President Kennedy, plagued with brushfires, delivered an impromptu speech on June 11. “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue,” he said, proposing a landmark civil rights bill to outlaw segregation.

The generic phrase “civil rights,” pertaining to every condition of citizenship, had become an accepted euphemism for the chronically abridged rights of black people. It minimized needed redress, suggesting that logical adjustment could repair the irrational flaw of bigotry. A disarming quality prevailed through the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, organized by A. Philip Randolph, featuring King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Apprehension about racially mixed crowds (with partial evacuation of the capital, and disaster units massed nearby) gave way to picnic euphoria. Grim reality struck back when a terrorist bomb killed four girls on a September Sunday morning in Birmingham, inside the 16th Street Baptist Church where the fateful children’s marches had assembled in May. The assassination of President Kennedy shook national moorings two months later. Amid raw confessions of lost innocence, Lyndon Johnson denounced “hate and evil and violence” in his first presidential address. He exhorted Congress to pass Kennedy’s stalled civil rights bill, calling it the essential public step to heal unfathomable wounds.

The legislative battle consumed half of 1964 and featured the longest Senate filibuster in history. On national television, Mississippi’s governor accused the news media of distorting racial coverage in a plot to “gather all effective power in the central government in Washington.” In Congress, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, the leading southern senator, warned of federal tyranny that would crush enterprise, enslave *white* people, and make sure “the average garden variety type of American has no chance whatever.” Meanwhile, battered SNCC activists adopted a desperate proposal for Mississippi, where violent repression had snuffed out every form of protest. They imported more than six hundred summer workers, mostly from northern colleges, despite misgivings that elite young volunteers would misread danger signals, overshadow local initiative, and exacerbate racial friction within the movement itself. At training, SNCC veterans also confessed ethical qualms about using sacrificial white messengers to jolt the nation awake, and lightning struck all too promptly on June 21, the first full day of Freedom Summer. When three civil rights workers disappeared in rural Neshoba County, President Johnson himself dispatched Navy search teams and received stricken relatives. Mississippi officials branded the uproar a hoax, but intuitions of the worst outcome affected voting in Washington. On July 2—well before the three bodies were found, or the sheriff’s department implicated in their Klan lynching—Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with a plea for renewal. “We must not fail,” he said. “Let us close the springs of racial poison.”

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Ten years after *Brown*, the watershed law abolished Jim Crow rules across the South. Moreover, it established a new economic standard for equal opportunity by gender as well as race, applied nationwide to proscribe not only segregated labor unions in the North but also gender-specific want ads in the *New York Times*. Enforcement officials, staggered by Jim Crow priorities, laughed early in public at the notion of male secretaries and female pilots. The law strained contemporary imagination. There was much to test and celebrate, but Martin Luther King vexed his own staff with driven urgency to “go back to the valley.” From December ceremonies accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, he returned to start daily marches for voting rights in January, went to jail in Selma on February 1, and pleaded for help on March 7 when Alabama troopers overran 600 local African Americans led by John Lewis (one of the original Nashville sit-in students). This time, moved by graphic news footage of “Bloody Sunday,” nearly a thousand interfaith clergy answered King’s call to converge from afar within thirty-six hours. Their nonviolent standoff with Alabama gripped national politics until March 25, 1965, when 50,000 people completed a trek from Selma to Montgomery behind Lewis and King.

The Civil Rights Movement crested again. To get at the root promise of democracy—equal votes—had required both the sustained engagement of citizens and mediation by responsive government. (“I think that was one of the most effective things that ever happened,” President Johnson confided afterward to King.) By August, Congress broke another filibuster to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which enfranchised some three million black voters. In a rush passed the pioneer clean air bill, marketing restrictions on tobacco, and, for senior citizens, a Medicare health program brokered through insurance companies. In October, a third landmark of civil rights repealed race-based formulas that had restricted naturalized citizenship since 1790. The Immigration Reform Act of 1965 made all foreigners equally eligible. “Never again,” Johnson announced, would prejudice “shadow the gate to the American nation.”

While no sit-ins highlighted their cause, new legal immigrants also buttressed a national identity founded on principle. Naturalization ceremonies came to resemble the United Nations, and visionary wonders turned normal across a landscape of former dreams—with Asian communities in the heartland, women entering West Point or the rabbinate, and integrated football at Ole Miss. Against stubborn forebodings in the South, healthy competition displaced the stigma of one-party rule under segregation, and a prosperous Sun Belt emerged from isolated regional poverty. “It is history’s wry paradox,” King had prophesied in 1962, “that when Negroes win their struggle to be free, those who have held them down will themselves be freed for the first time.”

History, alas, allowed no peaceful interval to absorb such thoughts, ponder distinctive methods, or digest massive change. War clouded everything. By cruel coincidence, the first

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US combat divisions landed in Viet Nam on Selma's "Bloody Sunday," and President Johnson committed another 50,000 troops just before he signed the Voting Rights Act. American forces skyrocketed from 180,000 by the end of 1965 to 450,000 in 1966. The war commanded a majority despite the sting of escalating casualties in a small, unfamiliar country, but conflict ran deep as Americans debated the Cold War rationale. Bob Moses, SNCC's mystic philosopher, asked whether Americans really pursued the same freedom for Mississippians and Vietnamese. President Johnson, while rallying to prevent the Communist unification of Viet Nam, faced a classified consensus that no foreign military force could defeat Vietnamese nationalism. He persevered into clear-eyed misery because, at bottom, he feared voters would never tolerate weakness. "They'd impeach a president that would run out, wouldn't they?" Johnson lamented in private, cringing over a course that "makes the chills run up my back." Thus he reduced the essence of power to solidarity with violence, whereas the Civil Rights Movement advanced democracy *against* the grain of violence. This difference was profound and difficult. Malcolm X had posed a pithy choice—the ballot or the bullet—but Vietnam compounded racial tensions to crush such inquiry. People polarized instead.

Violence suffused American society by the middle of 1966. That summer, a serial killer strangled eight nurses within hours in Chicago, and a deranged young rifleman shot forty-five pedestrians from a university tower in Texas. Conscription plucked new recruits for Vietnam, where US casualties passed 33,000. Angry crowds stoned Martin Luther King on his marches protesting white-only neighborhoods in Chicago, which refuted the notion that racism had been confined to the South, but there was no hint of the national outpouring over Birmingham or Selma. Moods hardened under stress. The new SNCC chairman, Stokely Carmichael, broke from six harrowing years in nonviolence to electrify the country with a new "black power" slogan, and soon brandished guns among conventional symbols of militancy. Doctrines of group rebellion splintered behind Carmichael's charisma, while politicians courted a white backlash.

The 1966 elections produced a minor landslide against racial disorder and antiwar dissent. Georgia elected a novice governor known for earnest assurance that he had meant to protect the rights of black customers by chasing them at gunpoint from his restaurant. In 1967, King famously decried an undertow from Viet Nam. "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos," he declared, "without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government." In 1968, after a sudden offensive killed 68,000 soldiers from all sides, plus untold Vietnamese civilians, President Johnson shockingly withdrew from the presidential race, broken by a futile war that dragged on seven more years. That same week, an assassin cut short King's lonely and beleaguered campaign to alleviate poverty among the garbage workers of Memphis.

Riots shook 110 American cities. The Civil Rights Movement, already fragmenting, subsided after an epic run of fourteen years. Fused together in memory with the Viet Nam War, it left the 1960s a pulsating jumble of hope and frustration at the peak of post-World War II liberalism. A conservative respite was natural in cyclical history—perhaps necessary—and the lingering aftermath echoed defiant retrospectives on the Civil War. As layers of everyday life peeled anew, no one sought the return of Jim Crow—nor of slavery a century earlier—but culture wars projected wholly divergent interpretations of the painful cure. From 1968 on, the dominant strain in American politics disparaged national government. Conservatives cultivated resentment of social missions and wartime humiliation, epitomized by Lyndon Johnson as the pre-eminent white liberal. Johnson’s freighted name sank within his own Democratic Party, which tiptoed from the old Solid South into multi-racial coalitions.

With major scandals feeding cynicism by the decade, public trust atrophied across the political spectrum. Even so, empirical progress continued through inertia from the Civil Rights Movement. Global diversity remade institutions from Harvard to Coca-Cola, with widespread support, and Title IX generated new worlds for female athletes. The percentage of black children attending integrated public schools jumped from 2.3 per cent in 1964 to 43.5 percent in 1988 before receding from neglect. Disabled people entered the mainstream. Gay couples lived openly, and Barack Obama, born during the Freedom Rides, was elected the first African American president in 2008.

For many reasons, a gap has persisted between reputation and reality. The consequence of the Civil Rights Movement is enormous, but its entire process was sparked by oddities—sit-ins, children’s marches, “freedom schools.” Hidden dynamics from minority leadership provoked daunting shifts far beyond the assimilated cast or story line of politics. In any case, Americans are entitled to gloss over the crisis as a messy adaptation for black people, worthy of a King Holiday. All history is argument, and Rosa Parks will not soon be forgotten. Potentially, a greater stake for everyone lies at the heart of the American experiment. Movement leaders, claiming patriotic kinship with the Founders, hurled into the helpless nightmare of Emmett Till their ingenious equivalent to democracy’s basic element—the nonviolent vote. At the zenith of the movement in 1965, King called it an axiom that such disciplined faith enlarged the public good to surmount implacable obstacles and discouragement. “This element,” he said, “is what makes both democracy and nonviolent action self-renewing and creative.” If King was right, the Civil Rights Movement can light the future from the past, like all good history.

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