

## The Civil Rights Movement 1945-1965

### Chronology

- 1946 -- President Truman expresses his support for moderate civil rights measures after learning that an African-American veteran was beaten and blinded by a white mob when he returned to his home town after the war.
- 1947 -- Jackie Robinson signs with the Brooklyn Dodgers, desegregating major league baseball.
- 1948 -- Faced with a tough re-election campaign in which he had to win black votes to make up for those lost in the South to the third party candidate State Rights Democrat, Strom Thurmond, Truman backs a strong civil rights platform. In July, he issues an executive order desegregating the military and prohibiting discrimination in the hiring of federal employees.
- 1949-1953 -- Truman's attempt to pass civil rights legislation through Congress -- anti-lynching laws, abolishing the poll tax, prohibiting segregation -- faces opposition from Southern Democrats who kill the bills in the Senate by filibustering. It appears that it will be impossible to pass such legislation as long as the Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans continue to oppose it. Eisenhower becomes president, 20 January 1953.
- 1954 -- Thurgood Marshall and a team of NAACP lawyers win the landmark Brown v Board of Education case. The Supreme Court declares in a unanimous 9-0 decision that "separate" is "inherently unequal." Segregating the public schools is now unconstitutional. Within a year, in Brown II, the Court demands that school authorities submit plans for how they would insure desegregation. These plans, the court declares, had to be implemented "with all deliberate speed." "Massive resistance" to the Court's decision follows in the states of the Deep South.
- 1955 -- Rosa Parks begins the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr., a 27-year-old Montgomery-based minister, rises to national prominence as a civil rights leader. Within a year, Montgomery's bus system has been desegregated.
- 1956 -- More than one hundred southern congressmen and Senators sign a "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," pledging their unyielding resistance to desegregation.
- 1957 -- Southern resistance to Brown culminates when the governor of Arkansas denies nine black students enrollment in the Central High School of Little Rock. President Eisenhower sends federal troops to support integration of the school. Later this year, Congress passes the first civil rights law since Reconstruction giving the federal government more power to insure black voters' rights. Still, ten years after Brown, fewer than 2 percent of black students in the Deep South attend integrated schools.
- 1957 -- Martin Luther Kings founds the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to mobilize the black churches behind the civil rights movement.

- 1960 -- Four black college freshmen begin a "sit-in" at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, NC. The black waitress refuses to serve them.
- 1960 -- John F. Kennedy elected president.
- 1961 -- "Freedom Riders" attempt to desegregate interstate buses. One bus torched in Anniston, AL. Robert F. Kennedy's personal representative beaten unconscious at an anti-Freedom Riot in Montgomery, AL.
- 1961-63 -- Kennedy begins working with black leaders to encourage blacks to register to vote in the South. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) inaugurates Voter Education Projects across the South. The two primary goals of the Civil Rights Movement are now (1) ending segregation and (2) registering blacks to vote.
- 1963 -- Martin Luther King, Jr. begins a campaign to desegregate Birmingham, AL. During this campaign, the Birmingham police use fire hoses and attack dogs to "subdue" the non-violent black protesters, provoking public outrage across the country. In a June address to the nation, President Kennedy calls the civil rights issue "a moral issue" and commits his administration to new civil rights legislation. The night of the speech, Medgar Evers is killed in Mississippi. In August, MLK leads a march on Washington, highlighted by his "I have a dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In September, a bomb blast in a Birmingham Baptist Church kills four little black girls who were attending Sunday School. Meanwhile, Kennedy's civil rights legislation has stalled in Congress due to southern opposition.
- 1963 -- 22 November. John F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas.
- 1964 -- Johnson succeeds in persuading Congress that it is its duty to pass the civil rights bill in honor of the martyred president. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gives the federal government more power to enforce school desegregation orders and to forbid racial discrimination (segregation) in all kinds of public accommodations and employment, essentially ending the official reign of Jim Crow laws in the South.
- 1964 -- The 24th Amendment abolishes the poll tax.
- 1964 -- "Freedom Summer." Blacks and whites join forces to launch a massive voter registration drive in Mississippi. Three civil rights workers -- one black and two whites -- are beaten to death. The FBI investigates, arresting twenty-one whites, one of whom is the local sheriff.
- 1965 -- Martin Luther King initiates the Selma to Montgomery march to protest blacks being deprived of their right to vote. In Selma, blacks constitute 50 percent of the population but only 1 percent of the registered voters. State troopers attack the marchers with tear gas and whips as the nation and President Johnson express outrage at the violence.
- 1965 -- Declaring that, "We shall overcome... the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice," Johnson rams through Congress the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It outlaws literacy tests and sends federal voter registrars into several southern states. Blacks can now vote in the South without fear of reprisals. White southern politicians even begin to court black votes.

## Points to Remember

The NAACP pursues a legal strategy. Its leaders hope that by setting legal precedents, it can compel the nation to live up to the ideals embodied in its laws.

Martin Luther King and the SCLC believe the best strategy is non-violent resistance, modeled on the tactics used by Gandhi during the Indian independence movement against the British. King holds integration as an ideal. He hopes to persuade whites that the cause of civil rights is a test of morality, choosing right over wrong, love over hate.

Others prefer more confrontational tactics and question whether blacks should want to integrate with white American society. SNCC, after beginning as an integrated organization, bans whites from leadership positions and rejects the strategy of non-violent resistance.

The federal government under Eisenhower and, to a lesser extent, Kennedy, is very reluctant to interfere in the South's racial troubles. Both presidents, however, send in troops when Southern officials flaunt or ignore federal law, as was the case when the governor of Arkansas refused to take steps to admit blacks to Central High in Little Rock.

Lyndon Johnson, himself a southerner, takes the boldest stand in support of civil rights, leading the fight for legislation in Congress. Often, however, frustrated blacks condemn Johnson for not pushing hard enough.

The success of the Civil Rights movement can be attributed to strong leadership and commitment at the grass roots level, legal victories, and the legislative initiatives of liberal Democrats at the federal level. Without the agitation from below, though, it seems unlikely that the federal government would have been willing to take the politically risky steps needed to implement civil rights laws.

The Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement were linked. As the United States tried to prove its system of government was superior to that of the Soviet Union, it had to put its democratic rhetoric into practice or appear to be hypocritical. Soviet leaders repeatedly drew attention to the poor treatment of blacks in the United States. U.S. officials therefore believed that addressing the nation's racial problems was essential to counter Communist propaganda.

The Civil Rights Movement and the prosperity of the postwar period were linked. Many blacks resented being excluded from the benefits of the new consumer culture -- benefits most whites took for granted. Though blacks believed they were fighting for justice, they were also fighting for their fair share of the postwar affluence.