Chapter 28: The Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1966

Chapter Review


In 1955, Montgomery’s black community mobilized when Rosa Parks violated segregation laws by refusing to give up her seat on a city bus. Baptist minister Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders organized a bus boycott that drew upon a network of local activists; they organized car pools using hundreds of private cars to get people to and from work. Leaders endured violence and legal harassment, but ultimately won a court ruling that the segregation ordinance was unconstitutional. The vignette illustrates how direct action campaigns were shaking American communities and how a community grew together to challenge injustice.

II. ORIGINS OF THE MOVEMENT

Following WWII, African American demands for equality began increasing, leading to the civil rights movement of the 1950s-60s.

MHL video: The Civil Rights Movement at www.myhistorylab.com

a. Civil Rights After World War II

The WWII experiences of African Americans laid the foundations for the civil rights struggle. Mass migration to the North brought political power to blacks, especially in urban Democratic Party politics. President Harry Truman indicated his support for civil rights programs, leading to a Democratic split in 1948. The NAACP grew in numbers and its Legal Defense Fund initiated a series of lawsuits to win key rights, while activist “freedom riders” directly challenged segregated buses. Jackie Robinson’s entrance into major league baseball and Ralph Bunche’s Nobel Peace Prize exemplified African Americans breaking the color barrier. A new generation of jazz musicians created be-bop, a sophisticated music that operated independently of mainstream white tastes and refused to cater to white stereotypes of black musicians and music.

MHL video: Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball at www.myhistorylab.com

b. The Segregated South

In the South, where half the nation’s 15 million blacks lived, segregation and unequal rights were still the law of the land. Law and custom kept African Americans as second-class citizens with no effective political rights. Few voted, and physical violence kept potential troublemakers in line, as Emmett Till’s family learned in 1955. Patience and stoicism were survival skills for African Americans in the South, but Till’s murder in
Mississippi was widely reported in black publications, even while much of the white press ignored or downplayed the story. Demographic changes also challenged southern patterns of life, as increased industrialization and improved farming techniques brought more black and white Southerners into cities and towns and in closer contact with each other.

**MHL document:** Sterling A. Brown, “Out of Their Mouths” (1942) at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

c. *Brown v. Board of Education*

Starting in the 1930s, the NAACP initiated a series of court cases that challenged the constitutionality of segregation. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, argued by Thurgood Marshall, sociological studies by Kenneth Clark provided powerful evidence of the pernicious effects of segregation. Newly appointed Chief Justice Earl Warren led the court in May 1954 in overturning the *Plessy* “separate but equal” standard and declaring that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. The court postponed ordering a clear timetable to implement the decision, but a second Brown ruling the next year ordered desegregation to proceed “with all deliberate speed.”

**MHL document:** Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

**MHL video:** How Did the Civil Rights Movement Change American Schools? At [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

d. Crisis in Little Rock

Southern whites declared their intention to nullify the *Brown* decision. As southern school boards closed schools or transferred funds and property to “white academies,” defiant politicians issued a “Southern Manifesto” and pledged to resist integration. In Little Rock, Arkansas, a judge ordered schools integrated in September, 1957. Defying the court and Eisenhower, who had reluctantly supported *Brown*, Governor Orville Faubus ordered the National Guard to keep African American children out of Central High. When the troops were withdrawn, violence erupted, forcing President Eisenhower to put the Guard under federal control and send in more troops to integrate the school. The governor of Arkansas ordered Little Rock high schools not to open at all during the 1958–1959 school year.

**MHL document:** The Southern Manifesto (1956) at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

**III. NO EASY ROAD TO FREEDOM, 1957–1962**

*Brown* opened the door to the use of federal courts to push for civil rights, but reluctant federal and state government support weakened the strategy and black communities realized they would have to help themselves.
a. Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC

When the 381-day Montgomery bus boycott ended in victory, Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a prominent national figure. The middle-class son of a Baptist minister, King earned a Ph.D. at Boston University, where he was exposed to the non-violent civil disobedience of Gandhi and the pacifism of northern intellectuals including Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley. King combined the traditions of the black preacher with an intensely moral political strategy. In 1956, King laid out these principles in a speech celebrating the end of the bus boycott, and shortly afterward helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King understood that not all Southerners were rabid bigots, and that playing the violent racists off against more moderate people could be a successful strategy for change. But the SCLC failed to gain mass black support, and the next great protest would arise out of an unlikely group—black college students.

b. Sit-Ins: Greensboro, Nashville, Atlanta

Black college students, first in Greensboro, NC, took matters into their own hands and began sitting in at segregated lunch counters. Nonviolent sit-ins were widely supported by the black community, and often were accompanied by community-wide boycotts of businesses that would not integrate. Reverend James Lawson organized successful sit-ins in Nashville, and developed rules of non-violent conduct that became models. Atlanta’s sit-in campaign, starting in the fall of 1960 and supported by King, was massive, and finally led to desegregation in September 1961.

c. SNCC and the “Beloved Community”

A new spirit of empowerment emerged among young people as the sit-in movement grew. Mass arrests and beatings only strengthened protestors’ resolve. Although student activism disturbed many older black community leaders, young blacks continued to agitate and organize. A conference of 120 black student activists in Raleigh, NC, called by veteran activist Ella Baker created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to promote nonviolent direct challenges to segregation. The young activists were found at the forefront of nearly every major civil rights battle.


d. The Election of 1960 and Civil Rights

The race issue played a surprisingly muted role in the 1960 presidential campaign. As vice president, Nixon had strongly supported civil rights, but it was Kennedy who pressured a judge to release Martin Luther King when he was jailed in Atlanta and faced a long sentence in a notorious state prison. Black voters provided Kennedy’s margin of victory, though an unfriendly Congress insured that little legislation would be enacted.
Attorney General Robert Kennedy used the Justice Department to force compliance with desegregation orders, but could not solve JFK’s dilemma of promoting civil rights without alienating southern Democrats.

e. Freedom Rides

James Farmer and The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sponsored Freedom Rides in May 1961, in which integrated groups would ride interstate buses in the South. Although the FBI and Justice Department knew of the plans, they were absent when mobs in Alabama firebombed a bus in Anniston, attacked freedom riders in Birmingham, and severely beat passengers in Montgomery, paralyzing a white freedom rider and leaving future Congressman John Lewis with a concussion. There was more violence and no police protection at other stops. The Kennedy Administration was forced to mediate safe passage for the riders, though 300 people were arrested. A Justice Department petition led to new rules that effectively ended interstate bus segregation. Although the Freedom Rides made the nation aware of violent racism, they also revealed the difficulty of forcing the federal government to take a stand; moral persuasion alone could not bring change.

f. The Albany Movement: The Limits of Protest

Where the federal government was not present, segregationists could triumph. In Albany, Georgia, local authorities prevented the kind of violent white reaction that made the protesters’ tactics effective—and therefore newsworthy—so protests fizzled. Despite the presence of Dr. King, Albany remained as segregated as ever. But when the federal government intervened, as it did at the University of Mississippi, important battles could be won. Governor Ross Barnett openly encouraged mob violence to prevent a black veteran, James Meredith, from enrolling in the fall of 1962. After several days of rioting in which two were killed and hundreds—including 160 U.S. marshals—were injured, Kennedy sent in 5,000 Army troops to restore order and force Meredith’s admission.

MHL document: Charles Sherrod, SNCC Memorandum (1961) at www.myhistorylab.com

IV. THE MOVEMENT AT HIGH TIDE, 1963–1965

After the events of 1960–1962, Civil Rights movement leaders looked to build a national consensus by broadening their base of support.

a. Birmingham

In conjunction with the SCLC, local activists in Birmingham, Alabama, planned a large desegregation campaign at the end of 1962. Demonstrators, including Martin Luther King, filled the city’s jails. King penned his Letter from Birmingham Jail, which presented the movement’s case to a wide audience. TV audiences were horrified to see water cannons and snarling dogs break up demonstrations, and bombs rocked SCLC headquarters, King’s own home and, finally, a black Birmingham church, where four
girls were killed, despite an agreement by which white businessmen had pledged to
desegregate and hire blacks. Birmingham changed the nature of the civil rights movement
by bringing millions of Americans, white and black alike, together in support of civil
rights, as well as mobilizing black unemployed and working poor for the first time.

b. JFK and the March on Washington

The shifting public consensus led President Kennedy to appeal for civil rights legislation in
a nationally televised speech in June 1963 after Governor George Wallace had sought to
prevent integration of the University of Alabama. While Kennedy asked Congress to pass
civil rights legislation, civil rights leaders planned a March on Washington for Jobs and
Freedom to force Kennedy’s hand. Kennedy opposed the march and refused to speak, but
over 250,000 people (including 50,000 whites) and a live national television audience
heard King’s stirring “I Have a Dream” speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln
Memorial. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the next year, gaining international
stature and demonstrating that the movement could not be ignored.

MHL document: John Lewis, Address at the March on Washington (1963) at
www.myhistorylab.com

MHL video: Civil Rights March on Washington (1963) at www.myhistorylab.com

c. LBJ and the Civil Rights Act of 1964

The assassination of President Kennedy threw a cloud over the movement. The new
president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, had never been much of a friend to civil rights. But
LBJ used his skills as a political insider to push through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The
most significant civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, the Act put a virtual end to
Jim Crow, but at a great cost to LBJ and his party, as the new law accelerated the political
realignment of the South from the Democratic to the Republican Party—something that
Johnson foretold but accepted as the price of justice.


d. Mississippi Freedom Summer

In 1964, civil rights activists led by Bob Moses of SNCC and Dave Dennis of CORE
targeted Mississippi for “Freedom Summer,” during which 900 volunteers, many of them
white northern college students, exposed the culture’s virulent racism. Two white
activists and a local black activist were quickly killed and other deaths, beatings, and
bombings followed. Tensions developed between white volunteers and black movement
veterans. The project riveted national attention on Mississippi, though the movement’s
strategy of challenging the regular Democratic Party’s delegation to the national
convention brought only a token concession. Many African Americans became
disillusioned with the Democratic Party and liberal establishment leaders like Hubert
Humphrey, Johnson’s running mate in 1964.
e. Malcolm X and Black Consciousness

Frustrated with the limits of nonviolence and politics, many younger activists were drawn to the vision of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Malcolm, whose father had been killed by racists in Michigan when he was a child, had little patience with the nonviolent strategy of King. He ridiculed integrationist goals and urged black audiences to break free from white domination. He broke with the Nation of Islam, made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and returned to America with changed views. He founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. This activist phase of his life was short-lived. On February 21, 1964 he was assassinated. Even in death, he continued to point to a new black consciousness and became a martyr for the idea soon to be known as Black Power.

f. Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

With an overwhelming Democratic victory in the 1964 elections, movement leaders pushed for federal legislation to protect the right to vote. In Selma, Alabama, whites had systematically kept blacks off the voting lists and brutally repressed protests. A planned march from Selma to the state capital, Montgomery, ended when police beat marchers, sending 50 to the hospital. A court injunction threatened the march. Just when it appeared the Selma campaign would fade, a white gang attacked a group of northern whites who had come to help out, killing one of them. President Johnson addressed the nation and thoroughly identified himself with the civil rights cause, concluding “we shall overcome.” The march went forward. In August 1965, LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act, which authorized federal supervision of voter registration in the South and led to a great leap in the number of black voters.

V. CIVIL RIGHTS BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

The civil rights movement inspired other minorities to adopt more militant strategies in pursuit of their civil rights and immigration reform.

a. Mexican Americans and Mexican Immigrants

Mexican Americans had already formed groups such as LULAC to fight for their rights and had used the courts to challenge discrimination. Legal and illegal Mexican immigration increased dramatically during and after WWII. During the 1950s, efforts to round up undocumented immigrants (“Operation Wetback”) led to a denial of basic civil rights and a Mexican distrust of Anglos. A new civil rights movement, la raza, linked the struggle of all Mexican Americans, whether they were in the country legally or not.

b. Puerto Ricans
Although Puerto Rican communities had been forming in New York City since the 1920s, the great migration came after WWII. Despite being citizens, Puerto Ricans faced both economic and cultural discrimination. In the 1960s and 1970s, they were hit hard by the decline in manufacturing jobs and urban decay. Like Mexicans, many Puerto Ricans responded to white hostility and indifference by emphasizing their Spanish language and Caribbean culture, and joined the demand for bilingual education.

c. Japanese Americans

WWII relocation camps had devastated the Japanese American community on the west coast. But the reaction against Nazi racist doctrines softened some of the anti-Japanese racism, and the Japanese American Citizens League was able to win important legislative victories in California. First-generation Japanese Americans became eligible for U.S. citizenship with the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act. By 1965, 46,000, the majority older Issei, had become citizens.

d. Indian Peoples

American Indians also experienced significant changes. During the 1950s, Congress passed a series of “termination bills” that ended tribal rights in return for cash payments and division of tribal assets. Indian activists challenged government policies, leading to court decisions that reasserted the principle of tribal sovereignty. Indians who had left the reservations often found themselves losing their tribal identities. Urban Indian groups focused on civil instead of tribal rights. As with other groups, a series of Indian organizations appeared through the 1960s and Indians began to emphasize civil rights more than tribal rights, but contradictions between Indian and tribal identity often weakened the movement.

e. Remaking the Golden Door: The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

In the egalitarian political climate of civil rights legislation, in 1965, a new Immigration and Nationality Act law abolished the national origins quota system, increased opportunities for southern and eastern Europeans and Asians to immigrate to the United States. Filipinos, Chinese, and Koreans especially took advantage of the law. The law’s provisions for family reunification led to chain immigration and sponsorship, while provisions encouraging immigration of skilled workers brought many health care professionals and managers from Asia. Because the new law substituted hemispheric for national quotas, undocumented immigration from Latin America also mushroomed. By the 1980s, more than 90 percent of immigrants, legal and illegal, came from Asia and Latin America.

VI. CONCLUSION

Beginning in Montgomery in 1955 and continuing through the 1960s, the mass movement for civil rights transformed American society and politics. Using the Constitution, the courts, and federal law, the legal equality of blacks was assured, but by 1967 continuing poverty and
lack of opportunities in the black community led many, including Dr. King, to begin shifting focus to economic equality, a problem that would prove far more difficult to solve than legal segregation.

Learning Objectives:

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 28:

1. What were the legal and political origins of the African American civil rights struggle?
2. What accounts for Martin Luther King’s rise to leadership?
3. How did student protesters and direct action shape the civil rights struggle in the South?
4. How did the civil rights movement intersect with national politics in the 1950s and 1960s?
5. What did the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 accomplish?
6. How did America’s other minorities respond to the African American struggle for civil rights?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. How did World War II influence the development of the civil rights movement? What changes occurred in the black community? What changes occurred in the white community?

   Answer: World War II laid the foundations for the Civil Rights movement in a number of ways. As blacks moved to the North, they acquired greater political power. President Truman’s Executive Order desegregated the Armed Services, and Jackie Robinson’s entry into Major League Baseball demonstrated that African Americans could coexist with whites. In addition, the NAACP initiated a legal strategy successfully challenging segregation in public schools. Whites, particularly in the South where the challenges were most dramatic, sought to resist these efforts.

2. Why did Martin Luther King emerge as a great civil rights leader? What qualities did he possess?

   Answer: Martin Luther King emerged as the leader of the Civil Rights movement after the Birmingham Bus Boycott in 1955. A well-educated minister from a prominent southern black family, King’s unwavering commitment to nonviolent direct action won him the admiration of many in the struggle. In addition to his tremendous patience, King was able to rally support through his gifted oratory, which combined passion and intelligence.

3. The text refers to the Albany struggle as a failure and the Birmingham struggle as a success. What did the movement need for successful struggles? What was the role of the federal government?

   Answer: Albany was a defeat for the Civil Rights Movement as white authorities there avoided the use of force and violence in dealing with black protesters, and therefore successfully limited the attention of the national media and the federal government. Civil Rights leaders learned valuable lessons, and in the Birmingham campaign in 1963 they succeeded in getting Police Chief Bull Connor to retaliate against marchers with water cannons and police dogs. The news media captured these images and they were seen across the country and around the world. As had happened elsewhere, the movement had succeeded.
The federal government served to mediate an end to the violence and protests. The power of the federal government was necessary in getting state and local white leaders to accept the demands of the movement.

4. How would you evaluate the roles of presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson?

Answer: While President Eisenhower avoided pushing the South to implement the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision, he did federalize the National Guard and sent in additional Army troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Kennedy’s call to Coretta Scott King and his pressure on a judge to secure the release of Martin Luther King in the fall of 1960 won him African American votes and the presidency. In office, Kennedy was stymied by conservative southern Democrats who prevented any civil rights legislation from being enacted. In the summer of 1963, Kennedy proposed a sweeping Civil Rights bill, but he had made little progress with the bill before he was assassinated. Lyndon Johnson used his unmatched political skills and appeals to the Kennedy legacy to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed into law. He also shepherded the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through Congress, identifying himself with the movement.

5. How did the Civil Rights Movement inspire other reform movements by minority groups?

Answer: A wide variety of minority communities, including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese Americans, and Native Americans, used the civil rights campaign to appeal for their own equal rights. The la raza movement linked the struggle of all Mexican Americans, those in the country both legally and illegally. Japanese Americans were allowed to seek citizenship for the first time in the 1950s and Native Americans challenged federal laws and reasserted tribal sovereignty. A new immigration law in 1965 dramatically increased the number of immigrants from Asia and the Americas.

Lecture Outline

American Communities: Montgomery and the Bus Boycott

Origins of the Movement
  Civil Rights After World War II
  The Segregated South
  Brown v. Board of Education
  Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas

No Easy Road to Freedom, 1957–1963
  Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC
  Sit-in Movement, Greensboro, North Carolina
  SNCC and the “Beloved Community”
  The Election of 1960 and Civil Rights
  Freedom Rides
  The Albany Movement and the Limits of Protest
The Movement at High Tide, 1963–1965
- Birmingham Campaign
- JFK and the March on Washington—“I Have a Dream” Speech
- LBJ and the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Mississippi Freedom Summer
- Malcolm X and Black Consciousness
- Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Civil Rights Beyond Black and White
- Mexican Americans: La Raza
- Great Migration of Puerto Ricans
- Japanese Americans and Citizenship
- Native Americans Reassert Tribal Sovereignty
- Remaking the Golden Door: Immigration and Nationality Act, 1965

Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
Civil Rights Documentation Project: [www.congresslink.org/civilrights/index.htm](http://www.congresslink.org/civilrights/index.htm) focuses on the story of the legislative process that gave birth to such laws as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and provides a full accounting of law-making based on the archival resources housed at The Dirksen Congressional Center.

[http://www.historynow.org/06_2006/index.html](http://www.historynow.org/06_2006/index.html) includes an essay on different perspectives of the movement, the music of the movement, an interactive jukebox of songs from that era, and more in the eighth issue of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s quarterly online journal.

Films/Video
Eyes on the Prize (360 minutes). PBS.

Eyes on the Prize II (480 minutes). PBS. Both volumes of this video contain a history of the movement, complete with documentary footage and interviews with many of the participants.

My History Lab Connections

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

Read the Documents
Sterling A. Brown, “Out of Their Mouths” (1942)
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)
The Southern Manifesto (1956)
Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, “Statement of Purpose” (1960)
Charles Sherrod, SNCC Memorandum (1961)
John Lewis, Address at the March on Washington (1963)
The Civil Rights Act of 1964
Fannie Lou Hammer, Voting Rights in Mississippi (1962–1964)

See the Maps
Impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Research and Explore

Read the Documents
Exploring America: The American Indian Movement
The Civil Rights Movement

Read the Biographies
Ella Baker
César Chávez

See the Videos
Malcolm X
The Civil Rights Movement
Civil Rights March on Washington (1963)
Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball
Photographing the Civil Rights Movement: Birmingham, 1963
How Did the Civil Rights Movement Change American Schools?

Critical Thinking Exercises

The civil rights movement involved communities north and south in the struggle for change. Veterans of, or at least witnesses to, the movement are all around us. Interviews with law enforcement personnel, reporters from the 1960s, clergy, etc. should reveal a sense of what the movement looked like to the average person.