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Civil Rights Movement

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Century-long struggle against legally mandated structures of white supremacy that culminated with mass protests in the 1960s and secured the enactment of national civil rights legislation.

The Civil Rights Movement had its roots in the constitutional amendments enacted during the Reconstruction era. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment expanded the guarantees of federally protected citizenship rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment barred voting restrictions based on race. The Reconstruction amendments were, as civil rights lawyer Oliver Hill observed, “a second Bill of Rights” for black Americans.

Reconstruction to World War I

Reconstruction radically altered social, political, and economic relationships in the South and in the nation. Former slaves participated in civic and political life throughout the South. Black elected officials served at all levels of government, from local offices to state legislatures and the United States Congress. During the early days of Reconstruction, state governments drew up new constitutions that implemented sweeping democratic reforms, including, for the first time in the South, a system of universal free public education.

Yet the meaning of freedom was vigorously contested in private and public life. Newly enfranchised blacks understood citizenship to embody constitutionally protected rights, realized through political participation and ultimately secured by the federal government. They acted upon an expansive view of the democratic process through their participation in Republican Party politics and by exploring alliances with independent groups and, in some cases, the Democratic Party as well.

This vision competed with the Democratic Party's politics of Redemption, which promised the restoration of white hegemony and home rule for Southern states. As Democrats regained control of state governments throughout the South, the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups sought to drive blacks from political life through a relentless campaign of fraud and violence. Black men nevertheless continued to vote in large numbers, often going to the polls in groups, accompanied by family members.

By the late nineteenth century, however, reconciliation between the North and the South was nearly complete, and popular “scientific” theories about race supported white supremacist views. State governments controlled by Democrats drew up new constitutions and enacted a variety of laws that dramatically restricted suffrage in the South, virtually barring blacks from voting and vastly reducing the scope of government. A combination of municipal ordinances and local and state laws mandating racial segregation ultimately permeated all spheres of public life. The Supreme Court, in rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), essentially nullified the constitutional amendments enacted during Reconstruction by upholding legal discrimination based on the concept of “separate but equal” public spaces.

Black Protest and the Age of Jim Crow. By the dawn of the new century, government and politics had become, as one historian observed, “inaccessible and unaccountable to Americans who happened to be black.” While the rudiments of citizenship expired, black protest against new laws segregating streetcars spontaneously erupted in locally organized boycotts in at least twenty-five Southern cities from 1900 to 1906. Some boycotts lasted as long as two years, but these protests failed to stem the tide of segregation. Meanwhile, Lynching and other forms of antiblack violence and terrorism reinforced legal structures of white domination.

Black leaders and intellectuals continued to debate a broad range of political strategies. There was, for example, the accommodationism and self-help advanced by Booker T. Washington and others, the civil rights protests advocated by Ida Bell Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. Du Bois, and the nationalist and emigration movements promoted by leaders such as Henry

McNeal Turner. These overlapping and sometimes contradictory approaches revealed the tensions and challenges inherent in what often was a daunting effort: how to build and sustain black communities amid the crushing environment of white racism while envisioning a way forward.

Yet traditions of freedom and citizenship, born in the crucible of Reconstruction, nurtured communities of resistance. African Americans continued to create strategies for social and political development through a separate public sphere. Black community life was dominated in large part by the church and shaped by other institutions such as fraternal organizations, schools, and newspapers. The Black Church mobilized community resources to provide educational and welfare services, leadership training, and organizational networks and served as a site of mass gatherings and meetings—a place, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has written, “to critique and contest America's racial domination.”

Southern Streetcar Boycotts

NAACP, War, and the New Negro. In 1905 W. E. B. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, and other black militants founded the Niagara Movement, an organization committed to securing full citizenship rights for African Americans. The Niagara Movement was short-lived but its goals were adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in New York City in 1909 by an interracial group of reformers and civil rights activists. White progressives dominated the early leadership of the NAACP. But the NAACP provided the primary organizational and institutional foundation from which the black struggle for civil rights was mounted over the next half century.

World War I and the Great Migration altered the political and social landscape of black America. Beginning in 1914, wartime industrial opportunities in the North sparked a massive movement of nearly 1.5 million black Southerners to Northern urban centers, a migration that continued through the 1920s. While racial discrimination and segregation restricted black opportunities in the North, black community life flourished in Northern cities, where African Americans enjoyed free access to the ballot. As their numbers increased, the black vote in the urban North gradually became a factor of national consequence.

The participation of African Americans in World War I, the war that promised to “make the world safe for democracy,” stirred the aspirations of a new generation determined to “make democracy safe for the Negro.” Returning veterans formed organizations such as the League for Democracy, which advocated political activism and self-defense, and joined in establishing new branches of the NAACP throughout the South. Others, like Charles Hamilton Houston, enrolled in law school, determined to fight racial injustice through the courts.

Antiblack violence escalated in 1919 in a series of lynchings and more than twenty-five race riots throughout the country, the worst of which was the Chicago Riot of 1919. In many instances blacks fought back, in the spirit of Claude McKay's defiant poem “If We Must Die.” Yet state repression, supported by federal surveillance, effectively quashed the incipient democratic political initiatives spawned by the war.

During the 1920s the “New Negro” movement stretched the parameters of racial consciousness and expression. Urban communities nurtured the outpouring of black cultural, literary, and musical creativity that flowered in the Harlem Renaissance. Beyond the literary salons and art galleries, Marcus Moziah Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association represented the largest mass black organization in the United States, one that promoted black economic development and celebrated Africa and racial pride. While W. E. B. Du Bois and some others dismissed Garvey as little more than a fool, Charles Houston contended that Garvey surpassed most leaders of his time, for he had “made a permanent contribution in teaching the simple dignity of being black.”

Despite cultural and economic changes ushered in by migration and urbanization, the status of African Americans remained largely unchanged. Some 80 percent of African Americans still lived in the Southern United States in 1930, where they were racially segregated, politically disenfranchised, and economically marginalized. The fate of nine young black men in the Scottsboro Case of 1931 focused national and international attention on the fact that blacks in the South were completely beyond the protection of the law.

Campaign for Civil Rights. With the normal channels of political participation closed to the vast majority of black Americans, Charles Hamilton Houston envisioned a unique role for black lawyers as “social engineers,” prepared to “anticipate, guide, and interpret his group's advancement.” Houston, a graduate of Harvard Law School, joined the faculty of Howard University Law School in 1924. He transformed Howard into a laboratory for the development of civil rights law and trained a generation of black lawyers to lead the assault on Jim Crow.

When Houston became chief legal counsel of the NAACP in the early 1930s, he and former student Thurgood Marshall began laying the groundwork for a protracted campaign against racial discrimination in education. For Houston and Marshall, litigation was a slow and deliberate process, tied to the development of community support and participation. Houston and Marshall traveled as much as 10,000 miles a year through the South, where they met with small and large groups, explaining the mechanics of the legal fight and its relationship to broader community concerns. An associate recalled that Houston's efforts in the South were fueled by his confidence in the capacity “within the black community and the Negro race to bring about change.” During the 1930s Houston and Marshall implemented a major reorientation of the NAACP's program, focusing staff efforts on the expansion of black membership and the cultivation of local leadership and branches, especially in the South. In 1934 Houston wrote Walter Francis White, then executive secretary of the NAACP: “The work of the next decade will have to be concentrated in the South.”

New Deal and World War II

While the South was the primary arena of the black freedom struggle, the nationalizing trends of the New Deal and World War II enhanced the possibilities for a broad legal and political challenge to the segregation system and made civil rights an issue of consequence throughout the country.

Blacks and the Roosevelt Administration. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression, precipitated a sea change in American politics. New Deal programs and legislation expanded the scope of federal power and redefined the role of government and politics in American life. Government relief and job programs, along with the legalization of labor unions, stirred the expectations of groups long on the margins of national politics —industrial workers, sharecroppers, and African Americans of all classes.

When Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1933, racial segregation was strongly entrenched in the city of Washington, D.C., and in the corridors of government. The Republican Party offered no more than token representation to black Americans, and white Southerners dominated the Democratic Party. During the 1920s the NAACP had carved out a presence in the nation's capital through its efforts to gain support for antilynching legislation; in 1930 an NAACP lobbying campaign had helped defeat the nomination of John J. Parker, a white Southern conservative, to the Supreme Court. But there were no secure avenues through which African Americans could influence or shape government policy.

The implementation of a national recovery program, however, promised to have immediate and long-term consequences for black Americans. As more established black leaders deliberated about how to respond to the flurry of New Deal legislation, Robert Clifton Weaver, a doctoral student at Harvard, and John P. Davis, a new graduate of Harvard Law School, acted to ensure that black interests were represented. In the summer of 1933 the two men returned to their hometown of Washington and established an office on Capitol Hill, where they fought successfully against the racial wage differential in the first recovery program. Their efforts led to the establishment of the Joint Committee on Economic Recovery, a group of more than a dozen black organizations that included the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL). The committee lobbied for

fair inclusion of African Americans in government-sponsored programs and publicized incidents and patterns of racial discrimination.

The NAACP and the black press, along with the Rosenwald Fund, successfully pressed for the appointment of black government officials to represent black interests from within the Roosevelt administration. Robert Weaver and William Henry Hastie were among the first African Americans hired. Shortly after joining the Interior Department they integrated the lunchroom, sparking the reversal of the segregationist policies enacted by Woodrow Wilson. By 1935 black advisers were serving in many cabinet offices and New Deal agencies and had created an informal network commonly known as the Black Cabinet.

Southern Blacks and the New Deal. The Democratic rhetoric of the New Deal, along with federal programs, dovetailed with the NAACP's expanded activity in the South, the growth of industrial unionism in the region, and pockets of student and Communist Party activism. Together, these developments revived the expansive view of citizenship and politics that had informed black and biracial politics in the Reconstruction era.

Despite their conservative nature, early New Deal programs stirred the stagnant economic relationships that had persisted in the South since the 1890s. Federal work relief and credit, along with federal legislation securing the rights of labor to unionize, implicitly threatened the culture of dependency that shaped race and class relations in the South. New Deal initiatives combined with the organizing efforts of a revitalized NAACP and radical labor groups—such as the International Labor Defense—to support a renewed interest in politics on the part of the South's disenfranchised.

Early in 1934 a South Carolina peach grower complained that black women would not work in the fields while their husbands had jobs with the federal Civil Works Administration. In Arkansas black and white sharecroppers organized the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to demand federal enforcement of guarantees provided by the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Organized groups of black citizens in Georgia and South Carolina attempted to vote in the Democratic primary that barred blacks in 1934, seeking entry into Roosevelt's party. Peter Epps, an administrator for the Works Progress Administration in South Carolina, told an interviewer that blacks “talked more politics since Mister Roosevelt's been in than ever before.”

Contemplating the impact of recent federal programs on black political consciousness, W. E. B. Du Bois noted that the government was attending to economic matters and furnishing jobs and food in the provincial South. The question bound to arise was, “How can this political instrument which is the federal government be used more widely and efficiently for the well-being of the mass of people?”

Political Coalitions. While blacks were essentially barred from voting in the South, black voters in the North emerged as a pivotal group in the 1936 presidential campaign. Following a steady stream of migrations from the South during the 1920s, blacks in the North began casting significant numbers of votes in key industrial states. They had been drifting away from the party of Lincoln, establishing a tentative allegiance to the Roosevelt administration. Yet Roosevelt's party was also the party of Southern segregationists.

While the Roosevelt administration had failed to endorse racially sensitive legislation, such as an antilynching bill, it made other gestures that appealed to black voters. Roosevelt presided over a Democratic National Convention that, for the first time, opened its doors to the equal participation of black reporters and the handful of black delegates in attendance, drawing a howl of protest from Southern delegates. Mary McLeod Bethune and other members of the Black Cabinet took part in a sophisticated campaign aimed at black voters. It included an extravagant multicity celebration of the seventy-third anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Such actions reinforced the bonds woven by New Deal relief and jobs, ensuring Roosevelt's sweep of the black vote. “The amazing switch of this great group of voters is the real political sensation of the time,” wrote a national political analyst.

The basis of Roosevelt's landslide victory in 1936 was a broad, class-based appeal, one that pledged an activist federal government committed to the “establishment of a democracy of opportunity for all people.” African Americans, urban ethnic groups, industrial workers, and farmers responded, creating a new Democratic coalition that eclipsed the singular dominance of old-line Southern Democrats. For the next three decades the Democratic Party was a major site of the struggle waged to define a national policy on civil rights.

Race and the Politics of Reform. The late 1930s and the early 1940s witnessed the emergence of new organizations that were dedicated to expanding economic and political democracy in the South and were prepared to challenge Jim Crow laws. In 1937 a group of black students established the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in Richmond, Virginia, dedicated

to organizing black industrial workers in the South. During the next decade, SNYC grew into a regional organization based in Birmingham; in addition to supporting the work of organized labor, SNYC activists sponsored voter education and registration efforts and leadership training, often through community-based cultural activities.

In 1938 Roosevelt issued the *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South*, which identified the region as “the Nation's number one economic problem.” In response to that report several thousand black and white Southerners met in Birmingham, Alabama, in November 1938 and established the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). At the founding of the SCHW, Birmingham police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor enforced segregated seating in the group's meeting hall. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt responded by placing her chair on top of the hastily established line separating the two races. With the endorsement of the Roosevelt administration and the strong support of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the SCHW launched a decade-long effort to expand political participation in the South.

Just weeks after Eleanor Roosevelt's dramatic gesture in Birmingham, the Supreme Court ruled that Lloyd L. Gaines be admitted to the University of Missouri Law School, giving the NAACP its first major victory in the campaign for equal education. Pauli Murray, whose application to the University of North Carolina had been rejected solely on the grounds of race, observed that *Gaines* was the “first major breach in the solid wall of segregated education since *Plessey*. “It was,” she wrote, “the beginning of the end.”

World War II. By the late 1930s, the crusading spirit of the New Deal had been obscured by mobilization for war and the increasing power of conservatives in Washington. Still, the war experience broadened the possibilities for civil rights struggles. On the eve of America's entry into the war, Osceola McKaine, a South Carolina NAACP organizer, observed: “We are living in the midst of perhaps the greatest revolution within human experience. Nothing, no nation, will be as it was when the peace comes. … There is no such thing as the status quo.”

The demographic, economic, and political changes unleashed by the war had far-reaching consequences for African Americans. As scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has written, World War II “did more to recement black American culture, which migration had fragmented, than did any single event or experience. For the nearly one million African American soldiers the army became “a great cauldron, mixing the New Negro culture, which had developed since the migration of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Old Negro culture, the remnants of traditional rural black culture in the South.” The massive movement of black Southerners to centers of defense production in the North marked one of the largest internal migrations in American history.

Black civil rights activism accelerated under the banner of the Double V campaign, a movement first promoted by the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Double V advocates combined the fight against fascism abroad with the struggle for racial equality and full democracy at home. When the president failed to respond to black demands for equal inclusion in the war effort, labor leader A. Philip Randolph promised to lead 10,000 black Americans in a march on Washington to compel federal action. At the eleventh hour Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discrimination in defense industries and federal agencies and created the president's Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to implement the law. It was the first federal agency since Reconstruction devoted to dealing with racial discrimination.

NAACP and the Southern Movement. During the war years, NAACP membership soared to nearly 400,000 nationally, and the rate of growth in the South surpassed that in all other regions. Having reported 18,000 members in the late 1930s, the NAACP claimed 156,000 members in the South by the war's end. Ella Baker, Southern field secretary for the NAACP, reported that the growth in membership brought a “new surge of identity” among black communities around the South. Through the organization of local branches and state conferences of the NAACP, Southern blacks created an infrastructure for sustained political struggle.

In the spring of 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Smith v. Allwright* that the all-white Democratic primary was unconstitutional. This ruling was the culmination of the NAACP's twenty-year legal battle against the South's most effective legal means of barring blacks from political participation. “Once the Supreme Court opened the door in 1944,” civil rights activist Palmer Weber recalled, “the NAACP charged into the whole registration and voting area very hard.”

From 1944 to 1948 the NAACP, along with SNYC, the SCHW, and the CIO Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), joined with other local and state groups to promote voter registration. When South Carolina Democrats continued to bar blacks from the party, black newspaperman John McCray and NAACP activist Osceola McKaine organized the South Carolina Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). The PDP sent a delegation to the 1944 Democratic National Convention in an unsuccessful effort to challenge old-guard Democrats for failing to open the state party to blacks. That fall the PDP ran its own slate of candidates. Black veterans, such as Medgar Wylie Evers and James Charles Evers in Mississippi, often took

leading roles in voter registration efforts. In Birmingham black veterans marched in uniforms to the Jefferson County Court House to register to vote.

Henry Lee Moon, a journalist and a Southern field organizer for the CIO-PAC, reported that “Negro groups, sometimes in collaboration with labor and progressive groups, sometimes alone, are setting up schools to instruct new voters in the intricacies of registration, marking the ballot, and manipulating the voting machine.” By the late 1940s the total number of registered black voters in the South approached one million; this number had been estimated at 200,000 in 1940. The increases were most striking in South Carolina, where the number of black voters climbed from 3,500 to 50,000, and in Georgia, where the number rose from 20,000 to 118,000.

Southern whites met growing black political participation with terror and intimidation. There were countless individual acts of violence against blacks who voted, as well as public campaigns on the parts of candidates like Eugene Talmadge in Georgia and Theodore Bilbo in Mississippi, inviting whites to do what was necessary to keep blacks from the polls. In several cases black veterans were gunned down after voting. Publicly staged acts of violence against blacks increased during the 1946 primary season and included the execution-style murders of two black couples in Walton County, Georgia. There is evidence that Talmadge stole his gubernatorial win in 1946 and that the Justice Department had enough information to indict him, but decided against pursuing the matter.

Postwar America

Wartime experience and the growing power of the Northern black vote elevated the importance of civil rights in national politics. At the war's end, decolonization movements in Africa and Asia and the beginnings of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union heightened the rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and self-determination. In 1947, W. E. B. Du Bois sought unsuccessfully to enlist the United Nations in an international investigation of racial discrimination in the United States.

President Harry S. Truman responded to the call for civil rights reform by commissioning a review of racial discrimination, which resulted in a report that called for sweeping federal action against Jim Crow. Truman was reluctant to act in the face of strong Southern opposition. But a close 1948 presidential race in which victory in key Northern states hinged on the black vote compelled him to endorse a strong civil rights plank at the Democratic National Convention. Southerners left the convention in protest and ran their own candidate for president in 1948 on the States Rights Party ticket. Shortly after the convention, Truman issued an executive order desegregating the armed forces.

Civil Rights Movement: Major Events 1954–1968

The confident Democratic initiatives of the 1930s and 1940s, however, were overwhelmed by two postwar political

factors—the Cold War and the Truman administration's domestic loyalty-security program, which limited civil liberties; and the acceleration of white Southern repression of any challenge to the Jim Crow system. Groups like SNYC and the SCHW became targets of government investigations. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sought out suspected communists and sympathizers, while a revived Ku Klux Klan terrorized blacks who attempted to vote in the South and Southern civic leaders presided over fraudulent elections. Indeed, Charles Houston wondered why the loudly proclaimed crusade to "lead the world to democracy" did not extend to the Southern United States. Why were free and fair elections in Eastern Europe of greater importance to the U.S. government than open elections in Alabama and Mississippi?

Civil Rights Struggle in the 1950s

During the 1950s the struggle against Jim Crow in the South remained distant from national issues and concerns. After 1948 the Democratic Party placated its rebellious Southern wing while its civil rights agenda floundered. Meanwhile, whites responded to the steady migration of Southern blacks to Northern cities by extending patterns of racial segregation and black exclusion in housing, employment, and education.

The foundation of the Civil Rights Movement remained anchored in the cumulative gains of the NAACP legal campaign and its extensive network of branches. Southern NAACP leaders, however, faced an emboldened defense of the racial status quo. In 1951 the Christmas Day assassination of Harry Tyson Moore, a leading NAACP organizer in Florida, and his wife inaugurated a decade of white terrorism and state-sponsored repression that heightened in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision.

Landmark Legal Decision. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the doctrine of "separate but equal" as applied to public education was unconstitutional. *Brown* marked the culmination of the NAACP's long legal battle; the Court had effectively reversed its 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the cornerstone of the segregation system. By implication, state-mandated racial segregation in all areas of public life violated the Constitution.

The Court, however, issued a separate ruling one year later concerning the enforcement of this momentous decision. Sympathetic to warnings of Southern white defiance, the Court allowed for a policy of gradual implementation that would, the opinion explained, be responsive to local conditions and problems. While calling for compliance "with all deliberate speed," the Court reflected the ambivalence of the justices, executive and congressional leadership, and the vast majority of Americans about dismantling racial segregation in the South. For many white Southerners, *Brown II* was a license to resist. During the next ten years, less than 1 percent of black children in the South attended white schools.

Brown was a major turning point in the struggle for civil rights, and ushered in an era of heightening interplay between Southern blacks striving to realize the promise of *Brown* in the face of massive resistance by Southern whites and the equivocal response of the federal government, unfolding on an increasingly national and international stage.

Emerging Leadership . In August 1955, just three months after the court ruled in *Brown II*, fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till was murdered in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Mamie Bradley, Till's mother, brought her son's body home to Chicago and insisted on an open casket so that all could see "what they did to my boy." Jet magazine's photograph of Till's badly mutilated body offered gruesome evidence of the terror that reigned in Mississippi, and it informed the consciousness of a new generation of young black people. The widely publicized trial and acquittal of Till's murderers confirmed the entrenched racism and terrorism of the Southern law enforcement system.

That December, Rosa Louise McCauley Parks, a local NAACP leader in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to surrender her seat on a city bus to a white man. This action, and the mobilizing work of the Women's Political Council, inspired the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted for 381 days. Local black leaders elected Martin Luther King, Jr., the new twenty-six-year-old minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization that led the boycott and sued to end segregation on the buses. Hundreds of African Americans, mostly women, walked several miles to and from work each day, and as one woman commented, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." This dignified protest contrasted with the city's efforts to intimidate the MIA leadership through indictments, injunction, and the bombing of King's house, and it attracted the attention of the national and international media.

By the time the Supreme Court struck down segregation on the buses in December 1956, Dr. King had become a seasoned leader and eloquent spokesman of the emerging nonviolent movement. Early in 1957, King joined with other activist ministers and civil rights leaders, such as Bayard Rustin and Ella J. Baker to establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King was elected its president and John L. Tilley became the SCLC's first executive director, replaced

in 1959 by Ella Baker, who served as executive director until 1960. SCLC served as an umbrella organization, linking church-based affiliates throughout the South in the nonviolent struggle for racial justice and to “redeem the soul of America.”

Little Rock and School Desegration. The fight for school integration had few supporters outside the black community. The NAACP aided parents who petitioned school boards to admit their children to the all-white schools, in compliance with the *Brown* decision, but the organization became the target of an extensive effort across the South to shut it down. In 1956 Alabama passed a state law effectively barring the NAACP from operating in that state; South Carolina barred NAACP members from state employment. Five other states enacted laws requiring the NAACP to register and to provide lists of members and contributors. While such state action was often unconstitutional, the burden was on local NAACP branches to spend scarce resources in fighting to overturn these laws. In the meantime, the White Citizens Council (WCC), founded in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1956, organized local businessmen and civic leaders throughout the South. WCC chapters used economic reprisals and manipulation of the law in an effort to intimidate and undermine civil rights activists and supporters.

Southern obstructionists met their first major setback in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1957 a group of local parents, working with NAACP leader Daisy Lee Gatson Bates, won a court order mandating the admission of black students to Central High School. Governor Orval Faubus employed the National Guard to block the admission of the nine young men and women who had been selected to attend Central High. The governor's open defiance of the federal courts compelled President Eisenhower, who was no supporter of school integration, to send in U.S. Army troops and to federalize the Arkansas National Guard in order to ensure peaceful compliance with the court order. When the school year ended, the governor closed the public schools in the state to avoid further integration.

The March on Washington. Massive crowds gather around the Reflecting Pool near the Washington Monument in August 1963. Many historians of the era consider the March on Washington a highpoint in the struggle for civil rights.

(Library of Congress.)

From 1957 to 1959 public schools in Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama closed rather than obey the orders to integrate. In New Orleans, Louisiana, when public schools admitted four young black girls to the first grade, whites in the city rioted.

Civil Rights Act of 1957. While federal officials and the U.S. Congress sought to avoid the issue of racial integration, the Eisenhower administration—recognizing the possibility of wooing back Northern black voters to the Republican Party—was sympathetic to extending protection of black voting rights in the South. In 1957 Attorney General Herbert Brownell helped to craft legislation that sought to provide federal protection of basic citizenship rights. The final bill, the first civil rights bill enacted since 1875, was trimmed to meet the opposition of Southern Democrats and lacked strong enforcement provisions. Nevertheless, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 created a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department, authorized to prosecute

registrars who obstructed the right of blacks to vote. The bill also established the United States Civil Rights Commission as an independent agency charged with gathering facts about voting rights violations and other civil rights infringements.

In the fall of 1958, the new Civil Rights Commission sent investigators to Alabama to gather information on voter discrimination. The Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA), a black organization established in the early 1940s to encourage voter registration, shared its extensive records documenting voter discrimination. As a result, the commission held nationally televised hearings in Montgomery, and a parade of black witnesses—farmers, hospital technicians, and Tuskegee professors—described the deceptive and often bizarre devices used by registrars in Macon County to keep blacks from registering to vote.

While presenting the case before the Civil Rights Commission and the American public, TCA founder Charles Gomillion and several associates were also preparing their suit against the city of Tuskegee for redrawing the political boundaries of the town so that black voters would be excluded. In 1960 the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of the TCA in *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*, a case that marked a major step in broadening federal review of state voting practices.

Citizenship Schools and Voter Registration. Voter registration and education accelerated in communities around the South after the *Brown* decision. In 1957 Septima Clarke, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins organized the Citizenship Schools program on South Carolina's Sea Islands, with the support of Highlander Folk School, one of the few politically active interracial organizations in the South. Over the next four years, the number of registered black voters on St. Johns Island tripled. The program was adapted in communities in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama.

In the mid-1950s in Mississippi, NAACP chapters and the Regional Council of Negro Leadership began a concerted effort to increase black voter registration, which in 1954 amounted to only 4 percent of the state's eligible black population. Reprisals from whites were swift. Those attempting to vote risked losing their jobs and suffered other forms of economic intimidation. Leaders were often targets of physical violence. In 1955 George W. Lee, president of the NAACP branch in Belonzi, was gunned down by a mob of whites. That same year Lamar Smith, a political activist in Lincoln County, was assassinated in front of the courthouse in broad daylight. Several other leaders fled the state. Despite the efforts of a handful of organizers, including Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers, political activity came to a standstill or was driven completely underground.

By the end of the decade, the momentum for the kind of change that had seemed possible in the aftermath of *Brown* and the Montgomery bus boycott became remote in the face of hardening white resistance and the persistence of unchecked violence. Virginia Durr, a white civil rights activist in Montgomery, wrote plaintively to a friend in the North: “We have such a feeling here that we have been abandoned by the rest of the country and by the government and left to the tender mercies of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council.”

Direct-Action Protests of the 1960s

On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four first-year students at Greensboro Agricultural and Technical College (A&T) sat at the white lunch counter in Woolworth's and asked to be served. The waitress refused, but the young men waited and left at the end of the day. The next day they were joined by twenty more students from A&T. Some white students from a local women's college “sat in” with black students on the third day. By the end of the week, the sit-ins had spread to several other towns in the state, and students began targeting a broad range of public accommodations. By the end of February, sit-ins had been staged in towns and cities throughout the South.

The sit-ins marked the beginning of a direct-action mass protest movement that defied the racial and political boundaries of Cold War America. In April 1960, young people who had participated in the sit-ins established the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at a meeting convened by veteran activist Ella Baker. Working with rural Southern blacks, SNCC quickly became engaged in a movement for more fundamental social change—change that looked beyond the legalistic and legislative goals of the national NAACP and its white liberal allies. In particular, SNCC sought to empower black people at the local level.

Escalating black protest, along with fierce white resistance, invited more extensive coverage by the national press and tested the resolve of the president to enforce federal law. In the spring of 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) initiated a “freedom ride” from Washington to the Deep South. The interracial group of freedom riders challenged the newly elected John F. Kennedy and his administration to enforce a 1960 Supreme Court ruling (*Boynton v. Virginia*) that banned segregation on interstate transportation. One bus was firebombed outside Birmingham; another rode into a savage mob assault at the bus station in Montgomery. In Jackson, riders were arrested, as one historian noted, “on charges of traveling

'for the avowed purpose of inflaming public opinion.'" SNCC and CORE sent a steady flow of reinforcements, who filled the local and county jails to overflow. Attorney General Robert Kennedy finally directed the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce regulations barring segregation in interstate terminals.

In Mississippi. During the early 1960s, civil rights groups and leaders experimented with a variety of tactics and strategies. SNCC and CORE organizers carved out a critical base as they fanned out across the South to establish community-based projects to support local organizing efforts aimed at securing voting rights and desegregating public facilities.

In the summer of 1960, Robert Parris Moses, a 26-year-old high school teacher from New York, traveled through Mississippi to recruit people for a SNCC conference to be held that fall. On the advice of Ella Baker, Moses sought out Amzie Moore, an NAACP leader in Cleveland, to learn how white terrorism had crippled voter registration efforts in Mississippi. With Moore's encouragement, Moses and a team of SNCC workers returned the following summer prepared to live in and organize what was the poorest and the most violently racist state in the nation.

The SNCC organizers joined with other civil rights activists in the state, including members of CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP, and created the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO) to unify the efforts of all civil rights groups operating in Mississippi. Late in 1961 COFO's efforts won financial support from the newly established Voter Education Project, a foundation-based organization that Attorney General Robert Kennedy helped to establish. But though the Kennedy administration, like the Eisenhower administration before it, supported voter registration, it was not prepared to offer federal protection to those who sought to register—often in the face of violence, economic harassment, and, in some cases, death. The murder of Herbert Lee in 1961 and the beating and jailing of other voting rights activists had the desired effect. During 1962 and 1963, fewer than 4,000 black voters were added to the rolls while 394,000 black adults in Mississippi remained unregistered.

The NAACP in Mississippi, under field director Medgar Evers, supported several desegregation efforts during this period. In 1962 NAACP lawyers secured a federal court order to gain the admission of the first African American to the University of Mississippi. Riots engulfed the campus on the eve of James H. Meredith's enrollment, claiming two lives and injuring hundreds of others. The Kennedy administration sent federal troops to restore order, and federal marshals remained on campus to protect Meredith.

The desegregation of Ole Miss encouraged Evers to revive the campaign against segregation in Jackson. SNCC workers offered training sessions for sit-ins. In the spring of 1963, students sat in at Woolworth's and attempted to gain admission to the public library and "whites-only" public parks, and organized protest marches in downtown Jackson. The demonstrators were beaten by police and arrested. On June 12, 1963, as he returned from a strategy meeting, Medgar Evers was gunned down in the driveway of his house.

Bombings in Birmingham. Martin Luther King, Jr., with his ability to articulate the ideals of the Southern movement to the nation at large, emerged as the national spokesman for the movement. King's eloquence was matched by his capacity for bringing media attention to the clashes between peaceful black protesters and white racists. On occasion, SCLC played a role in orchestrating these confrontations, which prompted resentment from some of the anonymous foot soldiers of the movement. Indeed, the intervention of King and SCLC in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, the site of a major SNCC project, failed to achieve any concessions and probably undermined some of the organizing work that had been done. But Albany was a critical training ground for Birmingham, Alabama, which became a pivotal battleground in the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1963 Birmingham was arguably the most segregated city in the nation and the most racially violent. During the previous six years, there had been eighteen unsolved bombings in black communities, winning the city the nickname of "Bombingham." Police Commissioner Bull Connor was prepared to maintain the city's color line at all costs.

On the invitation of Fred L. Shuttlesworth, the leading civil rights activist in the city, Dr. King and the SCLC launched Project C (for "Confrontation") in Birmingham early in the spring of 1963. A boycott of downtown stores was launched at the peak of the Easter shopping season, protesting the stores' refusal to hire black clerks; and demonstrators marched to City Hall, protesting the city's segregation laws. Bull Connor secured a federal court order barring the demonstrations, leading to the arrest of scores of protesters, including Dr. King and several other SCLC leaders. From his cell King penned his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in response to a group of liberal white clergy who criticized the protests as ill-timed and charged King and his associates with stirring up tensions between the races.

In his letter King distinguished the "type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth … the type of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and

brotherhood." King acknowledged that he had "yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was 'well-timed' in view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait!' ring in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

Yet local black business leaders and some clergy were beginning to question the value of the demonstrations. With the jails full, spirits flagging, and bail money spent, they began pressuring King to call off the protests. At this juncture James Bevel, a veteran of the Nashville sit-in movement, suggested a strategy for reviving the protests: invite children to march. Bevel reasoned that children had fewer constraints than their parents did. Moreover, in King's words, exposing young people to the wrath of Connor's police force would "subpoena the conscience of the nation."

Civil Rights Protester. Demonstrations throughout the United States during the great era of civil rights frequently led to conflict with police. Often peaceful demostrators were hauled off to jail while violent mobs of white counter-protesters went unmolested.

(Library of Congress.)

On May 2, children and young adults from age six to eighteen gathered at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the movement headquarters, and marched to downtown Birmingham. The police arrested more than 900 and carried them off to jail in paddy wagons and school buses. On the second day, more than 1,000 young people stayed out of school and assembled at the church to march. In an effort to abort the march, the police turned dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators as they left the church. The pressure of the hoses, which was strong enough to strip the bark off trees, slammed children to the ground and sent others sailing over parked cars. As outrage spread through the black community, SCLC organizers struggled to keep blacks from retaliating.

Civil Rights March, 1963.

With more than 2,000 people in jail, the marches continued to attract more participants. The next major confrontation with the police occurred several days later in downtown Birmingham. Once again the police turned attack dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators. Television coverage of the brutal police assault on children shocked the nation, while photos and news reports quickly spread around the world.

With Birmingham on the brink of a full-scale race riot, city businesses began to negotiate with King through a Kennedy administration intermediary. A tentative agreement to desegregate downtown stores and to employ black clerks sparked a spate of bombings. With federal troops on alert outside the city, Mayor Albert Boutwell finally ratified the agreement and repealed the city's segregation laws.

In the aftermath of Birmingham, mass demonstrations spread throughout the South, involving more than 100,000 people.

With Birmingham, the Civil Rights Movement had irrevocably commanded the attention of the nation and the world, opening the possibility for decisive legislative action.

Kennedy Administration. Birmingham marked a turning point for the Kennedy administration and its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement. Nearly three years earlier, the election of John F. Kennedy had raised the hopes of African Americans and their allies. The youthful Kennedy had actively courted black voters and had brought vitality and a new vision to the presidency after eight years of Dwight Eisenhower. Yet the new administration faced the legislative reality of a Southern bloc that dominated key congressional committees whose support was critical to the success of the president's agenda.

The Justice Department, under Attorney General Robert Kennedy, more vigorously enforced voting rights and school desegregation orders than the previous administration, but the jurisdiction of the Justice Department was limited. In any event, civil rights was not a priority in the early years of the Kennedy administration, which were dominated by Cold War issues. If anything, Kennedy was most inclined to placate and appease powerful Southern Democrats. He bowed to the wishes of Senator James Eastland of Mississippi and other like-minded Southern senators when making appointments to the federal bench in the South, and appointed a number of arch segregationists. They stood in contrast to moderate Republican judges, such as Frank Johnson and Elbert Tuttle, Eisenhower appointees who actively enforced civil rights law.

By June 1963, Kennedy was prepared to align himself and his presidency with the struggle for civil rights. On June 11, the day that Governor George Wallace attempted, unsuccessfully, to block the entrance of two black students to the University of Alabama, Kennedy addressed the nation. In a televised speech he told Americans that they could no longer ask black citizens to “be content with the counsels of patience and delay.” He pledged that he would urge Congress to act on “the proposition that race has no place in American life and law.” Seven days later he requested legislation from Congress that would ban segregation in public facilities, broaden the powers of the Justice Department to enforce school integration, and extend federal protection of voting rights.

March on Washington. In response to the momentous events of the spring, veteran civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph broadened the agenda of a planned march on the nation's capital. Other leaders joined Randolph to orchestrate a mass gathering in Washington calling for civil rights legislation, immediate integration of public schools in the South, and economic opportunity.

On August 28 an estimated quarter of a million people, black and white, from all parts of the nation assembled in front of the Lincoln Memorial in what was, at that time, the largest peacetime gathering in America. The day culminated with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech “I Have a Dream,” in which he looked toward an America of racial harmony and justice. Writer James Baldwin observed: “For a moment it almost seemed that we stood on a height and could see our inheritance …” Malcolm X, who had observed the march, commented to Bayard Rustin, “You know, this dream of King's is going to be a nightmare before it's over.”

Less than a month after the March on Washington, the sense of foreboding articulated by Malcolm X overshadowed the euphoria of that extraordinary day. On September 15 white terrorists dynamited the basement of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church during Sunday School, killing four young girls: Denise McNair and Cynthia Wesley, both eleven years old, and Carole Robertson and Addie Mae Collins, both fourteen. Dreading that the families would blame him for exposing the children to risk, King returned to Birmingham and presided over the funeral of the movement's youngest victims.

Movement at High Tide

During 1964 and 1965, the accelerated momentum of the Civil Rights Movement was fueled by the escalation of organized protest activity in the South, particularly in Mississippi and Alabama, and by the commitment of President Lyndon Johnson to enact strong civil rights legislation.

Civil Rights Act of 1964. The heightened expectations tied to the leadership of John F. Kennedy were tragically ended on November 22, 1963, when the president was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Within days of assuming the office of the presidency, Lyndon Baines Johnson, in an address to a joint session of Congress, promised that Kennedy's commitment to civil rights would be carried forward and translated into action. As a Southerner, Johnson did not underestimate the opposition a strong civil rights bill would meet. But no one knew the workings of the Congress better than this former majority leader of the U.S. Senate, and as a legislative strategist Johnson had no equal. Roy Ottoway Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, was struck by the contrast between Kennedy and Johnson. While Kennedy talked “about the art of the possible,” Wilkins explained, “he didn't really know what was possible and what wasn't on Capitol Hill.” Johnson, in comparison, “knew exactly what was possible, and how to get it.”

Johnson orchestrated a “no holds barred” campaign for a civil rights bill untainted by compromise. He enlisted the help of NAACP lobbyist Clarence Maurice Mitchell, Jr., and the formative Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), a broad coalition of veteran lobbyists representing labor, church, and liberal groups. He held press conferences, directly enlisting the public in this great effort, and brought the full weight of his power and persuasive abilities to secure the votes of doubtful congressmen and senators. The civil rights bill passed the House of Representatives on February 10, 1964, and, after much arm-twisting and ego stroking, won Senate approval late in June. On July 2, 1964, Johnson signed the bill into law.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in public facilities and employment; authorized the attorney general to initiate suits to enforce school integration; and allowed the withholding of federal funds to noncomplying schools. While the legislation was directed specifically at removing the barriers to equal access and opportunity that affected African Americans, the law vastly expanded the scope of federal protection of the rights of women and other minority groups who experienced discrimination. Fearful that the issue of voting rights would sink the legislation, however, the president and his allies in Congress postponed action in that arena.

Freedom Summer. In Mississippi, while efforts to register black voters stalled, the Congress of Federated Organizations launched Freedom Vote in the fall of 1963. More than 80,000 blacks participated in this mock election campaign and voted for unofficial Freedom Party candidates. The Freedom Vote enabled many black Mississippians who had never before voted to have the experience of casting a ballot, while demonstrating that despite white claims to the contrary, blacks were interested in voting. But it was clear that more aggressive action was needed. Bob Moses recalled that by the end of 1963, COFO organizers “were exhausted … they were butting up against a stone wall, [with] no breakthroughs.”

In an effort to revive a flagging movement, COFO launched the Summer Project in 1964, which brought hundreds of student volunteers, mostly white, into Mississippi to participate in a massive voter registration drive, with the expectation that the media would follow. White Mississippi prepared as if they were expecting an invasion. Freedom Summer, as it became known, was punctuated with violence and terrorism, as well as with the dramatic growth of black political participation—from the abduction and murder of three civil rights workers (including James Earl Chaney) in June to the establishment of a new party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP sent a full delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention, challenging the seating of the delegation representing Mississippi's all-white party. The failure of the MFDP to win its challenge, and the way in which the president and key liberal Democrats attempted to undermine that challenge, left many blacks disillusioned with the national Democratic Party. Still, the MFDP challenge prepared the way for the expansion of black political enfranchisement in Mississippi and led to major revisions in the Democratic Party convention rules.

Sit-In in North Carolina. Sit-ins, such as the one seen here from 1960, were a popular, visible, and often effective means for peacefully fighting against discrimination in places of public accommodation.

(Library of Congress.)

Voting Rights Act of 1965. After Lyndon Johnson's landslide win over Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election, the Justice Department began preparing legislation aimed at voting rights. The Southern movement ensured that the issue

moved to the top of the president's agenda, and the final battleground was Selma, Alabama. SNCC organizers had been working with the Dallas County Voters League in Selma for nearly two years when Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC arrived in Selma in January 1965. King began a series of marches aimed at bringing media attention to the violence and discrimination that barred blacks from the polls. After several police attacks on marchers and the murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson by a police officer, King planned to lead a march to Montgomery, the state capital, and to petition Governor George Wallace directly. On March 7, as the marchers attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were clubbed by police officers on horseback and driven back across the bridge. The scene flashed across the country on the nightly news. Bloody Sunday, as it was named, mobilized public opinion in support of federal legislation, and Johnson acted swiftly.

The president introduced a comprehensive voting rights bill to Congress on March 15 with a speech that was televised across the nation. “Their cause must be our cause, too,” Johnson said. “Because it's not just Negroes, but it's really all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.” Borrowing the words of the movement's anthem, he concluded, “And, we shall overcome.” Five days later, with federal troops and marshals standing by, King led marchers on the four-day-long march to Montgomery. An estimated 25,000 people had joined the trek by the time the marchers reached the capital. On August 6, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which provided federal supervision of voter registration practices, effectively opening up the polls to African Americans throughout the South for the first time since the end of Reconstruction.

In the Aftermath

The enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 reinforced the guarantees of full citizenship provided for in the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution that had been added nearly a century earlier, and marked the end of the Jim Crow system in the South. The desegregation of public facilities was quickly implemented, and the rapid increase in black voting had far-reaching consequences for politics in the South, and for the nation as well. With the enforcement powers of the federal government greatly enhanced, the desegregation of public schools proceeded steadily, although “white flight” and the proliferation of private schools often made integration an elusive goal.

The fall of Jim Crow in the South removed the most extreme manifestation of racial discrimination and inequality, only to reveal deeply entrenched patterns of racial discrimination in the fabric of national life. For African Americans segregated in Northern cities and locked into poverty, the gains of the Southern movement had little direct relevance. Five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, black frustration erupted into nearly a week of rioting in the Watts section of Los Angeles; urban disturbances and rebellions followed in other cities over the next three years. In 1968 the National Committee on Civil Disorders (also known as the Kerner Commission), appointed by the president, described “a nation moving towards two societies—one black, one white, separate and unequal.”

The Civil Rights Movement vastly expanded the parameters of American democracy and the guarantees of citizenship, while also raising new challenges in an ongoing struggle to advance racial and economic justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., carried his efforts forward in very different settings: supporting challenges to residential discrimination in Chicago; protesting America's involvement in Vietnam; aiding striking garbage workers in Memphis; and developing plans for a Poor People's March on Washington, which went forward after his assassination in 1968. At the same time, the rallying cry for “Black Power” eclipsed the integrationist thrust of the early 1960s, focusing renewed attention on black political and economic empowerment, while heightened black consciousness and racial pride found expression in the cultural renaissance of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Although the Civil Rights Movement did not end racism in the United States, it did outlaw discrimination and guarantee basic rights to African Americans. In the decades since the enactment of civil rights legislation, blacks have exercised significant influence at the polls, electing African American mayors, state legislators, and members of Congress. Affirmative action policies have been developed to subvert racial barriers to education and jobs. Government programs instituted in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement helped to cut the black poverty rate from 55 percent in 1959 to 32 percent in 1969; federal programs in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a three-fold increase in the black middle class. Even so, patterns of discrimination, such issues as high rates of incarceration for black men, are still widely evident and point to areas in which racist assumptions continue to influence social policy.

See also American Electoral Politics, Blacks in; Antilynching Movement; Kerner Report; Labor Unions in the United States; Little Rock Crisis, 1957; March on Washington, 1963; Military, Blacks in the American; Separate But Equal Doctrine; Sit-In; Watts Riot of 1965; World War I and African Americans; World War II and African Americans.

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