

In the field of public education the doctrine of  
“separate but equal” has no place.

## **6 The Civil Rights Era: 1946 to 1965**

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U.S. SUPREME COURT

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954

When World War II came to an end in 1945, most black Americans found themselves still living firmly under the yoke of racial segregation. Although the “New Deal” years of President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw a significant number of northern black voters convert from Republican to Democrat, black participation in American public life nevertheless remained limited, and segregationist practices were widespread—not just in the South but even in big northern cities.

The growing black presence in the northern Democratic Party, however, helped persuade both President Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman, that access for blacks to equal employment opportunities in the government sector deserved protection in the form of presidential executive orders. Although these measures were generally more symbolic than substantive, they helped send a clear message that racial discrimination and segregation were morally wrong. That same message was also highlighted by the publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s classic study of race in America, *An American Dilemma* (1944).

One notable influence on the immediate postwar racial climate was the return from military service of thousands of black veterans who, even in segregated military units,

had been exposed to more liberal racial climates in other countries than they had experienced in the United States. These young men often manifested an active and challenging interest in civil rights reform, and even in the South many of them set out to win an active place in local affairs for themselves and other black citizens. Although in 1940 the best surveys counted only 151,000 registered black voters in the eleven southern states of the old Confederacy, by 1947 the total had jumped to 595,000 and by 1952 it was up to 1,008,000.

housing discrimination case, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, that lower courts and government bodies could not enforce exclusionary residence agreements in place in many neighborhoods all across the country that were aimed at preventing blacks from purchasing properties. Again the importance of the case was in large part symbolic, but it provided further evidence that the Supreme Court was more responsive to demands for equal rights than other levels or branches of the government. President Truman had appointed a civil rights study commission that submitted a strong report calling for progress in civil rights

## “separate” could never be “equal.”

Even the last figure, however, represented only 20 percent of black southerners of voting age.

The reentry of blacks into political participation across the South had been significantly assisted by a 1944 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Smith v. Allwright*, outlawing what was known as the “white primary”—internal Democratic Party primary elections in which only white voters could participate. Because in most southern locales the only political competition that existed occurred within the Democratic Party, even the minority of black voters who actually were registered were effectively disenfranchised by “white primaries.” Although some southern Democrats sought to obstruct the implementation of the Court’s ruling, by the early 1950s black voters had more influence in the South than they had had since the 1880s. Perhaps even more important, as more and more black Southerners migrated to the North during the 1940s and early 1950s as the increasing mechanization of southern agriculture further and further reduced the need for field workers, the northern black vote also started to become a more significant force in electoral politics, with both Democrats and Republicans striving to recruit these new arrivals.

*Smith v. Allwright* was not the only significant civil rights victory in the Supreme Court, however. Four years later, in 1948, the Court ruled in a

for African Americans. Truman had also ordered the U.S. military to eliminate segregationist practices, but the president had no prospects for getting civil rights legislation through the U.S. Congress, in part because so many senior congressional Democrats were southern segregationists.

Even prior to 1948, a number of civil rights lawyers had begun planning a major litigation effort premised on the assumption that the U.S. Supreme Court, when faced with persuasive evidence of the effects of segregation, would rule against segregationist practices whether or not it formally abandoned its 1896 endorsement of “separate but equal” in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The initial area of concentration was higher education, because most major public universities in the South were completely segregated—as were virtually all public schools in the region. Although public colleges for blacks existed in each state, in most southern and “border” states black students seeking many forms of graduate education, including law school training, simply had to go to other parts of the United States in order to have access to such degree programs. Beginning with a 1938 Supreme Court decision in a case from Missouri where the only public law school was for whites only, and then in a 1948 decision concerning Oklahoma, where the only law school in the state similarly excluded blacks, lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—the NAACP—took their initial steps toward showing the Court that in the field of education, “separate” could never be “equal.”

Then in two cases decided by the Supreme Court in 1950, the NAACP’s attack on segregated education made significant strides. In another law school case, the state of Texas had attempted to argue that a small, newly created, and inadequately staffed law school for black students ought to obviate any constitutional requirement to admit

blacks into the law school of the all-white University of Texas, far and away the leading educational institution in the state. In the second case, the state of Oklahoma had grudgingly admitted a black graduate student to the principal state university, but it had then required him to study and eat in segregated facilities and to sit in separate, fenced-off alcoves during his classroom sessions. Although the unanimous Supreme Court decisions

With particular encouragement from one of the three trial judges, the NAACP attorneys explicitly indicated that it was the very practice of racial segregation, and not simply the resulting inequalities, that ought to be expressly prohibited by the U.S. Constitution. The same frontal challenge inescapably emerged in the other cases as well, and by the fall of 1952 all four of these cases, along with a fifth from the District of Columbia, had progressed to the U.S. Supreme Court. After first hearing argument in late 1952,

## 'Brown v. Board of Education'

in both cases carefully avoided making any direct comments about *Plessy* or articulating any broad-gauge condemnation of segregation, they provided two additional unmistakable declarations that equal educational opportunities could not be provided within a racially segregated framework.

Initially the NAACP lawyers, captained by Thurgood Marshall, who fifteen years later would become the first black Supreme Court justice in American history, had felt that higher education, rather than elementary and secondary education, was the preferable target for their antisegregation lawsuits. But in many counties across the South, particularly in rural counties well-removed from larger cities, segregated elementary and secondary schools for African Americans were not only vastly inferior to those for whites but were often so poorly housed and staffed as to be almost unrecognizable as educational institutions. In a number of such locales, black parents and ministers began to press for increased funding and improved facilities for their children, but members of white schoolboards, believing that any improvements in black schools would have to be funded out of a diminution of the resources available to white ones, brushed the requests aside.

Out of such nascent local efforts by concerned black parents, however, a number of requests for lawsuits came to Marshall and his NAACP colleagues. One case emerged in Virginia, another in the small border state of Delaware, and another in the city of Topeka in the largely midwestern state of Kansas. Perhaps the most promising, however, emerged from an intensely segregated rural county in South Carolina, where the evidence of gross inequality under segregation was overwhelming.

the Court, uncertain of precisely how to handle such a direct challenge to so deeply ingrained a southern practice as racially segregated education, held the cases over for reargument in the fall of 1953. By that time a new Chief Justice, Earl Warren, previously the Republican governor of California, had joined the Court, and following that second argument, Warren carefully took the lead in establishing unanimous agreement among the nine justices that the only proper result was a direct and low-key opinion declaring that racial segregation in education was both immoral and unconstitutional. Seven months later, on May 17, 1954, that unanimous opinion was issued in the name of the lead case from Kansas, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

The *Brown* decision was brief, powerful, and purposely incomplete. Holding that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place," the Court explicitly ruled that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." But the Court frankly acknowledged that how to pursue desegregation—how to remedy the unconstitutional racial discrimination that the schools had practiced for decades—was neither simple nor immediately clear. And so it set the cases for further argument in the subsequent term of court on the question of implementation. One year and two weeks after the initial landmark decision, on May 31, 1955, Warren issued another brief and unanimous opinion for the Court stressing that the elimination of racial discrimination in public education could best be overseen by the federal district courts closest to each of the four school districts and instructing those local judges to pursue nondiscriminatory operation of the public schools "with all deliberate speed."

Without a doubt, *Brown* was a landmark decision and the most important Supreme Court ruling in almost a century—arguably the most important ruling in the Court's entire history. Immediate reaction was somewhat muted,

however, for although ardent southern segregationists of course expressed displeasure and criticized the justices for pointing toward integrated schools, which many in the South declared they would never accept, no fury or angry rebellion was initially manifest. The actual decision affected immediately only the five areas that had been involved in the *Brown* cases; black plaintiffs would have to bring scores of new lawsuits if they wanted the principles of *Brown* to be applied to the hundreds of other formally segregated school systems across the South. Although black America understandably welcomed and exulted in the *Brown* ruling, again the response was modest, because most black participants in the effort that had led to *Brown* appreciated full well that a Supreme Court decree—even a unanimous one—would not bring about racial equality in education or in social relations in general.

But *Brown* undeniably marked the real beginning of America's civil rights revolution, even if the long-term importance it would have was not immediately evident in the aftermath of the decision. For black America, *Brown* was a clear and powerful signal that at least one top-ranked institution in white society had fully grasped and endorsed the moral correctness of the black litigants' assertion that racial discrimination and segregation had no place in American law or public life. That signal was as potentially empowering as it was encouraging, and it was a signal that undeniably hastened and energized the incipient activism for racial change that had been locally manifest in so many black communities in the years after World War II.

As significant as any place in which the Supreme Court's moral signal was welcomed was the black community of Montgomery, Alabama. In later years the onset of black Montgomery's boycott of segregated and abusive seating practices on the city's public buses in December 1955 would come to share equal status with the *Brown* decision, marking the beginning of the modern black freedom struggle, but the Montgomery boycott could not have occurred without earlier roots, and the intertwining of those roots with the moral power of *Brown* is an instructive and important linkage.

The actual onset of the December 5, 1955, black community boycott of Montgomery's public buses was occasioned by the arrest on December 1

of a humble and well-respected black seamstress, Rosa Parks, for refusing to surrender her seat on a crowded bus to a newly boarding white rider. The idea of a boycott by black riders to protest discriminatory treatment on the buses, however, had been discussed by middle-class women activists in black Montgomery for a number of years, and in May 1954 news of the *Brown* decision had helped stimulate the president of their group, the Women's Political Council (WPC), to write to Montgomery's mayor and politely make it clear that a boycott would occur if improvements did not take place. "Three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes," WPC President Jo Ann Robinson, an English professor at all-black Alabama State College, told the mayor. "If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate."

Although discussions continued, and although several driver-passenger incidents led to a heightened desire to call such a boycott, only on December 1, 1955, as word of Parks's arrest spread through black Montgomery, did Robinson and other leading activists resolve that the time for action had indeed arrived.

Robinson and her female colleagues were largely teachers, whose jobs and incomes could be terminated by white Alabama officials if they so desired. Montgomery's other senior black activist, railroad worker E. D. Nixon, was a courageous man but with only a modest formal education. More important, for the activists to rally the support and participation of Montgomery's thousands of black citizens, the vigorous support of the city's black churches—and access to their sanctuaries for meeting space—would be necessary. Not only could the ministers of these churches help rally the support of their congregations, but they were men whose jobs and salaries were controlled wholly from within the black community, hence making them less vulnerable to white economic retaliation.

As the boycott got under way, the ministers stepped to the fore and the initial activists remained somewhat in the background. Two young pastors of highly important churches, who were also known as impressive speakers, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy, became the principal spokespersons for the newly formed boycott group, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). White city officials and bus company executives showed no serious interest in negotiating an early end to the protest by granting the black citizens' requests for improved seating practices, which considerably surprised the black leadership. But the black community soon had an impressively well-organized car pool system up and running so that black citizens could continue to dispense with public buses with relatively little inconvenience. Black support of the boycott was virtually



total, and within several weeks the lack of patronage of public transportation made Robinson's earlier prediction come true as the bus company was forced to raise fares and cut back service.

In early 1956 the black leadership explicitly demanded fully desegregated seating on buses, and the remarkable black community unity began to draw national news attention. White Montgomery remained intransigent, however, and at the end of January, white segregationists exploded a small bomb on the front porch of the house occupied by the MIA's president, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. No one was injured, but the incident drew much more national press coverage to Montgomery than the boycott previously had received. In addition, some of that coverage focused on the persuasive advocacy of nonviolence, of "loving one's enemies," that King had articulated to the angry crowd that had gathered after the bombing, much as he had done in church rallies earlier in the boycott.

King's growing status both locally and outside Montgomery was given yet another boost by white Montgomery in mid-February, when local authorities indicted King and scores of other boycott participants for supposedly violating an obscure statute aimed at prohibiting boycotts in labor disputes. King's ensuing trial on that charge drew even more national and some international attention to the ongoing protest, and the car pool system remained in operation as most of white Montgomery continued to disdain any talk of compromising its tenets of segregation.

Immediately after the King bombing, the MIA filed suit in federal court, alleging that the city's maintenance of segregated bus seating practices violated the clear principle of *Brown*, and in June of 1956 two of three judges on the local federal court agreed, concluding that *Brown's* mandate necessarily applied to government-sponsored segregation in transportation as well as education. But Montgomery city officials immediately appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, and in the interim the buses remained segregated and black Montgomery remained dependent on its private, voluntary car pool system.

Five months later, in November, the Supreme Court affirmed the lower court decision, and in several weeks its formal mandate was delivered to Montgomery. Only then did city and bus company officials finally institute desegregated seating. With King and Abernathy in the lead, black Montgomery returned to the buses, as civil rights supporters across the country celebrated the achievement.

The successful Montgomery boycott, like the *Brown* case, symbolized a tremendous step forward for black Southerners. Again the importance was less in the immediate tangible changes that had occurred than in the larger political message that was conveyed. Although the NAACP's lawyers emphasized that the actual successful resolution of the boycott had, like *Brown*, depended on achieving a Supreme Court ruling, the real meaning and importance of Montgomery for almost all nonlawyers lay in the stark political message that an ordinary group of citizens, with no initial outside support and no particular organizational expertise, could through simple unity and dedication demonstrate an almost revolutionary degree of grassroots political activism—which ultimately prevailed.

King and Abernathy were not alone in appreciating that the Montgomery triumph heralded a political model that could very well prove productive in other southern cities, and with assistance from other southern black clergymen and from a small circle of northern advisers they announced the creation of a new region-wide organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Although a number of NAACP leaders made no secret of their belief that one black civil rights organization was enough, King and his ministerial colleagues hoped to reach beyond bus desegregation campaigns to stimulate new levels of black voter registration across the South. At a Washington march called to commemorate the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision and to press Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower to take action supportive of civil rights efforts, King delivered his first significant national address and identified the right to vote as the linchpin for freedom that black Southerners had to attain in order to get on the road to full equality.

But much of the white South, as the 1956 events in Montgomery had demonstrated, had no intention of allowing desegregation of schools, buses, and other facilities to spread quickly across the region without fierce and active opposition. Although Congress in September 1957 managed to pass a modest and limited Civil Rights Act, the first such piece of legislation in the twentieth century, arguably the most significant civil rights story of the year happened in Little Rock, Arkansas, where local segregationists, aided by Arkansas's segregationist governor Orval Faubus, obstructed the scheduled token desegregation of a

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"5,000 at Meeting Outline Boycott; Bullet Clips Bus," *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 6, 1955. Headline concerning the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, December 1955.

Serial and Government Publications Division, General Collections.

city high school, one of the first such schools to actually face up to implementing the meaning of *Brown*. Eventually President Eisenhower was forced to send a detachment of federal soldiers into Little Rock in order to ensure that nine black students would be able to attend peacefully the formally all-white Central High School, but some months later the U.S. Supreme Court used a case growing out of the Little Rock turmoil as an opportunity to issue a strong and powerful reaffirmation of *Brown*. That declaration notwithstanding, however, relatively little actual school desegregation took place between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. In many rural locales southern blacks were simply too vulnerable to white power and pressure to want to launch battles to desegregate local schools, and even in most southern towns in which black parents did take the initiative, white school boards successfully delayed taking any meaningful action. Some local federal judges, leery of stimulating another potentially violent crisis like the one in Little Rock, also chose to tread water rather than order quick or far-reaching local school compliance with the principles of *Brown*.

By the end of the 1950s in the South, it almost appeared as if white intransigence in the face of occurrences such as *Brown*, Montgomery, and Little Rock had to some extent fought the new black activism to a draw. Martin Luther King, Jr., had certainly emerged as a new national voice for southern activists, but neither SCLC nor the NAACP had generated any notable progress across the South during 1958 and 1959, and white opposition had significantly reduced the rate of increase in black southern voter registration. King resolved that he would move from Montgomery to Atlanta and devote more of his time to civil rights work. Then, with little prior warning, the civil rights log-jam suddenly broke open in February of 1960 when a new wave of antisegregation protests sprang up among black southern college students.

The "sit-in movement," as the student protests were accurately labeled, began in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four young male undergraduates decided that something ought to be done about the whites-only lunch counters in variety and department stores that otherwise pretended to welcome black customers. Although such stores often also featured segregated restrooms and whites-only water fountains, the discrimina-

tory lunch counters could be targeted in a simple, direct, and utterly nonviolent way: Simply by sitting down in an empty seat and remaining there as waitresses ignored them or refused to serve them, the black students could both offer a quiet protest and also heavily cut into the counters' receipts.

The sit-in tactic spread first from Greensboro to other North Carolina cities with black colleges, and then moved to black college towns across the southeast with impressive speed. In many stores managers simply closed down their food service at the first sign of a sit-in, and in some cities segregationist hoodlums, with active or passive police connivance, harassed the protesters by pouring mustard, ketchup, and sugar on them, or more brutally by beating them. Despite the white response, however, the rapidly spreading sit-in campaign brought black college students into the civil rights scene to a vastly greater degree than ever had been the case before. Adult organizations such as SCLC, the NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) all sought to assist and win the allegiance of the new student activists. Within just a few weeks' time, however, more than one hundred student sit-in representatives from across the South convened in Raleigh, North Carolina, for a meeting that signaled the founding of what soon came to be called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

The creation of SNCC represented a new stage in the black freedom struggle, much as the sit-ins themselves undeniably kicked off America's experience of the 1960s. Not only did SNCC and the sit-ins add a new generation to the civil rights effort, but they brought into the movement a cohort of nonviolent "shock-troops" whose youth afforded them more freedom to devote themselves to civil rights work than did adults with family and job responsibilities.

King and other adult activists appreciated the new energy the students brought to the movement, but the students themselves were wary of allowing the older activists—whether the NAACP or King—to call the shots. Adult-student tensions were highlighted in a fall 1960 sit-in effort in Atlanta, where those arrested included an initially reluctant King. The 1960 presidential election and the victory of John F. Kennedy meant more to the future of civil rights than those internecine differences.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was among those who hoped for a new degree of presidential support for civil rights with the advent of Kennedy. Little Rock aside, President

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Daisy Bates, State Press, Little Rock, Arkansas, to Roy Wilkins, December 17, 1957.  
Autograph letter. NAACP Collection, Manuscript Division. Courtesy Arkansas State Press of  
Kearney Publishing Group, Inc.

Eisenhower had said as little as he could on the subject, whereas Kennedy during his presidential campaign had given repeated signs that he intended to be a special friend to black Americans. Once in office, however, and especially in the context of being faced with a congressional situation in which southern Democratic segregationists still controlled disproportionate power in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, Kennedy adopted a decidedly low-key approach to civil rights as well. King, among others, sought to keep his hopes up, but James Farmer and his colleagues in CORE resolved to take direct action of an even more dramatic sort than the students had employed a year earlier. Identifying continued segregation in interstate transportation facilities—primarily southern bus stations serving long-distance routes—as a particularly egregious example of ongoing racism that federal government authority ought to tackle and eliminate, the CORE activists mapped out what they called a “Freedom Ride”—a two-week bus trip across the South by an integrated group of riders who would “test” or challenge any segregated facilities they encountered. Starting in Washington, D.C., they made it their goal to arrive in New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 17, 1961, the seventh anniversary of *Brown*.

The Freedom Riders encountered some segregationist obstacles and troubles in South Carolina, but only when their buses entered eastern Alabama did they experience serious terrorist violence. Outside the city of Anniston one bus was attacked and burned, and the escaping riders were beaten as they fled. Some time later, when the second bus arrived in the major city of Birmingham, a long-time Ku Klux Klan stronghold in which city police were rightfully believed to be in league with the segregationist terrorists, those riders were also attacked and assaulted. These events brought the federal Department of Justice, presided over by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, into the situation, and only with Justice Department prodding did Alabama and bus company officials agree to allow the bloodied but unbowed riders to head on to their next city, Montgomery.

When the riders’ bus arrived in Montgomery, however, no city police were anywhere to be seen, and yet another Klan mob attacked the riders, again inflicting several serious injuries. Two days later, when the riders and the MIA attempted to hold a rally at Reverend Ralph Abernathy’s down-

town church, another white mob surrounded the church, bombarded it with bricks and rocks, and set fire to at least one auto. The rally participants feared for their lives as a small number of federal marshals held off the mob until a force of National Guard soldiers arrived to take charge. Two days later, under elaborate protection, one busload of riders left Montgomery headed west to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi, where they were immediately arrested and incarcerated in the state penitentiary.

The Freedom Ride was a bloody but undeniable political success for the activists, because it graphically conveyed to the American public just how great a level of violence southern segregationists were prepared to use to halt antisegregation initiatives. The lack of federal support during the Freedom Ride left many civil rights activists questioning how heart-felt a commitment to civil rights progress the Kennedy brothers actually held, but for the students who were active in SNCC the riders’ experiences were yet one more sign that an intensified offensive against southern segregation could not be postponed. Several SNCC members, led by Robert Moses, had already made a commitment to pursue organizing efforts in southwestern Mississippi near the town of McComb, and by the end of the summer a second SNCC project, centered in the southwest Georgia city of Albany, was also under way.

By late 1961 Albany had become the site of the most intensive southern civil rights effort since the Montgomery boycott five years earlier. SNCC workers, in conjunction with local NAACP activists and with King’s SCLC, generated a significant black community commitment to picketing and marches aimed at persuading Albany’s white leadership to eliminate formal segregation from everyday public life. But white Albany did not budge. Mass arrests depleted both the emotional and the financial reserves of the black community, and King’s SCLC pulled back. After several relatively quiet months in the spring of 1962, mass demonstrations and mass arrests resumed in mid-summer, but again white Albany stonewalled, even in the face of a public declaration by President Kennedy that the white officials ought to negotiate a compromise settlement. By the end of the summer the protests were moribund, and the national news media was heralding Albany as the first major defeat for civil rights proponents.

To Martin Luther King, Jr., that verdict was especially painful, and throughout the fall and winter of 1962 to 1963 King pondered how to recoup. In October, federal troops again had to be deployed after violent white rioters sought to block the admission of the University of Mississippi’s first black student, James Meredith, but most signs indicated that President Kennedy, like the rest of the federal government, preferred to deal with civil



rights issues as little as possible. In early 1963 King and his SCLC colleagues resolved that the issue had to be forced. To do so, they carefully outlined a major protest campaign for the hard-core city of Birmingham, and in April their effort was launched. It began slowly, but within several weeks, much as they had anticipated, Birmingham's hot-tempered and violently segregationist public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, began to live up to his reputation by turning high-pressure fire hoses and snarling police dogs loose on the protesters.

By early May, pictures of the Birmingham conflict were in newspapers and on televisions across the country and around the world. Moderate white segregationists, upset with the effects of Connor's conduct, began quiet negotiations with the civil rights forces. Kennedy administration representatives encouraged such discussions. As protest battles threatened to intensify even further, a modest agreement was reached, which mandated that downtown department stores would desegregate their facilities and that at least some black applicants would be hired for what previously had been whites-only store jobs. A Klan bombing of a civil rights gathering spot threatened to undo the accord, but pressure from the Kennedy administration helped keep it on track. Gradually the situation quieted, but the events of May 1963 had fundamentally changed the American civil rights scene.

King and other national civil rights figures had hoped for two years that the Kennedy administration would press Congress for enactment of a comprehensive and powerful civil rights bill, and a number of activists, including A. Philip Randolph, a senior civil rights figure whose political activism went back to the 1920s, revived the idea of staging a mass march in Washington to call for both presidential and congressional action. But the events of Birmingham had altered the Kennedy brothers' perceptions as well, and work on just such a bill soon got under way. In June President Kennedy gave a nationally televised, powerful speech calling for civil rights progress and declared that racial equality was first and foremost a moral issue. That very same evening, the NAACP's top activist in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, was gunned down by a racist sniper outside his home in Jackson. Within days the organized civil rights leadership—King, Randolph, the NAACP, SNCC, and CORE—announced firm plans for a

"March on Washington" on August 28, and with some apprehension the Kennedy administration decided to cooperate with the protest.

The images of Birmingham had helped stimulate new black activism in scores of towns all across the country, as northern demonstrations of support supplemented protest efforts in many previously quiet southern cities. In the summer of 1963 racial change was on the front pages of American newspapers more than ever before, and for many participants and observers, anticipation built as the date of the August 28 March on Washington neared.



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"Mahalia Jackson at the May 17, 1957, Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, D.C."  
Silver gelatin print. NAACP Collection: Prints and Photographs Division.

When the day arrived, estimates of the peaceful crowd reached upwards of 200,000, with perhaps 25 percent of the participants being white. Civil rights tacticians had pulled off a superb logistical achievement in producing such a smoothly organized event. The main program was a series of songs and speeches delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, with the penultimate oration by Martin Luther King, Jr. For most people who heard it then or read it later, King's address remained the most notable of all of King's memorable speeches. "I have a dream," King repeatedly intoned in his peroration, "a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by



the content of their character." The crowd response was enthusiastic, and the media coverage a public relations coup for civil rights forces.

In retrospect, the March on Washington was as significant an emotional high point as any the civil rights struggle would experience. Barely two weeks later, however, a Klan bombing of the Birmingham church that had been one of the principal meeting spots during the May protests resulted in the deaths of four young black school-girls. Exultation over the Washington success was immediately overshadowed by fury and anger over these tragic killings. At the same time, little significant progress was being made with Kennedy's comprehensive civil rights bill. On November 22, Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas succeeded to the presidency. Less complicit in segregationist policies than other southern members of Congress, Johnson had played a moderately progressive role in the passage of the very modest Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, but he surprised virtually everyone when, within days of taking the oath of office, Johnson firmly declared that passage of Kennedy's civil rights bill would be one of his top priorities as president.

Over the next six months congressional work on the bill was a major story. King's SCLC became involved in a protest effort in the historic Florida town of St. Augustine, and SNCC's young organizers made a major commitment toward staging a sizable "Summer Project" all across the state of Mississippi. In June, just two weeks before Johnson signed the Kennedy bill into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, three of the Mississippi civil rights workers disappeared. Although their dead bodies were not discovered until August, hardly anyone doubted that they had been killed by Klan terrorists.

Although the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment and in all forms of public accommodations across the United States, was the most significant legal achievement for civil rights forces since *Brown*, the killings and other terroristic violence in Mississippi had a far greater—and tremendously disheartening—impact on younger civil rights activists. The Mississippi summer project sent an integrated delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention to challenge the seating of the traditionally all-white "regular" Mississippi delegation. The integrated "Freedom" Democrats

anticipated a favorable reception from what was a largely pro-civil rights political party, but President Johnson, fearful of his upcoming presidential race against ultra-conservative Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, refused to allow the Democratic leadership to give the integrated Mississippians anything beyond honorific status at the convention. That treatment led many of the activists to rethink their expectations that significant progress could be attained by working through the partisan electoral process. As King and his SCLC colleagues turned their sights toward a major voting rights initiative, many younger activists, particularly those who had worked a year or more in dangerous and intense locations like Mississippi, began to struggle with feelings of "burn out," and some began drifting away from civil rights work.

Voting rights guarantees had been one of the few major omissions from the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and King's desire to stimulate creation and congressional passage of a new act that would mandate tough voting rights enforcement took the form of a protest campaign that the SCLC organized in Selma, Alabama. Jim Clark, the county sheriff, was a lawman with a reputation for dramatic and gratuitous violence, and within several weeks of the campaign's early 1965 kickoff, Clark began behaving true to form as black protesters marched to the county courthouse, seeking fairer and easier voter registration procedures. On Sunday, March 7, when a column of civil rights marchers headed out from Selma toward the state capitol in Montgomery, Clark's "posse" of segregationist deputies, along with a sizable force of Alabama state troopers, attacked the marchers with nightsticks and tear gas. Scores of participants were hospitalized, and as graphic pictures of the assault spread across the country, a vociferous national uproar ensued.

Hundreds of civil rights sympathizers from around the nation headed for Selma, and President Johnson spoke out strongly against the attack. As efforts were made to negotiate safe passage for another—this time peaceful—march from Selma to Montgomery, Johnson went before the Congress to propose a powerful new voting rights bill that fulfilled virtually all of the activists' hopes. A ground-swell of national support greeted both that proposal and a triumphal march from Selma to Montgomery that was capped by another memorable King speech, but once again terroristic violence entered the picture as a northern white female participant was murdered by Klansmen while driving from Selma to Montgomery.

By early August 1965 the powerful Voting Rights Act had become law. Only a few days later, the first of the major urban riots of the late 1960s broke out in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California. When the violence

finally ended six days later, there were thirty-four people dead and property damage totaling at least \$45 million. The Watts rebellion demonstrated to King and others that the struggles and successes of the southern civil rights crusade had been only half of the battle, and that the economic obstacles and forces constraining black equality outside the South as well as within might very well be much harder to overcome than the barriers of formal, legal segregation that had begun to be toppled by court decisions and acts of Congress.

In the years after 1965, significant black electoral progress was registered in many cities and counties all across the South, as the provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act led to large increases in black voter registration and to dramatic gains in the number of black candidates elected to public office. In some locales white control remained intact, however, in part because of the relative economic powerlessness of black communities. Particularly in the political arena, however, fundamental change gradually spread across more and more of the South.

The years from 1945 to 1965 witnessed tremendous legal progress for black Americans and supplied the legal foundations that allowed for such dramatic political progress by black communities in the years after 1965. Ensuing decades would highlight again and again how incomplete the gains of the 1945 to 1965 period actually were. Yet the civil rights era represents the greatest leap forward for black Americans since the decade of the Civil War a century earlier.