The Civil Rights Movement Begins

**Main Idea** The Brown v. Board of Education ruling ignited protest and encouraged African Americans to challenge other forms of segregation.

**History and You** Do you think that one person has the power to change things for the better? Read on to learn how the courage and hard work of individuals helped reform society.

In the midst of the uproar over the Brown v. Board of Education case, Rosa Parks made her decision to challenge segregation of public transportation. Outraged by Parks’s arrest, Jo Ann Robinson, head of a local organization called the Women’s Political Council, called on African Americans to boycott Montgomery’s buses on the day Rosa Parks appeared in court.

The boycott marked the start of a new era of the civil rights movement among African Americans. Instead of limiting the fight for their rights to court cases, African Americans in large numbers began organizing protests, defying laws that required segregation, and demanding they be treated as equal to whites.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Montgomery bus boycott was a dramatic success. On the afternoon of Rosa Parks’s court appearance, several African American leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to run the boycott and to negotiate with city leaders for an end to segregation. They elected a 26-year-old pastor named Martin Luther King, Jr., to lead them.

On the evening of December 5, 1955, a meeting was held at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Dr. King was the pastor. In the deep, resonant tones and powerful phrases that characterized his speaking style, King encouraged the people to continue their protest. “There comes a time, my friends,” he said, “when people get tired of being thrown into the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair.” He cautioned, however, that the protest had to be peaceful:

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"Now let us say that we are not advocating violence. . . . The only weapon we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. If we were incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a communist nation—we couldn’t do this. If we were trapped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime—we couldn’t do this. But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right!"
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—quoted in Parting the Waters: America in the King Years

King had earned a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University. He believed that the only moral way to end segregation and racism was through nonviolent passive resistance. He told his followers, “We must use the weapon of love. We must realize that so many people are taught to hate us that they are not totally responsible for their hate.” African Americans, he urged, must say to racists: “We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”

### The Montgomery Bus Boycott

The act of one woman on a bus and the subsequent bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, brought civil rights out of the legal arena and turned it into a struggle in which ordinary Americans realized that they could make a difference. Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white man showed that even small acts of defiance could empower people to create change.

The Montgomery bus boycott, which was begun to show support for Parks, became a huge success. It started a chain reaction—the beginning of a mass movement that would dramatically change American society over the next 20 years, and bring to prominence many influential African American leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Analyzing History** Drawing Conclusions How did the bus boycott create a mass movement for change?
King drew upon the philosophy and techniques of Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, who had used nonviolent resistance effectively to challenge British rule in India. Believing in people's ability to transform themselves, King was certain that public opinion would eventually force the government to end segregation.

Stirred by King's powerful words, African Americans in Montgomery continued their boycott for over a year. Instead of riding the bus, they organized car pools or walked to work. Meanwhile, Rosa Parks's legal challenge to bus segregation worked its way through the courts. In November 1956, the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of a special three-judge panel declaring Alabama's laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional.

**African American Churches**

Martin Luther King, Jr., was not the only prominent minister in the bus boycott. Many of the other leaders were African American ministers. The boycott could not have succeeded without the support of the African American churches in the city. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, African American churches continued to play a critical role. They served as forums for many of the protests and planning meetings, and mobilized many of the volunteers for specific civil rights campaigns.

After the Montgomery bus boycott demonstrated that nonviolent protest could be successful, African American ministers led by King established the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC) in 1957. The SCLC set out to eliminate segregation from American society and to encourage African Americans to register to vote. Dr. King served as the SCLC's first president. Under his leadership, the organization challenged segregation at voting booths and in public transportation, housing, and accommodations.

**Reading Check**

**Summarizing** What role did African American churches play in the civil rights movement?
President Eisenhower sympathized with the civil rights movement and personally disagreed with segregation. Following the precedent set by President Truman, he ordered navy shipyards and veterans’ hospitals to desegregate. At the same time, however, Eisenhower disagreed with those who wanted to end segregation through protests and court rulings. He believed segregation and racism would end gradually, as values changed. With the nation in the midst of the Cold War, he worried that challenging white Southerners might divide the nation at a time when the country needed to pull together. Publicly, he refused to endorse the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Privately, he remarked, “I don’t believe you can change the hearts of men with laws or decisions.”

Although he believed that the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was wrong, Eisenhower knew he had to uphold the authority of the federal government. As a result, he became the first president since Reconstruction to send troops into the South to protect the rights of African Americans.

**Crisis in Little Rock**

In September 1957, the school board in Little Rock, Arkansas, won a court order requiring that nine African American students be admitted to Central High, a school with 2,000 white students. The governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, was known as a moderate on racial issues, but he was determined to win reelection and began to campaign as a defender of white supremacy. He ordered troops from the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the nine students from entering the school. The next day, as the National Guard troops sur-

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**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Little Rock School Crisis, Arkansas, 1957

In 1957 Elizabeth Eckford (left center) was one of nine courageous African American students determined to integrate Central High School in Little Rock.

1. **Explaining** Why do you think the crowd is shouting at Elizabeth Eckford?
2. **Identifying Central Issues** Why did President Eisenhower send troops to Little Rock?

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**Analyzing VISUALS**

- In 1957 Elizabeth Eckford (left center) was one of nine courageous African American students determined to integrate Central High School in Little Rock.
- Federal troops protect African American students at Central High.

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*Arkansas governor Orval Faubus sought to block the school’s integration. He is shown holding up a paper making his argument that the federal government was abusing its power in forcibly integrating Central High in Little Rock.*
rounded the school, an angry white mob joined the troops to protest and to intimidate the students trying to register.

Faubus had used the armed forces of a state to oppose the federal government—the first such challenge to the Constitution since the Civil War. Eisenhower knew that he could not allow Faubus to defy the federal government. After a conference between Eisenhower and Faubus proved fruitless, the district court ordered the governor to remove the troops. Instead of ending the crisis, however, Faubus simply left the school to the mob. After the African American students entered the building, angry whites beat at least two African American reporters and broke many of the school’s windows.

The violence finally convinced President Eisenhower that he had to act. Federal authority had to be upheld. He immediately ordered the Army to send troops to Little Rock. In addition, he federalized the Arkansas National Guard. By nightfall, 1,000 soldiers of the elite 101st Airborne Division had arrived. By 5:00 A.M., the troops had encircled the school, bayonets ready. A few hours later, the nine African American students arrived in an army station wagon and walked into the high school. Federal authority had been upheld, but the troops had to stay in Little Rock for the rest of the school year.

Officials in Little Rock, however, continued to resist integration. Before the start of the following school year, Governor Faubus ordered the three public high schools in Little Rock closed. Steps to integrate the schools in Little Rock resumed only in 1959.

New Civil Rights Legislation

In the same year that the Little Rock crisis began, Congress passed the first civil rights law since Reconstruction. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was intended to protect the right of African Americans to vote. Eisenhower believed firmly in the right to vote, and he viewed it as his responsibility to protect voting rights. He also knew that if he sent a civil rights bill to Congress, conservative Southern Democrats would try to block the legislation. In 1956 he did send the bill to Congress, hoping not only to split the Democratic Party but also to convince more African Americans to vote Republican.

Several Southern senators did try to stop the Civil Rights Act of 1957, but the Senate majority leader, Democrat Lyndon Johnson, put together a compromise that enabled the act to pass. Although its final form was much weaker than originally intended, the act still brought the power of the federal government into the civil rights debate. It created a civil rights division within the Department of Justice and gave it the authority to seek court injunctions against anyone interfering with the right to vote. It also created the United States Commission on Civil Rights to investigate allegations of denial of voting rights. After the bill passed, the SCLC announced a campaign to register 2 million new African American voters.

Vocabulary

Main Ideas
2. Explaining What was CORE and what were some of its tactics?
3. Identifying What event set off the civil rights movement of the 1950s?
4. Summarizing Why did Eisenhower send the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock, Arkansas?

Critical Thinking
5. Big Ideas Why did the role of the federal government in civil rights enforcement change?
6. Organizing Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the efforts made to end segregation.

7. Analyzing Visuals Study the photograph of Elizabeth Eckford on page 628. Describe Eckford’s demeanor compared to those around her. What might this indicate about her character?

Writing About History
8. Expository Writing Assume the role of an African American soldier returning from World War II. Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper describing your expectations of civil rights.
In the early 1960s, the struggle for civil rights intensified. African American citizens and white supporters created organizations that directed protests, targeted specific inequalities, and attracted the attention of the mass media and the government.

**The Sit-in Movement**

**MAIN Idea** African American students staged sit-ins and formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to organize efforts for desegregation and voter registration throughout the South.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Would you risk your personal safety to participate in a sit-in? Read on to learn of the response of young people to the sit-in movement of the early 1960s.

In the fall of 1959, four young African Americans—Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., David Richmond, and Franklin McCain—enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, an African American college in Greensboro. The four freshmen spent evenings talking about the civil rights movement. In January 1960, McNeil suggested a sit-in at the whites-only lunch counter in the nearby Woolworth’s department store.

“All of us were afraid,” Richmond later recalled, “but we went and did it.” On February 1, 1960, the four friends entered the Woolworth’s. They purchased school supplies and then sat at the lunch counter and ordered coffee. When they were refused service, Blair asked, “I beg your pardon, but you just served us at [the checkout] counter. Why can’t we be served at the counter here?” The students stayed at the counter until it closed, and then announced that they would sit at the counter every day until they were given the same service as white customers.

As they left the store, the four were excited. McNeil recalled, “I just felt I had powers within me, a superhuman strength that would come forward.” McCain was also energized, saying, “I probably felt better that day than I’ve ever felt in my life.”

News of the daring sit-in at the Woolworth’s store spread quickly across Greensboro. The following day, 29 African American students arrived at Woolworth’s determined to sit at the counter until served. By the end of the week, over 300 students were taking part.

Starting with just four students, a new mass movement for civil rights had begun. Within two months, sit-ins had spread to 54 cities in nine states. They were staged at segregated stores, restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters. By 1961, sit-ins had been held in more than 100 cities.
The sit-in movement brought large numbers of idealistic and energized college students into the civil rights struggle. Many African American students had become discouraged by the slow pace of desegregation. Students like Jesse Jackson, a student leader at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, wanted to see things change more quickly. The sit-in offered them a way to take matters into their own hands.

At first, the leaders of the NAACP and the SCLC were nervous about the sit-in campaign. They feared that students did not have the discipline to remain nonviolent if they were provoked enough. For the most part, the students proved them wrong. Those conducting sit-ins were heckled by bystanders, punched, kicked, beaten with clubs, and burned with cigarettes, hot coffee, and acid—but most did not fight back. Their heroic behavior grabbed the nation's attention.

As the sit-ins spread, student leaders in different states realized they needed to coordinate their efforts. The person who brought them together was Ella Baker, a former NAACP official and the executive director of the SCLC. In April 1960 Baker invited student leaders to attend a convention at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. There she urged students to create their own organization instead of joining the NAACP or the SCLC. Students, she said, had "the right to direct their own affairs and even make their own mistakes."

The students agreed with Baker and established the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**. Among SNCC's early leaders were Marion Barry, who later served as mayor of Washington, D.C., and John Lewis, who later became a member of Congress. African American college students from all across the South made up the majority of SNCC's members, although many whites also joined. Between 1960 and 1965, SNCC played a key role in desegregating public facilities in dozens of Southern communities. SNCC also began sending volunteers into rural areas of the Deep South to register African Americans to vote.
The idea for what came to be called the Voter Education Project began with Robert Moses, an SNCC volunteer from New York. Moses pointed out that the civil rights movement tended to focus on urban areas. He urged the SNCC to start helping rural African Americans, who often faced violence if they tried to register to vote. Despite the danger, many SNCC volunteers headed to the Deep South. Moses himself went to Mississippi. Several had their lives threatened; others were beaten, and in 1964, local officials brutally murdered three SNCC workers.

One SNCC organizer, a sharecropper named Fannie Lou Hamer, had been evicted from her farm after registering to vote. She was arrested in Mississippi for urging other African Americans to register. Police severely beat her while she was in jail. She then helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and challenged the legality of Mississippi’s segregated Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

**Reading Check** Explaining What were the effects of the sit-in movement?

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**The Freedom Riders**

**MAIN Idea** Teams of African Americans and whites rode buses into the South to protest the continued illegal segregation on interstate bus lines.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Is it acceptable to risk provoking violence in order to advance a cause you support? Read to learn about the violence that erupted against the Freedom Riders and against Martin Luther King, Jr.’s march in Birmingham.

Despite rulings outlawing segregation in interstate bus service, bus travel remained segregated in much of the South. In 1961 CORE leader James Farmer asked teams of African American and white volunteers, many of whom were college students, to travel into the South to draw attention to its refusal to integrate bus terminals. The teams became known as the Freedom Riders.

In early May 1961, the first Freedom Riders boarded several southbound interstate buses. When the buses arrived in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, Alabama, angry white mobs attacked them. The mobs...
slit the bus tires and threw rocks at the windows. In Anniston, someone threw a firebomb into one bus, but fortunately no one was killed.

In Birmingham the riders emerged from a bus to face a gang of young men armed with baseball bats, chains, and lead pipes. The gang beat the riders viciously. One witness later reported, “You couldn’t see their faces through the blood.” The head of the police in Birmingham, Public Safety Commissioner Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor, explained that there had been no police at the bus station because it was Mother’s Day, and he had given many of his officers the day off. FBI evidence later showed that Connor had contacted the local Ku Klux Klan and told them to beat the Freedom Riders until “it looked like a bulldog got a hold of them.”

The violence in Alabama made national news, shocking many Americans. The attack on the Freedom Riders came less than four months after President John F. Kennedy took office. The new president felt compelled to get the violence under control.

Kennedy and Civil Rights

While campaigning for the presidency in 1960, John F. Kennedy promised to actively support the civil rights movement if elected. His brother, Robert F. Kennedy, had used his influence to get Dr. King released from jail after a demonstration in Georgia. African Americans responded by voting overwhelmingly for Kennedy. Their votes helped him narrowly win several key states, including Illinois, which Kennedy carried by only 9,000 votes.

Once in office, however, Kennedy at first seemed as cautious as Eisenhower on civil rights, which disappointed many African Americans. Kennedy knew he needed the support of many Southern senators to get other programs through Congress and that any attempt to push through new civil rights legislation would anger them. Congressional Republicans repeatedly reminded the public of Kennedy’s failure to follow through on his campaign promise to push for civil rights for African Americans.
Kennedy did, however, name approximately 40 African Americans to high-level positions in the government. He also appointed Thurgood Marshall to a federal judgeship on the Second Circuit Appeals Court in New York—one level below the Supreme Court and the highest judicial position an African American had attained to that point. Kennedy created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (CEEO) to stop the federal bureaucracy from discriminating against African Americans in hiring and promotions.

**The Justice Department Takes Action**

Although President Kennedy was unwilling to challenge Southern Democrats in Congress, he allowed the Justice Department, run by his brother Robert, to actively support the civil rights movement. Robert Kennedy tried to help African Americans register to vote by having the civil rights division of the Justice Department file lawsuits across the South.

When violence erupted against the Freedom Riders, the Kennedys came to their aid as well, although not at first. At the time the Freedom Riders took action, President Kennedy was preparing for a meeting with Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union. Kennedy did not want violence in the South to disrupt the meeting by giving the impression that his country was weak and divided.

After the Freedom Riders were attacked in Montgomery, the Kennedys publicly urged them to stop the rides and give everybody a “cooling off” period. James Farmer replied that African Americans “have been cooling off now for 350 years. If we cool off anymore, we’ll be in a deep freeze.” Instead, he announced that the Freedom Riders planned to head into Mississippi on their next trip.

To stop the violence, President Kennedy made a deal with Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, a strong supporter of segregation. If Eastland would use his influence in Mississippi to prevent violence, Kennedy would not object if the Mississippi police arrested the Freedom Riders. Eastland kept the deal. No violence occurred when the buses arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, but the riders were arrested.

The cost of bailing the Freedom Riders out of jail used up most of CORE’s funds, which meant that the rides would have to end unless more money could be found. When Thurgood Marshall learned of the situation, he offered James Farmer the use of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's huge bail bond account to keep the rides going.

When President Kennedy returned from meeting with Khrushchev and found that the Freedom Riders were still active, he changed his approach. He ordered the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to tighten its regulations against segregated bus terminals. In the meantime, Robert Kennedy ordered the Justice Department to take legal action against Southern cities that maintained segregated bus terminals. The actions of the ICC and the Justice Department finally produced results. By late 1962, segregation in interstate bus travel had come to an end.

**James Meredith**

As the Freedom Riders were trying to desegregate interstate bus lines, efforts continued to integrate Southern schools. On the day John F. Kennedy was inaugurated, an African American air force veteran named **James Meredith** applied for a transfer to the University of Mississippi. Up to that point, the university had avoided complying with the Supreme Court ruling ending segregated education.

In September 1962, Meredith tried to register at the university’s admissions office, only to find Ross Barnett, the governor of Mississippi, blocking his path. Meredith had a court order directing the university to register him, but Governor Barnett stated emphatically, “Never! We will never surrender to the evil and illegal forces of tyranny.”

Frustrated, President Kennedy dispatched 500 federal marshals to escort Meredith to the campus. Shortly after Meredith and the marshals arrived, an angry white mob attacked the campus, and a full-scale riot erupted. The mob hurled rocks, bottles, bricks, and acid at the marshals. Some people fired shotguns at them. The marshals responded with tear gas, but they were under orders not to fire.

The fighting continued all night. By morning, 160 marshals had been wounded. Reluctantly, Kennedy ordered the army to send several thousand troops to the campus. For the rest of the year, Meredith attended classes at the University of Mississippi under federal guard. He graduated in August.
Violence in Birmingham

The events in Mississippi frustrated Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders. Although they were pleased that Kennedy had intervened, they were disappointed that the president had not seized the moment to push for a new civil rights law.

Reflecting on the problem, Dr. King came to a difficult decision. It seemed to him that only when violence got out of hand would the federal government intervene. "We've got to have a crisis to bargain with," one of his advisers observed. King agreed. In the spring of 1963, he decided to launch demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, knowing they would provoke a violent response. He believed it was the only way to get President Kennedy to actively support civil rights.

The situation in Birmingham was volatile. Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor, who had arranged for the attack on the Freedom Riders, was now running for mayor. Eight days after the protests began, King was arrested. While in jail, King began writing on scraps of paper that had been smuggled into his cell. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that he produced is one of the most eloquent defenses of nonviolent protest ever written.

In his letter, King explained that although the protesters were breaking the law, they were following a higher moral law based on divine justice. Injustice, he insisted, had to be exposed "to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."

After King was released, the protests, which had been dwindling, began to grow again. Bull Connor responded with force. He ordered the Birmingham police to use clubs, police dogs, and high-pressure fire hoses on the demonstrators. Millions of Americans watched the graphic violence on the nightly news on television. Outraged by the brutality and worried that the government was losing control, Kennedy ordered his aides to prepare a new civil rights bill.

Reading Check Evaluating How did President Kennedy help the civil rights movement?
The Civil Rights Act of 1964

**Main Idea** President Johnson used his political expertise to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you remember the constitutional amendments that granted African Americans civil rights after the Civil War? Read on to learn about new legal steps taken during the 1960s.

Determined to introduce a civil rights bill, Kennedy now waited for a dramatic moment to address the nation on the issue. Alabama’s governor, George Wallace, gave the president his chance. At his inauguration as governor, Wallace had stated, “I draw a line in the dust . . . and I say, Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” On June 11, 1963, Wallace stood in front of the University of Alabama’s admissions office to block two African Americans from enrolling. He stayed until federal marshals ordered him to move.

The next day a white segregationist murdered Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist in Mississippi. President Kennedy seized the moment to announce his civil rights bill. That evening, he spoke to Americans about a “moral issue . . . as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution”:

**Primary Source**

"The heart of the question is whether . . . we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him . . . then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. . . . And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free. . . . Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise."

—from Kennedy’s White House address, June 11, 1963

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**The March on Washington**

Dr. King realized that Kennedy would have a very difficult time pushing his civil rights bill through Congress. Therefore, he searched for a way to lobby Congress and to build more public support. When A. Philip Randolph suggested a march on Washington, King agreed.

On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 demonstrators of all races flocked to the nation’s capital. The audience heard speeches and sang hymns and songs as they gathered peacefully near the Lincoln Memorial. Dr. King then delivered a powerful speech outlining his dream of freedom and equality for all Americans.

King’s speech and the peacefulness and dignity of the March on Washington built momentum for the civil rights bill. Opponents in Congress, however, continued to do what they could to slow the bill down, dragging out their committee investigations and using procedural rules to delay votes.

**The Bill Becomes Law**

Although the civil rights bill was likely to pass the House of Representatives, where a majority of Republicans and Northern Democrats supported the measure, it faced a much more difficult time in the Senate. There, a small group of determined Southern senators would try to block the bill indefinitely.

In the U.S. Senate, senators are allowed to speak for as long as they like when a bill is being debated. The Senate cannot vote on a bill until all senators have finished speaking. A filibuster occurs when a small group of senators take turns speaking and refuse to stop the debate and allow a bill to come to a vote. Today a filibuster can be stopped if at least 60 senators vote for cloture, a motion that cuts off debate and forces a vote. In the 1960s, however, 67 senators had to vote for cloture to stop a filibuster. This meant that a minority of senators opposed to civil rights could easily prevent the majority from enacting a new civil rights law.

Worried that the bill would never pass, many African Americans became even more disheartened. Then, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, and his vice president, Lyndon Johnson, became president. Johnson was from Texas and