

Introductory Essay

Continuing the Heroic Struggle for Equality: The Civil Rights Movement



To what extent did Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice become a reality for African Americans during the civil rights movement?

- ☐ I can explain the importance of local and federal actions in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.
- ☐ I can compare the goals and methods of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Malcolm X and Black Nationalism, and Black Power.
- ☐ I can explain challenges African Americans continued to face despite victories for equality and justice during the civil rights movement.

Essential Vocabulary

Great Migration	The movement of millions of Black Americans from the rural South to cities in the South, Midwest, and North that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century
The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)	A civil rights organization founded in 1909 with the goal of ending racial discrimination against Black Americans
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)	A civil rights organization founded in 1957 to coordinate nonviolent protest activities
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)	A student-led civil rights organization founded in 1960
Black nationalism	A school of thought that advocated Black pride,

	self-sufficiency, and separatism rather than integration
Filibuster	An action designed to prolong debate and to delay or prevent a vote on a bill
Freedom Summer	A 1964 voter registration drive led by Black and white volunteers
Black Power	A movement emerging in the mid-1960s that sought to empower Black Americans rather than seek integration into white society
Black Panther Party	A political organization founded in 1966 to challenge police brutality against the African American community in Oakland, California

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The struggle to make the promises of the Declaration of Independence a reality for Black Americans reached a climax after World War II. The activists of the civil rights movement directly confronted segregation and demanded equal civil rights at the local level with physical and moral courage and perseverance. They simultaneously pursued a national strategy of systematically filing lawsuits in federal courts, lobbying Congress, and pressuring presidents to change the laws. The civil rights movement encountered significant resistance, however, and suffered violence in the quest for equality.

During the middle of the twentieth century, several Black writers grappled with the central contradictions between the nation's ideals and its realities, and the place of Black Americans in their country. Richard Wright explored a raw confrontation with racism in *Native Son* (1940), while Ralph Ellison led readers through a search for identity beyond a racialized category in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), as part of the Black quest for identity. The novel also offered hope in the power of the sacred principles of the Founding documents. Playwright Lorraine Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, first performed in 1959, about the dreams deferred for Black Americans and questions about assimilation. Novelist and essayist James Baldwin described Blacks' estrangement from U.S. society and themselves while caught in a racial nightmare of injustice in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and other works.

World War II wrought great changes in U.S. society. Black soldiers fought for a “double V for victory,” hoping to triumph over fascism abroad and racism at home. Many received a hostile reception, such as Medgar Evers who was blocked from voting at gunpoint by five armed whites. Blacks continued the **Great Migration** to southern and northern cities for wartime industrial work. After the war, in 1947, Jackie Robinson endured racial taunts on the field and segregation off it as he broke the color barrier in professional baseball and began a Hall of Fame career. The following year, President Harry Truman issued executive orders desegregating the military and banning discrimination in the civil service. Meanwhile, Thurgood Marshall and his legal team at the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** meticulously prepared legal challenges to discrimination, continuing a decades-long effort.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund brought lawsuits against segregated schools in different states that were consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954. The Supreme Court unanimously decided that “separate but equal” was “inherently unequal.” *Brown II* followed a year after, as the court ordered that the integration of schools should be pursued “with all deliberate speed.” Throughout the South, angry whites responded with a campaign of “massive resistance” and refused to comply with the order, while many parents sent their children to all-white private schools. Middle-class whites who opposed integration joined local chapters of citizens’ councils and used propaganda, economic pressure, and even violence to achieve their ends.

A wave of violence and intimidation followed. In 1955, teenager Emmett Till was visiting relatives in Mississippi when he was lynched after being falsely accused of whistling at a white woman. Though an all-white jury quickly acquitted the two men accused of killing him, Till’s murder was reported nationally and raised awareness of the injustices taking place in Mississippi.

In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks (who was a secretary of the Montgomery NAACP) was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus. Her willingness to confront segregation led to a direct-action movement for equality. The local Women’s Political Council organized the city’s Black residents into a boycott of the bus system, which was then led by the Montgomery Improvement Association. Black churches and ministers, including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, provided a source of strength. Despite arrests, armed mobs, and church bombings, the boycott lasted until a federal court desegregated the city buses. In the wake of the boycott, the leading ministers formed the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**, which became a key civil rights organization.



Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks is shown here in 1955 with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the background. The Montgomery bus boycott was an important victory in the civil rights movement.

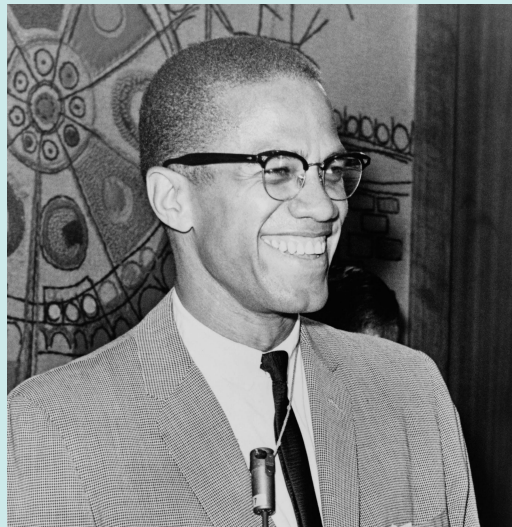
In 1957, nine Black families decided to send their children to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Governor Orval Faubus used the National Guard to prevent their entry, and one student, Elizabeth Eckford, faced an angry crowd of whites alone and barely escaped. President Eisenhower was compelled to respond and sent in 1,200 paratroops from the 101st Airborne to protect the Black students. They continued to be harassed, but most finished the school year and integrated the school.

That year, Congress passed a Civil Rights Act that created a civil rights division in the Justice Department and provided minimal protections for the right to vote. The bill had been watered down because of an expected **filibuster** by southern senators, who had recently signed the Southern Manifesto, a document pledging their resistance to Supreme Court decisions such as *Brown*.

In 1960, four Black college students were refused lunch service at a local Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and they spontaneously staged a "sit-in" the following day. Their resistance to the indignities of segregation was copied by thousands of others of young Blacks across the South, launching another

wave of direct, nonviolent confrontation with segregation. Ella Baker invited several participants to a Raleigh conference where they formed the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** and issued a Statement of Purpose. The group represented a more youthful and daring effort that later broke with King and his strategy of nonviolence.

In contrast, Malcolm X became a leading spokesperson for the Nation of Islam (NOI) who represented Black separatism as an alternative to integration, which he deemed an unworthy goal. He advocated revolutionary violence as a means of Black self-defense and rejected nonviolence. He later changed his views, breaking with the NOI and embracing a **Black nationalism** that had more common ground with King's nonviolent views. Malcolm X had reached out to establish ties with other Black activists before being gunned down by assassins who were members of the NOI later in 1965.

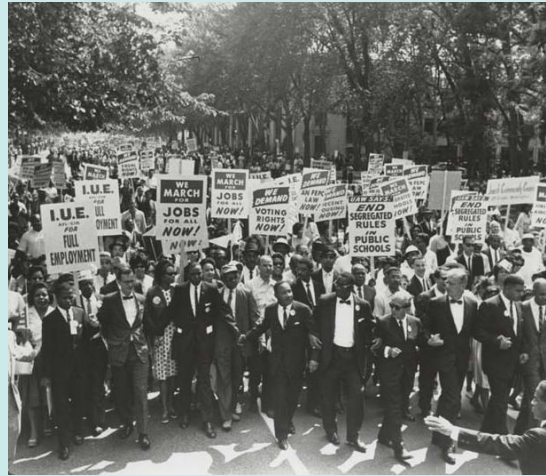


Malcolm X

Malcolm X was a charismatic speaker and gifted organizer. He argued that Black pride, identity, and independence were more important than integration with whites.

In 1961, members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) rode segregated buses in order to integrate interstate travel. These Black and white Freedom Riders traveled into the Deep South, where mobs beat them with bats and pipes in bus stations and firebombed their buses. A cautious Kennedy administration reluctantly intervened to protect the Freedom Riders with federal marshals, who were also victimized by violent white mobs. King was moved to act. He confronted segregation with the hope of exposing injustice and brutality against nonviolent protestors and arousing the conscience of the nation to achieve a just rule of law.

In late August 1963, more than 250,000 people joined the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in solidarity for equal rights. From the Lincoln Memorial steps, King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. He stated, “I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”



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After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, President Lyndon Johnson pushed his agenda through Congress. In the early summer of 1964, a 3-month filibuster by southern senators was finally defeated, and both houses passed the historical civil rights bill. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, banning segregation in public accommodations.

Activists in the civil rights movement then focused on campaigns for the right to vote. During the summer of 1964, several civil rights organizations combined their efforts during the “**Freedom Summer**” to register Blacks to vote with the help of young white college students. They endured terror and intimidation as dozens of churches and homes were burned and workers were killed, including an incident in which Black advocate James Chaney and two white students, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were murdered in Mississippi.

That summer, Fannie Lou Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as civil rights delegates to replace the rival white delegation opposed to civil rights at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Hamer was a veteran of attempts to register other Blacks to vote and endured severe beatings for her efforts. A proposed compromise of giving two seats to the MFDP satisfied neither those delegates nor the white delegation, which walked out. Cracks were opening up in the Democratic electoral coalition over civil rights, especially in the South.



Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer testified about the violence she and others endured when trying to register to vote at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Her televised testimony exposed the realities of continued violence against Blacks trying to exercise their constitutional rights.

In early 1965, the SCLC and SNCC joined forces to register voters in Selma and draw attention to the fight for Black suffrage. On March 7, marchers planned to walk peacefully from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery. However, mounted state troopers and police blocked the Edmund Pettus Bridge and then ram-paged through the marchers, indiscriminately beating them. SNCC leader John Lewis suffered a fractured skull, and 5 women were clubbed unconscious. Seventy people were hospitalized for injuries during “Bloody Sunday.” The scenes again shocked television viewers and newspaper readers.



The images of state troopers, local police, and local people brutally attacking peaceful protestors on “Bloody Sunday” shocked people across the country and world. Two weeks later, protestors of all ages and races continued the protest. By the time they reached the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, their ranks had swelled to about 25,000 people.

Two days later, King led a symbolic march to the bridge but then turned around. Many younger and more militant activists were alienated and felt that King had sold out to white authorities. The tension revealed the widening division between older civil rights advocates and those younger, more radical supporters who were frustrated at the slow pace of change and the routine violence inflicted upon peaceful protesters. Nevertheless, starting on March 21, with the help of a federal judge who refused Governor George Wallace’s request to ban the march, Blacks triumphantly walked to Montgomery. On August 6, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act protecting the rights to register and vote after a Senate filibuster ended and the bill passed Congress.

The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act did not alter the fact that most Black Americans still suffered racism, were denied equal economic opportunities, and lived in segregated neighborhoods. While King and other leaders did seek to raise their issues among northerners, frustrations often boiled over into urban riots during the mid-1960s. Police brutality and other racial incidents often triggered days of violence in which hundreds were injured or killed. There were mass arrests and widespread property damage from arson and looting in Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, Cleveland, Chicago, and dozens of other cities. A presidential National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders issued the Kerner Report, which analyzed the causes of urban unrest, noting the impact of racism on the inequalities and injustices suffered by Black Americans.

Frustration among young Black Americans led to the rise of a more militant strain of advocacy. In 1966, activist James Meredith was on a solo march in Mississippi to raise awareness about Black voter registration when he was shot and wounded. Though Meredith recovered, this event typified the violence that led some young Black Americans to espouse a more military strain of advocacy. On June 16, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael and members of the Black Panther party continued Meredith's march while he recovered from his wounds, chanting, "We want **Black Power**." **Black Power** leaders and members of the **Black Panther Party** offered a different vision for equality and justice. They advocated self-reliance and self-empowerment, a celebration of Black culture, and armed self-defense. They used aggressive rhetoric to project a more radical strategy for racial progress, including sympathy for revolutionary socialism and rejection of capitalism. While its legacy is debated, the Black Power movement raised many important questions about the place of Black Americans in the United States, beyond the civil rights movement.

After World War II, Black Americans confronted the iniquities and indignities of segregation to end almost a century of Jim Crow. Undeterred, they turned the public's eyes to the injustice they faced and called on the country to live up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and to continue the fight against inequality and discrimination.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What factors helped to create the modern civil rights movement?

2. How was the quest for civil rights a combination of federal and local actions?

3. What were the goals and methods of different activists and groups of the civil rights movement? Complete the table below to reference throughout your analysis of the primary source documents.

	Martin Luther King, Jr., and SCLC	SNCC	Malcolm X	Black Power
Goal				
Method				