

# Primary Source

## “We Shall Overcome”



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

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the civil rights movement
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

### Building Context

“We Shall Overcome” is believed to have its origin in the gospel song “I’ll Overcome Someday” by African American minister and composer Charles Tindley. The song was popularized in the 1960s by folk singers and activists Pete Seeger and Joan Baez and became the unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the song in March 1968, just days before his assassination: “There’s a little song that we sing in our movement down in the South . . . I’ve joined hands so often with students and others behind jail bars singing it: ‘We shall overcome.’ Sometimes we’ve had tears in our eyes when we joined together to sing it, but we still decided to sing it: ‘We shall overcome.’ Oh, before this victory’s won, some will have to get thrown in jail some more, but we shall overcome.” This version of the song was performed by Joan Baez at the White House during a 2010 celebration of music from the civil rights movement. Read the lyrics before listening to Baez’s performance and consider the power of the song’s message.

## “We Shall Overcome”

Source: <https://www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/american.studies.s98/we.shall.overcome.html>

Lyrics	Notes
We shall overcome We shall overcome We shall overcome some day	
<b>CHORUS:</b> Oh, deep in my heart I do believe We shall overcome some day	
We'll walk hand in hand We'll walk hand in hand We'll walk hand in hand some day	
[CHORUS]	
We shall all be free We shall all be free We shall all be free some day	
[CHORUS]	
We are not afraid We are not afraid We are not afraid some day	
[CHORUS]	
We are not alone We are not alone We are not alone some day	
[CHORUS]	
The whole wide world around The whole wide world around The whole wide world around some day [CHORUS]	

We shall overcome We shall overcome We shall overcome some day  [CHORUS]	
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### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. What were some of the reasons civil rights protesters might have been fearful?

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2. How does the simplicity and repetition in this song reinforce its message of struggle and ultimate victory?

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3. “We Shall Overcome” has been adopted by protesters in other countries and in various contexts. In what ways is the message of this song universal?

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