

US civil rights

Explore the civil-rights movement that made great strides in overturning more than a century of discrimination against African Americans



The 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King gave his 'I have a dream' speech

Social movement

In the 1950s and 1960s key legislative changes were enacted in the USA, but more importantly a whole generation of social attitudes were altered. In 1954 the Supreme Court overturned the old 'separate but equal' doctrine (which had normally meant separate but far from equal) and ruled that school segregation should end. With this pillar of the old regime removed, mass movements on the ground in the southern states began to launch an assault on racial discrimination.

A bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 used black economic power to end segregation on public transport. Students in Greensboro, North Carolina, occupied the lunch counter at Woolworths when they were refused service. A quarter of a million people marched on Washington DC in 1963 to protest about the lack of progress in Congress.

Inspirational leaders

The role of ordinary people should not be understated, but inspirational leaders also played a key role. The most famous of them was Martin Luther King, whose oratory in his 'I have a dream' speech, resonated with millions. King's advocacy of peaceful protest earned him increasing support among liberal whites, but was challenged by more radical leaders such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement. Both King and Malcolm X were assassinated during the 1960s.

Congress and progress

One of the most significant achievements of the Civil Rights movement was in getting Congress to act. President Johnson, who receives insufficient credit for his role in cajoling legislators, signed three landmark pieces of legislation that prohibited racial discrimination and ended the restriction of voting rights that targeted minorities.

The battle for civil rights is not over, however. Some parts of the Voting Rights Act were recently overturned by the US Supreme Court. Some states continue to try to make voting harder rather than easier, particularly for the poorest.

1954

1960

1970

17 May 1954
Brown v Board of Education rules that segregation of schools is **unconstitutional**

February 1957
Martin Luther King becomes president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

May 1961
Freedom Riders test rules on long-distance buses

2 July 1964
Civil Rights Act prohibiting racial discrimination

7 March 1965
March from Selma to Montgomery

11-17 August 1965
Watts riots in Los Angeles leave 34 dead

4 April 1968
Martin Luther King assassinated

1 February 1960
Lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, NC

28 August 1963
March on Washington. King delivers 'I have a dream' speech

21 February 1965
Malcolm X assassinated

6 August 1965
Voting Rights Act ending restrictions on voting

October 1966
Black Panthers founded

10 April 1968
Civil Rights Act ends housing discrimination

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