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.

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.

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.