World War II and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement

Despite playing an important role in World War II, African Americans experienced significant discrimination in the defense industry and the military. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other African American leaders demanded that President Franklin Roosevelt issue an executive order to end workplace discrimination in wartime industries and threatened to march on the White House. Roosevelt acquiesced on June 25, 1941, and issued Executive Order 8802. The order stated, "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries and in Government, because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

African Americans in the military served in segregated units. The incongruity of their situation was apparent: They were fighting for the freedom of others while their own freedoms were severely curtailed at home. In 1939, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the country's largest African American newspaper, called out this incongruity. Three years later, the paper published a letter from an African American defense worker detailing the discrimination he faced at work. The letter introduced the idea of a "double V for victory" sign symbolizing victories abroad and for African Americans on the home front. The *Courier* championed the Double V campaign and called for an end to domestic racism and an end to segregation in the military. The campaign achieved the latter goal when President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948. Although the Double V campaign was short lived, the experiences of African Americans during World War II laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Desegregating Education

An important step forward for the Civil Rights Movement was the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The case was the culmination of a years-long strategy of lawsuits pursued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund. The Court ruled in *Brown* that state-mandated, or *de jure* ("by law"), racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. *Brown* overturned the Court's earlier decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that had established the doctrine of "separate but equal." Although separate schools were never in fact equal, the doctrine had been used to explain how segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1955, the Court ruled in *Brown II* that the desegregation of public schools had to be undertaken with "all deliberate speed."

The *Brown* ruling faced backlash throughout the South. The "Southern Manifesto," a document issued by 101 Southern congressmen, affirmed their commitment to oppose desegregation. Civil rights organizers such as Arkansas activist and publisher Daisy Bates, however, began assembling groups of students to enroll in and desegregate white public schools. Bates selected Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls—known collectively as the Little Rock Nine—to enroll at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The state of Arkansas attempted to stop the desegregation of Central High School, but President Dwight Eisenhower sent U.S. Army troops to protect the Nine from crowds of angry white mobs as they attended school each day. Still, Alabama Governor George Wallace vowed to keep his state's schools segregated.

Despite very real threats of violence, African American students persisted. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges became one of six African American children to pass New Orleans's entrance exams, which were designed to prevent African American students from attending all-white schools. Although the school district repeatedly delayed her enrollment, Bridges and her parents persisted. She integrated William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana, in November 1960. Ruby Bridges had perfect attendance despite the angry crowds she passed each morning on her way into school. She became a class of just one after angry white parents withdrew their children from the school. However, Ruby Bridges's efforts led to the enrollment of more African American students the following school year. James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in 1963 after successfully suing the school for repeatedly denying his admission based on race.

Though the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* prohibited *de jure* school segregation, most American schools remained segregated *de facto*, or in effect, because of patterns of residency, heavily influenced as they were by racial discrimination and gerrymandered school districts. In the 1960s, many school districts began the practice of school busing: transporting students to schools outside of their local districts to ameliorate racial segregation. The highly controversial practice sparked protests around the country, particularly among white suburban parents, who objected to their children being bused to inner-city schools. In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the Supreme Court let stand the practice of using mandatory busing to racially integrate schools.

Emmett Till

Although organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had existed since the early 1900s, it was not until the early 1950s that the Civil Rights Movement truly captured much of the nation's attention. The death of Emmett Till certainly increased this attention. Till was a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was visiting his family in Money, Mississippi. On August 24, 1955, Till allegedly offended a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, in a grocery store.

In response, the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother kidnapped and murdered the teenager. The two men were accused of murder but were ultimately acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury. Roy Bryant later confessed to Till's murder in a magazine interview, further illustrating the institutional racial injustice of the South.

Emmett Till's family and organizations like the NAACP made his gruesome death a symbol of the violence and injustice endured by African Americans. Images of Emmett Till's mangled body shocked and horrified people around the United States and the world.

Nonviolent Resistance

Emmett Till's murder was just one of countless examples of violence against African Americans. In stark contrast, civil rights leaders, especially Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., largely embraced nonviolent civil disobedience. Nonviolent direct action took many forms during the 1950s and 1960s, including marches, protests, and sit-ins. In 1960, four African American college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat at a segregated Woolworth's department store lunch counter and politely asked for coffee. Soon the sit-in movement spread across the South, including to New Orleans. In September 1960, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lombard v. Louisiana* that segregation policies at McCrory's Five and Dime in New Orleans were unconstitutional.

Desegregating Transportation

Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

The first major segregated bus system boycott took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 1950, the Baton Rouge Bus Company (BRBC) secured an exclusive contract with the city of Baton Rouge that prevented African American–owned bus services from operating routes to African American neighborhoods in the city. On BRBC buses, African American passengers sat at the back of the bus, while white passengers sat at the front. If the back was full, African American passengers were forced to stand, even if there were open seats in the "whites only" section.

Reverend T. J. Jemison, a local civil rights activist and religious leader, petitioned the city council. He argued that because all passengers paid the same fare, African American passengers should be allowed to sit in open seats in the "whites only" section. In response, the city council passed Ordinance 222 that instituted a "first come, first served" model. African American passengers entered from the back of the bus, while white passengers entered from the front so that seats were filled toward the middle.

When Ordinance 222 was overturned, Jemison and other local African American leaders organized a boycott of the BRBC. Some eighty percent of passengers were African American, and the BRBC felt the financial pinch after just a few days. Jemison struck a deal with the city council after five days, resulting in Ordinance 251. This ordinance designated fewer "whites only" seats, but African American passengers still had to stand if there were open seats at the front of a bus filled at the back. Although many African Americans were angered by the arrangement, the Baton Rouge bus boycott did gain national attention and helped inspire other transportation boycotts, including the Montgomery bus boycott.

Montgomery Bus Boycott

In 1955, a fifteen-year-old girl, Claudette Colvin, remained in her seat on a crowded, segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, rather than give it up to a white passenger. She was arrested. Later that same year, on December 1, a seamstress named Rosa Parks was also arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Four days later, the Women's Political Council and the local NAACP chapter organized a one-day boycott of Montgomery's bus system in protest of its segregation policies. Seventy-five percent of the system's riders were African American. About ninety percent of these riders participated in the boycott. Civil rights leaders, inspired by this success, decided to extend the boycott until their demands for desegregation were met. They organized the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and elected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as its president. In February 1956, the MIA filed a lawsuit against the bus company's policies. A federal district court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. The Montgomery bus boycott came to an end after the ruling, upheld by the Supreme Court, went into effect on December 20, 1956.

The Montgomery bus boycott also resulted in the creation of a new civil rights organization: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was formed in 1957 by members of the Montgomery Improvement Association and other civil rights groups from ten Southern states. Members of its Executive Board of Directors included King, Ralph David Abernathy, and Reverend T. J. Jemison.

A few years later, in 1960, in *Boynton v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court ruled that bus terminals also could not be segregated. The next year, interracial groups of Freedom Riders rode interstate buses into a South that was still very segregated. Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the goal of the rides was to see the *Boynton* ruling enforced. The riders faced extreme violence. However, their actions succeeded in desegregating public transportation in the South.

Birmingham Campaign

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the SCLC, and other civil rights leaders organized the Birmingham Campaign in April 1963 with the goal of desegregating Birmingham, Alabama. The campaign relied on a variety of tactics, including sit-ins, marches, and a boycott of local stores. Dr. King was arrested on April 12 after protestors refused to obey a court order obtained by the city to end the campaign. During his eight days in jail, King penned his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The letter addressed a criticism published in the local paper by eight white religious leaders who urged African Americans to stop protesting and instead exercise patience as they negotiated for their civil rights. King's response reaffirmed his stance that African Americans neither should nor could wait any longer for their civil rights.

The Birmingham Campaign gained national attention after the city's public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, authorized the use of fire hoses and police dogs against children. Attorney General Robert Kennedy eventually intervened in Birmingham. His office mediated an agreement between the campaign's leaders and city officials, leading to the desegregation of lunch counters and other public spaces. White supremacists who opposed the deal took violent action. Members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, where much of the Birmingham Campaign was organized, resulting in four deaths.

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

On August 28, 1963, a multiracial crowd of about 250,000 walked peacefully through the nation's capital, carrying signs urging Congress to end racial discrimination. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the culmination of months of organizing by members of CORE, the SCLC, SNCC, the NAACP, and the National Urban League. Later that day, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. The March on Washington helped create momentum for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Enfranchising Voters

Freedom Summer

Voter registration drives were another important part of the Civil Rights Movement. Less than seven percent of eligible African Americans in Mississippi were registered to vote. In 1961, SNCC organizer Bob Moses began working to change this. SNCC volunteers faced significant resistance to their efforts. In 1964, Moses helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The project had two main goals: to draw national attention to racial oppression and violence in Mississippi and to register as many African American voters as possible.

Hundreds of mostly white volunteers joined with Black Mississippians to register African American voters. Despite violent acts of intimidation, volunteers registered sixteen hundred new voters. While this was an important step, this figure represented less than ten percent of the African Americans who attempted to register. Three thousand African American students attended Freedom Schools where SNCC volunteers taught civics and literacy.

Selma

The 1965 Selma to Montgomery March was a series of three marches, organized by SNCC and the SCLC, to protest injustice in denying African Americans the right to vote. On March 7 and March 9, unarmed protestors were met by white segregationists and by police, who used whips, nightsticks, and tear gas on them. On the first

march, which came to be known as "Bloody Sunday," at least fifty protestors required hospital treatment. On the second march, Dr. King paused the marchers upon seeing police, led the group in prayer, and then led them back to Selma. Before the third, march even began, President Lyndon Johnson had asked Congress for federal voting rights legislation.

Civil Rights Legislation and Affirmative Action

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, especially in public accommodations and federally funded programs. It also strengthened voting rights enforcement and school desegregation.

Passed in the wake of the Selma marches, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests as a requirement for voting, mandated federal oversight of voter registration in areas where tests had previously been used, and gave the U.S. attorney general the duty to challenge poll taxes for state and local elections. It also granted federal oversight of voter registration in areas where less than fifty percent of the non-white population had registered to vote. While this did not end discrimination at the polls, it did greatly improve voter turnout among African Americans.

Civil rights issues continued to dominate American politics in the late 1960s. The 1968 Fair Housing Act prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, or financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, or sex.

The Johnson administration also promoted affirmative action policies to improve opportunities for African Americans and other marginalized groups. Affirmative action is an approach that favors disadvantaged groups in job hiring and promotions, admission to colleges and universities, and other social benefits. By the late 1970s, the use of affirmative action and racial quotas led to charges of "reverse discrimination," the notion that majority groups (particularly white men) were being unfairly passed over in favor of "less qualified" individuals. In *Bakke v. Regents* (1978), the Supreme Court ruled that public universities and government institutions could not set specific numerical targets based on race for admissions or employment but could set "goals" or "timetables" for integration. Decades later, the Supreme Court would reconsider this decision.

The Movement Shifts

Civil rights legislation was far from the end of the story. While African Americans secured more of their civil rights, the realities of poverty and other forms of oppression continued to dominate the lives of many Black people in the United States. People rioted throughout the country as encounters between police officers and African American citizens became violent, including in Harlem, Rochester, and Philadelphia in 1964 and Los Angeles in 1965.

Malcolm X

By the early 1960s, some African American activists had come to disagree with the peaceful, nonviolent tactics of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Among them was a leader in the Nation of Islam named Malcom X. The Nation of Islam is a Black nationalist organization that includes elements of the religion of Islam. Unlike Dr. King, Malcolm X did not advocate for integration. Instead, he supported the complete separation of African Americans from white Americans, highlighting economic self-sufficiency and a message of racial pride. These goals, Malcolm X felt, needed to be achieved "by any means necessary," including violence. It should be noted that the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam is also deeply antisemitic.

Malcolm X renounced violence and the Nation of Islam in 1964 after being disillusioned by a sex scandal involving the group's leader, Elijah Muhammad. His break with the organization was also influenced by public

backlash against his assessment of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Malcolm X himself was assassinated in 1966; members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of the crime.

The Black Panthers

In 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the organization's initial purpose was to provide protection for African Americans against police violence. The organization explained the racially unequal social conditions of African Americans through the lens of economic exploitation under capitalism. Its initiatives included social aid programs such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program, legal aid, and tuberculosis testing. Black Panther Party members gained national and international attention in 1967 when they entered the state capitol building in Sacramento, California, fully armed. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) declared the Black Panther Party a threat to the country and embarked on a mission to destabilize the group, including a 1969 raid on one of the group's headquarters, in which several people, including leader Fred Hampton, were killed.