

# The Civil Rights Era (1865–1970)

## Key People & Terms

### PEOPLE:

#### **Stokely Carmichael**

Black leader who called for independence, self-reliance, and black nationalism in his 1967 book ***Black Power***. Carmichael became tired of the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's** theory of "love and nonviolence" and expelled its white members in 1966. He condoned the use of violence to achieve revolution and independence and even envisioned splitting the United States into separate black and white countries.

#### **W. E. B. Du Bois**

Harvard-educated black historian and sociologist who pushed for both equal economic and social rights for African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Du Bois disagreed with other black leaders, such as **Booker T. Washington**, who fought only for economic equality. Du Bois also worked to develop a "**black consciousness**," promoting black history, religious heritage, art, music, and culture. He also helped found the **NAACP** in 1909.

#### **Dwight D. Eisenhower**

The least supportive president of the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century. Eisenhower refused to endorse or comment publicly on the Supreme Court's decision in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** and even privately admitted that he regretted appointing Chief Justice **Earl Warren** to the bench. Although Eisenhower did dispatch federal troops to oversee the integration of **Central High School** during the **Little Rock crisis**, he did so only because Arkansas governor **Orval Faubus** had defied a federal court order, not because he believed in integration. Moreover, Eisenhower had also opposed President Truman's **Executive Order 9981** to desegregate the armed forces in 1948. Eisenhower did sign the **Civil Rights Act of 1957**, but only as a political gesture and only after assuring southerners that the act would have little impact on day-to-day life.

#### **Marcus Garvey**

A Jamaican immigrant and black activist who promoted **black nationalism** and the idea of the "**New Negro**" in black communities in New York during the **Harlem Renaissance** of the 1920s. Garvey's **Universal Negro Improvement Association** encouraged blacks to become independent and self-sufficient and to do more business within the black community. He also led a movement to resettle blacks in Africa. In 1927, however, the federal government deported Garvey after he was indicted on charges of mail fraud. Still, his message influenced future black leaders, including **Elijah Muhammad**, **Malcolm X**, and **Stokely Carmichael**.

#### **Lyndon B. Johnson**

Thirty-sixth U.S. president and one of the civil rights movement's greatest supporters after he assumed the presidency in 1963. Even though Johnson had opposed the movement in the 1940s and 1950s, he changed his mind and decided to use the issue of civil rights to establish himself as the leader of the Democratic Party in the wake of **John F. Kennedy's** assassination. Johnson also hoped to stem the racial violence in the South before it intensified beyond his control. He therefore

pressured Congress to pass an even more potent civil rights bill than Kennedy had asked for in 1963. Thanks to an enormous effort on Johnson's part, Congress passed the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** and the **Voting Rights Act** in 1965. Ironically, Johnson later ordered the FBI to investigate Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X for suspected ties to Communist organizations.

### **John F. Kennedy**

Thirty-fifth U.S. president and a leading supporter of the civil rights movement. Even though black voters helped him win the election in 1960, Kennedy supported the civil rights movement only tacitly during his first two years in office. He feared that more explicit support on his part would alienate conservative southern Democrats in Congress. The violence of the **Birmingham campaign**, however, convinced Kennedy to endorse the civil rights movement publicly, even at the risk of losing the next election. He had plans to push a stronger civil rights bill through Congress but was assassinated in 1963.

### **Martin Luther King Jr.**

A civil rights leader during the 1950s and 1960s who fought to protect the rights of blacks in the South. King rose to national fame after he took charge of the **Montgomery bus boycott** in 1955. An amazing speaker, he quickly became the de facto leader of the civil rights movement. He hoped to desegregate the South and protect blacks' political rights through "love and nonviolence" and peaceful protest. In 1957, he founded the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)** to rally southern churches behind the movement. On countless occasions, he purposefully incited violence by racist southerners against blacks in order to win sympathy from moderate white Americans. A talented writer, King penned many of the finest essays about the movement, including his 1963 "**Letter from Birmingham Jail.**" He received the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 1964, which boosted global awareness of the civil rights movement and put pressure on the federal government to address racial inequality in the United States. However, King's efforts were cut short when he was assassinated by **James Earl Ray** in Memphis in 1968.

### **Thurgood Marshall**

Chief counsel for the **NAACP** who worked to rid America of the "separate but equal" doctrine that the Supreme Court had upheld in the 1896 **Plessy v. Ferguson** ruling. Marshall won key victories in *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) and *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), but his greatest achievement was convincing the Warren Court to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the **Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas**, decision (1954). Marshall later went on to become the first African-American justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

### **Rosa Parks**

A college-educated seamstress who effectively launched the first peaceful protest of the civil rights movement. The peaceful protest began when Parks boarded a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus on December 1, 1955, and refused to give up her seat to a white man who was looking for a seat because the "white" section was full. Police arrested her for defying the city's law, prompting outraged blacks to start the **Montgomery bus boycott** later that year.

### **Earl Warren**

Supreme Court justice appointed by conservative president **Dwight D. Eisenhower** in 1953. Warren proved to be surprisingly liberal during his tenure as chief justice. He fully supported the quest of many blacks to end racial segregation, for example, and worked hard to get the Court to deliver a

unanimous verdict in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** to overturn the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1954.

## **Booker T. Washington**

President of the **Tuskegee Institute** in Alabama who pushed blacks to achieve economic equality with whites. Washington did not advocate immediate social equality but rather believed that economic equality would eventually bring social equality. Other black leaders, such as **W. E. B. Du Bois**, disagreed sharply with Washington’s views.

## **Malcolm X**

Prominent civil rights leader who quickly became the national voice for the black nationalist **Nation of Islam** in the early 1950s. The son of a civil rights leader, Malcolm Little converted to Islam while serving a prison term in the 1940s. He then changed his surname to “X” to represent the heritage and identity of the black people lost during centuries of slavery. A dynamic speaker, Malcolm X espoused self-reliance, militancy, and independence for blacks, in contrast to **Martin Luther King Jr.’s** doctrine of love, nonviolence, and integration. Malcolm X’s view of the civil rights movement changed, however, while he was on a holy pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. When he returned, he broke away from with the Nation of Islam and, with nonviolent organizations such as the SNCC, began working toward racial integration. In a tragic turn of events, rivals within the Nation of Islam assassinated him in 1965. Although his career was cut short, Malcolm X’s early views and opinions greatly influenced the “**black power**” movement that began in the late 1960s.

### **TERMS:**

## **Birmingham Campaign**

A peaceful protest organized by **Martin Luther King Jr.** and the **SCLC** in Birmingham, Alabama. By protesting, King hoped to provoke violent reactions by racist whites and win national media attention. The tactic worked, as city commissioner “**Bull**” **Connor** ordered police to use force to end the protest, and northern whites watched the violence unfold on national television. While serving a short jail sentence in Birmingham, King wrote his famous “**Letter from Birmingham Jail**,” in which he explained the civil rights movement to his critics. The Birmingham campaign also convinced President **John F. Kennedy** to endorse the movement fully and pressure Congress to pass more civil rights legislation.

## **Black Panthers**

An organization of militant black civil rights activists inspired by **Stokely Carmichael’s** “**black power**” philosophies. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense formed in Oakland, California, in 1966. Armed and clad entirely in black, Black Panther militants advocated the use of violence to incite a racial revolution in the United States. In addition to fomenting rebellion, they helped poor residents in black communities by running clinics and schools. The party disbanded, however, following an intense U.S. government crackdown in the late 1960s.

## **Black Power**

A term coined by militant former **SNCC** leader **Stokely Carmichael**. The black power movement reflected the growing push for militancy, self-reliance, independence, and nationalism within the black community and civil rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## **Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas**

A Supreme Court ruling that desegregated public schools. The **NAACP**'s chief counsel, **Thurgood Marshall**, won a major victory for black Americans when he convinced the Supreme Court to hear *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in 1954. Chief Justice **Earl Warren**, who supported desegregation, then convinced the justices to hand down a unanimous ruling that overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine the Court had established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* sixty years earlier. President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** personally opposed the decision and therefore refused to comment on the ruling or endorse the blossoming civil rights movement.

## **Civil Rights Act of 1957**

An act that nominally outlawed racial segregation and created a civil rights division within the Justice Department. Congress passed the act in the wake of the **Montgomery bus boycott** and the **Little Rock crisis**. However, the act had more of a symbolic impact than a legal one; President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** signed the bill only reluctantly and assured southern politicians that the law would not bring about any major changes in daily life.

## **Civil Rights Act of 1964**

An act that outlawed discrimination in public places and the workplace on the basis of race, religion, nationality, or gender. The act also created the **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** to ensure that people would abide by the law. President **Lyndon B. Johnson** used all his political power to push the bill through Congress, because he knew the bill would allow him to take control of the divided Democratic Party. Interestingly, the incorporation of the word *gender* into the law helped the **feminist movement** gain momentum in the late 1960s.

## **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**

An organization founded in 1942 to campaign against segregation in the North using sit-ins and other nonviolent forms of protest. CORE later worked closely with the **SNCC**, the **SCLC**, and the **NAACP** to organize nonviolent rallies and protests such as the **Freedom Rides** and the **March on Washington**.

## **Freedom Rides**

A series of protests aimed at the desegregation of buses in the South. Beginning in 1961, **CORE** and the **SNCC** organized several interracial Freedom Rides to win sympathy from whites in the North by provoking racist southerners. **Freedom Riders** met violent mobs throughout Alabama who burned buses and nearly beat several of the riders to death. Southern police also arrested riders for inciting violence and disturbing the peace.

## **Freedom Summer**

An **SNCC**-sponsored event that sent nearly 1,000 people—mostly young, white student volunteers from the North—to Mississippi in 1964 to provoke southern white ire. Volunteers helped register tens of thousands of black voters, formed the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**, and taught civic classes to poor blacks. Unfortunately, these volunteers paid a heavy price: hundreds were arrested, scores were stabbed and shot, and several died in their efforts to empower black Mississippians. The **Freedom Summer** campaign helped convince the U.S. Congress to ratify the **Twenty-Fourth Amendment** and pass the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**.

## Greensboro Sit-In

A 1960 protest in which four black college students sat at an all-white lunch counter in a Woolworth's store in **Greensboro**, North Carolina, and demanded service. When the clerks refused, the students continued to sit quietly at the counter and refused to leave. The students returned each subsequent day with additional supporters until hundreds of people had joined them. City officials eventually agreed to desegregate Woolworth's and other local stores, but only after blacks had waged a long and costly boycott. The Greensboro sit-in encouraged other student leaders to form the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** and inaugurated the **sit-in movement** that spread across the country.

## Jim Crow Laws

A term for racist laws and social orders in the South that kept blacks separate from and subordinate to whites. The Jim Crow laws that appeared after the **Plessy v. Ferguson** ruling of 1896 forced blacks to sit, eat, sleep, study, and work in separate facilities (although these Jim Crow laws were not as harsh as the **black codes** of the Reconstruction era). In 1955, **Rosa Parks** challenged one of the Jim Crow laws of Montgomery, Alabama, when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. Blacks went on to protest these laws effectively with boycotts and sit-ins during the civil rights movement. The federal government also helped the movement with the passage of the **Civil Rights Act in 1964**.

## Little Rock Crisis

A crisis that occurred in 1957 when the governor of Arkansas, **Orval Faubus**, defied a federal court order to integrate public high schools in the state and federal troops were sent in to enforce the law. In the hopes of winning votes from his white constituents, Faubus flouted the law and ordered the **Arkansas National Guard** to prevent nine black students from entering **Central High School** in the state's capital, Little Rock. President **Dwight D. Eisenhower**, though not a supporter of the civil rights movement, placed the National Guard under federal authority and sent 1,000 army troops to escort the students to class and uphold U.S. law.

## March on Washington

One of the largest political rallies in American history, during which more than 200,000 blacks and whites gathered in front of the **Lincoln Memorial** in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, to demonstrate their support for more civil rights legislation from Congress. Empowered by their success in Birmingham, **SCLC** leaders joined forces with the **SNCC**, **CORE**, and the **NAACP** in organizing the march. **Martin Luther King Jr.** ended the rally with his famous **"I have a dream" speech**.

## Montgomery Bus Boycott

A yearlong boycott beginning in 1955 in which blacks avoided city transportation in **Montgomery**, Alabama, to protest the arrest of **Rosa Parks** for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. **Martin Luther King Jr.** became a national figure when he took charge of the boycott and protest. The Supreme Court ended the boycott the following year, forcing the city of Montgomery to desegregate public transportation.

## National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

An organization founded by **W. E. B. Du Bois** and several white northerners that sought to achieve legal victories for blacks, especially the reversal of the **"separate but equal"** doctrine established by

the Supreme Court in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. After decades of legal battles, the NAACP's top lawyer, **Thurgood Marshall**, finally achieved several victories, including *Morgan v. Virginia*, *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, and *Sweatt v. Painter*. The NAACP's greatest victory, however, came when the Supreme Court reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* with the ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas***, ruling in 1954.

### **Nation of Islam**

A group founded in 1930 to promote **black nationalism** in Detroit's black community during the **Great Depression**. Under the early leadership of **Elijah Muhammad**, the organization appealed to the poorest urban blacks and quickly spread to the major cities in the East. **Malcolm X** emerged as the organization's chief spokesman in the early 1950s and continued to push for black independence from whites and self-reliance in daily life. The Nation of Islam also operated many stores in urban black neighborhoods throughout America to promote black economic independence.

### **Selma Campaign**

A black voter-registration drive in the small town of **Selma**, Alabama, that became a focal point for the civil rights movement in 1965. When police attacked thousands of peaceful black protesters petitioning the government for the right to vote, national controversy ensued. "**Bloody Sunday**," as the incident came to be called, shocked northerners, Congress, and President **Lyndon B. Johnson**, who asked Congress to help protect black voting rights. Congress complied and passed the **Voting Rights Act** in 1965.

### **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**

A coalition founded in 1957 by **Martin Luther King Jr.** and nearly one hundred other southern ministers to rally church support for the blossoming civil rights movement. King and other SCLC leaders preached a way to integrate black and white America through "**love and nonviolence**." Although the SCLC did not launch the widespread peaceful protest movement that King originally envisioned, it did play a prominent role in most of the nonviolent campaigns that took place between 1957 and 1965.

### **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**

A civil rights organization founded in 1960, after the highly successful **Greensboro sit-in**, whose goal was to organize students on campuses across the country. The SNCC was one of the most active groups of the civil rights movement and participated in nearly every major peaceful campaign. Ironically, disillusioned SNCC members such as **Stokely Carmichael** formulated the philosophy of "**black power**" to advocate violence in order to break away from white society rather than bring about peaceful integration.

### **Twenty-Fourth Amendment**

An amendment to the U.S. Constitution that outlawed the payment of **poll taxes** as a prerequisite for voting in federal elections. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment was ratified in 1964.

### **Voting Rights Act**

A 1965 act that outlawed literacy tests as a voting prerequisite and sent federal election officials into the South to help blacks register to vote. Congress passed the act partly in response to racial violence in **Selma**, Alabama. Because the new law drastically increased the percentage of black

voters in the South, some historians have claimed that it marked the true end of **Reconstruction**, which had begun exactly one hundred years earlier.

### **Watts Riots**

Violent riots that occurred in the Watts neighborhood of **Los Angeles** in 1965. For six days, more than 50,000 black residents rioted to protest poverty, racism, and continued unemployment. It took 20,000 National Guardsmen to end the riots, and more than thirty people died in the mayhem.