

Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

In May 1954, following the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case, the US Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Oliver Brown, a father of a school-aged child, challenged the law that stated he had to send his daughter to an all-black school much further away than the local, all-white school. The Supreme Court agreed and concluded: "In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" referring to and overturning the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case that had permitted separate but equal facilities.

But with no fixed timetable, and with the Southern states in no hurry to implement the ruling, the court was obliged to follow up, a year later, with an order that schools must integrate "with all deliberate speed". School buses 'bussed' school children sometimes considerable distances to ensure integration and 15 years later, in 1969, the Supreme Court had to intervene again when many schools had still to desegregate.

Emmett Till

In August 1955, a 14-year-old black boy, Emmett Till, was mutilated and murdered by white racists in Mississippi. His crime – "disrespecting" a white woman. His killers were controversially found not guilty by a white jury. Later, safe from retrial on the double jeopardy ruling, the killers admitted their guilt and sold their stories to the press, much to national outrage.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, 42-year-old Rosa Parks, seated in a segregated bus, refused to give up her seat to a white man. The bus driver called the police and Parks was arrested. Parks was the local secretary of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the branch had been looking for an opportunity to stage a boycott of the city's buses. The opportunity now presented itself and the boycott duly started on December 5. The Montgomery boycott was led by a 26-year-old recently appointed Baptist Reverend by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lasting a year the boycott caused the Montgomery blacks much hardship and inconvenience but eventually the city's buses, so reliant on its black customers, relented. In November 1956 the Supreme Court declared segregation on public transport to be illegal and a month later, on December 21, stepping on board the first non-segregated bus in Montgomery was the Reverend King.

Inspired by the non-confrontational approach adopted by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr spoke for the rising black consciousness of 1950s black America. "The objective," said King, "was not to coerce but to correct; not to break bodies or wills but to move hearts."

The 'Little Rock Nine'

In September 1957 nine black students tried to enroll at the recently desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The State Governor ordered the Arkansas National Guard to keep them out. Finally, after three weeks of picketing and escalating tension, President Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to escort the 'Little Rock Nine' to class. Televised throughout America, it showed the stark reality of racial injustice still prevalent within its borders. Eisenhower's attitude towards civil rights however was lukewarm, at best, and one month before the 1960 presidential election it was his Democratic opponent that stole the lead on civil rights. During a sit-in in Atlanta, King was arrested and sentenced to four months hard labour.

It was John F. Kennedy that rang King's wife and his brother, Robert, not Eisenhower, that pulled the strings and had King's sentence reversed. With the black vote now in his favor, Kennedy went on to win the election of November 1960.

The Student Sit-ins 1960

Black students throughout the South extended their non-violent protests by organizing sit-ins. In February 1960 four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina were denied service in a segregated Woolworth's diner. Refusing to leave, they were threatened and insulted, but, determined they should be served, they returned the following day, and again throughout the week. Students, both black and white, joined their protest, prepared to sit in dignified silence whilst mobs jeered, poked and smeared ketchup and mustard in their hair.

The event triggers many similar nonviolent protests throughout the South. Six months later the original four protesters are served lunch at the same Woolworth's counter. Student sit-ins would be effective throughout the Deep South in integrating parks, swimming pools, theaters, libraries, and other public facilities. (Raleigh, N.C.) The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded at Shaw University, providing young blacks with a place in the civil rights movement. The SNCC later grew into a more radical organization, especially under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael (1966–1967).

But the protests continued, rapidly spreading across the South, affecting restaurants, hotels, shops, libraries, beaches and most public facilities. Television cameras tracked the story as the tension escalated, and families throughout America and abroad watched with horror the unfolding indignities and intimidation happening in the land of the free.

In 1962 President Kennedy had to order troops to assist James Meredith, a young black man, enrolled at the University of Mississippi. In September, the Governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, physically blocked Meredith's entrance to the university. The following month Meredith tried again, this time with the aid of Kennedy's federal enforcement. The ensuing riots saw two killed and over 160 injured. Meredith finally took his place and having suffered a year of racism and intimidation, graduated in August 1963 with a degree in political science.

Freedom Rides 1961

Whilst state-run segregated buses had been declared illegal, inter-state bus facilities remained segregated. In May 1961 protestors embarked on the Freedom Rides, organized by CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Over the spring and summer, student volunteers begin taking bus trips through the South to test out new laws that prohibit segregation in interstate travel facilities, which includes bus and railway stations. Several of the groups of "freedom riders," as they are called, are attacked by angry mobs along the way. The rides involve more than 1,000 volunteers, black and white. They were met with civil disturbances and violence throughout the South as white mobs attacked the buses. In Montgomery the governor of Alabama refused to send the State Guard to protect the passengers and Robert Kennedy had to order in federal troops to break-up the increasingly violent scenes. The jailed freedom riders were treated harshly, crammed into tiny, filthy cells and sporadically beaten. In Jackson, some male prisoners were forced to do hard labor in 100-degree heat. Others were transferred to the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, where they were treated to harsh conditions. Sometimes the men were suspended by "wrist breakers" from the walls. Typically, the windows

of their cells were shut tight on hot days, making it hard for them to breathe. But finally, effective from November 1, 1961, inter-state bus services were desegregated.

Letter from Birmingham Jail- (Freedom Summer)

May 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama, saw a major protest against the city's segregation policies. The city's police (under the direction of the notorious Bull Connor) misused dogs and fire hoses against the peaceful demonstrators that included women and children. 3,000 were arrested, amongst them, King, his thirteenth arrest. From his cell, King used scrap pieces of paper and margins of newspapers to write a 7,000-word open letter on the moral issues of the civil rights movement. Known as the Letter from Birmingham Jail, it included the line, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy spoke on national television about the need for civil rights: "Legislation cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the home of every American." Within a few days Kennedy had presented Congress a sweeping raft of civil rights legislation which despite its moral necessity required greater Federal power at the expense of State power. It was perhaps asking too much. Civil rights leaders, realizing the potential for its failure, decided, against Kennedy's advice, to organize a huge demonstration to pressurize Congress into passing the bill.

The March on Washington (Midpoint and climax of the movement)

On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people took part in the 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom'. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial Joan Baez led the singing of the song that had become the anthem of the civil rights movement, We Shall Overcome, and Bob Dylan sang Blowin' In The Wind. The marchers, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, a complete cross section of society, listened as King proclaimed, "I have a dream" "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood."

The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing

A mere month later, in Birmingham, Alabama, four white supremacists detonated a bomb at a Baptist Church popular with African Americans. Twenty were injured but tragically four young girls, aged 11 to 14, were killed in the explosion. After a series of bungled investigations into the Birmingham Church Bombing, involving blocked evidence and malpractices, the last of the four killers was finally convicted in 2002. It had taken almost four decades.

The Proposed Civil Rights Bill of 1963

On November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated. Lyndon B Johnson, appointed his successor, prioritized the Civil Rights bill, which, on July 2, 1964, was passed. Segregation in public facilities was now illegal as was to discriminate on the basis of race, colour, religion or country of origin. The Civil Rights Movement had taken another substantial step forward

Malcolm X, Muslim's and the Black Panther Party (Black Power) 1965 -1968

(Harlem, N.Y.) Malcolm X, Black Nationalist and founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, is shot to death. Blacks begin a march to Montgomery in support of voting rights but are stopped at the Pettus Bridge by a police blockade. Fifty marchers are hospitalized after police use tear gas, whips, and clubs against them. The incident is dubbed "Bloody Sunday" by the media. The march is considered the catalyst for pushing through the voting rights act five months later. Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the militant Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), coined the phrase "**Black Power**" in a speech in Seattle. He defines it as an assertion of black pride and "the coming together of black people to fight for their liberation by any means necessary." The term's radicalism alarms many who believe the civil rights movement's effectiveness and moral authority crucially depend on nonviolent civil disobedience. Major race riots take place in Newark (July 12–16) and Detroit (July 23–30).

Martin Luther King shot dead 1968

Memphis, King Assassination and the Poor People's March, 1968 (Memphis, Tenn.) Martin Luther King, at age 39, is shot as he stands on the balcony outside his hotel room. Escaped convict and committed racist James Earl Ray is convicted of the crime. Rev. James Lawson invited King to Memphis, Tennessee, in March 1968 to support a sanitation workers' strike. These workers launched a campaign for union representation after two workers were accidentally killed on the job, and King considered their struggle to be a vital part of the Poor People's Campaign he was planning.

A day after delivering his stirring "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermon, which has become famous for his vision of American society, King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Riots broke out in black neighborhoods in more than 110 cities across the United States in the days that followed, notably in Chicago, Baltimore, and in Washington, D.C. The damage done in many cities destroyed black businesses and homes, and slowed economic development for a generation.

The day before King's funeral, April 8, Coretta Scott King and three of the King children led 20,000 marchers through the streets of Memphis, holding signs that read, "Honor King: End Racism" and "Union Justice Now". Armed National Guardsmen lined the streets, sitting on M-48 tanks, to protect the marchers, and helicopters circled overhead. On April 9 Mrs. King led another 150,000 people in a funeral procession through the streets of Atlanta. Her dignity revived courage and hope in many of the Movement's members, cementing her place as the new leader in the struggle for racial equality.

Coretta King said "Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life for the poor of the world, the garbage workers of Memphis and the peasants of Vietnam. The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day want is abolished, on the day wars are no more, on that day I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace".

Rev. Ralph Abernathy succeeded King as the head of the SCLC and attempted to carry forth King's plan for a Poor People's March. It was to unite blacks and whites to campaign for fundamental changes in American society and economic structure. The march went forward under Abernathy's plainspoken leadership but did not achieve its goals.

1971 - The Supreme Court, in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, upholds busing as a legitimate means for achieving integration of public schools. Although largely unwelcome (and sometimes violently opposed) in local school districts, court-ordered busing plans in cities such as Charlotte, Boston, and Denver continued until the late 1990s.

