

# Civil Rights Movement

During the first half of the 20th century, the United States existed as two nations in one. The Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decreed that the legislation of two separate societies — one black and one white — was permitted as long as the two were equal.

States across the North and South passed laws creating separate schools and public facilities for each race. These regulations, known as Jim Crow laws, reestablished white authority after it had diminished during the Reconstruction era. Across the land, blacks and whites dined at separate restaurants, bathed in separate swimming pools, and drank from separate water fountains.

In the aftermath of World War II, America sought to demonstrate to the world the merit of free democracies over communist dictatorships. But its segregation system exposed fundamental hypocrisy. Change began brewing in the late 1940s. In 1948, President Harry Truman ordered the end of segregation in the armed services, and in 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League Baseball. But the wall built by Jim Crow legislation seemed insurmountable.

## Schools

The first major battleground was in the schools. It was very clear by mid-century that southern states had expertly enacted separate educational systems. These schools, however, were never equal. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by attorney Thurgood Marshall, sued public schools across the South, insisting that the "separate but equal" clause had been violated.

In no state where distinct racial education laws existed was there equality in public spending. Teachers in white schools were paid better wages, school buildings for white students were maintained more carefully, and funds for educational materials flowed more liberally into white schools. States normally spent 10 to 20 times on the education of white students as they spent on African American students.

The Supreme Court finally decided to rule on this subject in 1954 in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case. The verdict was unanimous against segregation. "Separate facilities are inherently unequal," read Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion. Warren worked tirelessly to achieve a 9-0 ruling. He feared any dissent might provide a legal argument for the forces against integration. The united Supreme Court sent a clear message: schools had to integrate. They ruled that segregation of public schools was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which states that all citizens deserve equal protection under the law.

The North and the border states quickly complied with the ruling, but the *Brown* decision fell on deaf ears in the South. The Court had stopped short of insisting on immediate integration, instead asking local governments to proceed "with all deliberate speed" in complying.

Ten years after *Brown*, fewer than ten percent of Southern public schools had integrated. Some areas achieved a zero percent compliance rate. The ruling did not address separate restrooms, bus seats, or hotel rooms, so Jim Crow laws remained intact. But cautious first steps toward an equal society had been taken.

## Bus Boycott

On a cold December evening in 1955, Rosa Parks quietly incited a revolution — by just sitting down. She was tired after spending the day at work as a department store seamstress. She stepped onto the bus for the ride home and sat in the fifth row — the first row of the "Colored Section."

In Montgomery, Alabama, when a bus became full, the seats nearer the front were given to white passengers.

Montgomery bus driver James Blake ordered Parks and three other African Americans seated nearby to move ("Move y'all, I want those two seats,") to the back of the bus.

Three riders complied; Parks did not.

After Parks refused to move, she was arrested and fined \$10. The chain of events triggered by her arrest changed the United States.



## King, Abernathy, Boycott, and the SCLC

In 1955, a little-known minister named Martin Luther King Jr. led the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery.

Born and educated in Atlanta, King studied the writings and practices of Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas Gandhi. Their teaching advocated civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance to social injustice. A staunch devotee of nonviolence, King and his colleague Ralph Abernathy organized a boycott of Montgomery's buses.

The demands they made were simple: Black passengers should be treated with courtesy. Seating should be allotted on a first-come-first-serve basis, with white passengers sitting from front to back and black passengers sitting from back to front. And African American drivers should drive routes that primarily serviced African Americans. On Monday, December 5, 1955 the boycott went into effect.



Martin Luther King Jr. organized the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, which began a chain reaction of similar boycotts throughout the South. In 1956, the Supreme Court voted to end segregated busing.

Montgomery officials stopped at nothing in attempting to sabotage the boycott. King and Abernathy were arrested. Violence began during the action and continued after its conclusion. Four churches — as well as the homes of King and Abernathy — were bombed. But the boycott continued.

King and Abernathy's organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), had hoped for a 50 percent support rate among African Americans. To their surprise and delight, 99 percent of the city's African Americans refused to ride the buses. People walked to work or rode their bikes, and carpools were established to help the elderly. The bus company suffered thousands of dollars in lost revenue.

Finally, on November 23, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the MIA. Segregated busing was declared unconstitutional. City officials reluctantly agreed to comply with the Court Ruling. The black community of Montgomery had held firm in their resolve.

The Montgomery bus boycott triggered a firestorm in the South. Across the region, blacks resisted "moving to the back of the bus."

Similar actions flared up in other cities. The boycott put Martin Luther King Jr. in the national spotlight. He became the acknowledged leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1955, the Women's Political Council issued a leaflet calling for a boycott of Montgomery buses: Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. Another Negro Woman has been arrested and put in jail because she refused to give up her bus seat. Don't ride the buses to work to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk. Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7:00 P.M. at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instruction.

With Ralph Abernathy, King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This organization was dedicated to fighting Jim Crow segregation. African Americans boldly declared to the rest of the country that their movement would be peaceful, organized, and determined.

To modern eyes, getting a seat on a bus may not seem like a great feat. But in 1955, sitting down marked the first step in a revolution.

## Showdown at Little Rock

Three years after the Supreme Court declared race-based segregation illegal, a military showdown took place in Little Rock, Arkansas. On September 3, 1957, nine black students attempted to attend the all-white Central High School.

Under the pretext of maintaining order, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus mobilized the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the students, known as the Little Rock Nine, from entering the school. After a federal judge declared the action illegal, Faubus removed the troops. When the students tried to enter again on September 24, they were taken into the school through a back door. Word of this spread throughout the community, and a thousand irate citizens stormed the school grounds. The police desperately tried to keep the angry crowd under control as concerned onlookers whisked the students to safety.

The nation watched all of this on television. President Eisenhower was compelled to act.

Eisenhower was not a strong proponent of civil rights. He feared that the *Brown* decision could lead to an impasse between the federal government and the states. Now that very stalemate had come. The rest of the country seemed to side with the black students, and the Arkansas state government was defying a federal decree. The situation hearkened back to the dangerous federal-state conflicts of the 19th century that followed the end of the Civil War.

On September 25, Eisenhower ordered the troops of the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock, marking the first time United States troops were dispatched to the South since Reconstruction. He federalized the Arkansas National Guard in order to remove the soldiers from Faubus's control. For the next few months, the African American students attended school under armed supervision.

The following year, Little Rock officials closed the schools to prevent integration. But in 1959, the schools were open again. Both black and white children were in attendance.

The tide was slowly turning in favor of those advocating civil rights for African Americans. An astonished America watched footage of brutish, white southerners mercilessly harassing clean-cut, respectful African American children trying to get an education. Television swayed public opinion toward integration.

In 1959, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, the first such measure since Reconstruction. The law created a permanent civil rights commission to assist black suffrage. The measure had little teeth and proved ineffective, but it paved the way for more powerful legislation in the years to come.

Buses and schools had come under attack. Next on the menu: a luncheonette counter.



To ensure their safety, African American students were escorted to Central High School in a U.S. Army car.