

A History of The Civil Rights Movement

A History of the Civil Rights Movement introduces students to the important events and fascinating individuals associated with one of the most tumultuous periods of social upheaval and change in American history. From the Reconstruction period through the emergence of Jesse Jackson as a presidential candidate, this program not only provides students with a broad historical overview of the Civil Rights Movement, but also offers an excellent foundation for understanding modern African-American life and culture.

Historical Overview

Following the abolition of slavery, African Americans faced a difficult journey. After Reconstruction and the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, blacks were subjected to social, political and economic discrimination and mob violence. Voting laws were passed that effectively silenced blacks and Jim Crow policies maintained a system of segregated public facilities. African Americans fleeing north faced an often alien and hostile environment and experienced discrimination in housing, education and the workplace.

Following both World Wars, African-American veterans returned home with a renewed vigor to advocate for equal rights and black leaders began to challenge the principle of racial segregation. Brown vs. Board of Education in 1951 invalidated segregation and paved the way to equal rights for all Americans. Rosa Parks led an effort to strike down Montgomery, Alabama's Jim Crow Transportation Laws in 1955, an effort that elevated Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence. King's stirring speech at the March on Washington in 1963 helped compel Congress to pass legislation that embraced civil and voting rights for all Americans.

Following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement splintered and nearly collapsed. While some goals of the African-American struggle for civil rights have been partially achieved, problems of racism, poverty, violence and unequal education still exist. The fight for civil rights continues and will require new strategies, bold leadership and universal participation.

Vocabulary

Civil War — A major war in the United States between 1861 and 1865 in which northern states battled southern Confederate states that were attempting to leave the Union.

Jim Crow — Laws that were designed to enforce racial segregation and maintain white supremacy in the South after the Civil War.

Plessy v. Ferguson — An 1896 Supreme Court decision that upheld the Jim Crow principle of racial segregation.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) — An organization created in 1909 to end segregation and discrimination against African Americans in the United States.

Ku Klux Klan — A secret terror organization dedicated to white supremacy, first organized in the South after the Civil War.

World War I — The first major war of the 20th century that involved the Allied Powers, led by Great Britain, France and Russia, and their opponents, the Central Powers, which included Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Universal Negro Improvement Association — An organization founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey to improve social and economic conditions for Africans all over the world.

World War II — The second major war of the 20th century that involved the Allied Powers led by England, France, the Soviet Union and the United States and their opponents, the Axis Powers, which included Germany, Japan and Italy.

March on Washington (1963) — A famous gathering of over 200,000 demonstrators supporting the Civil Rights Movement and demanding that all people have equal justice under the law. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at this event.

Civil Rights Act of 1964 — Major, comprehensive legislation intended to end discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin.

Voting Right Act of 1965 — Legislation developed to end discriminatory practices that made it impossible for some people to exercise their right to vote.

Nation of Islam — A political and religious organization founded by Wallace Fard Muhammad in 1930 to improve social, economic and mental conditions for African Americans.

Discussion Questions

- Who was Marcus Garvey? Describe the goals of his Universal Negro Improvement Association.
- How did images of Bull Connor's actions in Alabama affect public opinion?
- Why was Malcolm X considered the antithesis of Martin Luther King? Ask students to offer their thoughts on the goals of nonviolence and integration during the Civil Rights Movement.

Follow-up Activities

- Homer Plessy, an African American, was arrested when he boarded a train in Louisiana and refused to move to an all-black coach. Plessy vs. Ferguson represents a profound moment in the history of racial segregation. Ask students to analyze the constitutional issues involved in this case, describe what the Supreme Court said of Constitutional rights and speculate about the future implications of this 1896 case. Comprehensive information on Plessy vs. Ferguson may be found at this web site:
www.usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/33.htm
- Ask students to interview someone they know who was either active in or a supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, or who can speak about the major social changes that occurred in the 1960s. Students may also speak to someone who is currently engaged in working for civil rights. Students should prepare questions that focus on the individual's motivation, methods and experiences as an activist. Have students present what they learned from their interviewee to the class in an oral, written or multimedia presentation.
- For over a year during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, thousand of African Americans refused to ride the city buses, often walking for miles in protest of the Montgomery transportation system's unfair rules. Ask students to discuss the concept of unity, and the role universal participation played in the success of this boycott. As an extension, students may research and discuss other successful boycotts or mass movements from American history.

Suggested Internet Resources

- memory.loc.gov/ammem/aohtml/exhibit/aopart9.html
The Library of Congress provides an excellent historical overview of the Civil Rights Era.
- www.usm.edu/crdp/
The University of Southern Mississippi's Civil Rights Documentation Project contains numerous accounts from civil rights activists who fought against discrimination in the South.
- www.stanford.edu/group/King/
Stanford University's "Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute" has many secondary and primary source documents written about Martin Luther King, Jr.

Suggested Print Resources

- Bausum, Ann. *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement*. National Geographic, Washington, D.C.; 2006.
- Levine, Ellen. *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists tell their own Stories*. Putnam, New York, NY; 1993.
- Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. Viking, New York, NY; 1987.

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