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'Jim Crow' laws

The American Civil War (1861-5) put a legal end to slavery and gave black men the vote in 1865. Yet despite this, black Americans were treated as inferior citizens.

In the South, the 'Jim Crow' laws, segregation laws that kept blacks and whites apart, controlled the lives of the black population. Black people had to use separate facilities for public transport, housing, hospitals, restaurants and shops. In 1896 separate public schools were ruled to be legal according to the constitution. This separation of facilities was considered acceptable as long as the facilities were equal in quality.

In the Northern states there was not a strict segregation policy. However, black people still experienced discrimination in jobs, education, housing and trade unions.

Few black citizens were able to exercise their right to vote because registered voters had to own property, which many blacks did not. In some states they had to pass a literacy test, which was fixed by white officials. Those who tried to vote were threatened or beaten.

Resistance at the beginning of the 20th century

Many black people took a stand over segregation, risking hurt or punishment. Resistance varied.

- Booker T. Washington founded the first Negro university. He said that black people should work to develop their own skills. This would bring them security and provide the means to fight segregation in the long term.
- William Edward Burghardt Du Bois argued that legal resistance to segregation, lack of voting rights and lynching was the best way to fight for equality. His organisation, the National Society for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), worked at the local level, bringing many legal cases to court in defence of black civil rights.
- Other organisations also tried to challenge segregation, for example the National Urban League, the National Negro Congress and the Communist Party.
- African Americans drew strength from their churches and their culture. For example, the coming of jazz in the 1920s, using African drums and plantation-based rhythms, was a challenge to the white stereotypes of 'black music' created in the 'Jim Crow' minstrel shows. Jazz became a great source of pride.



The principle of "separate but equal" overturned

One of the NAACP's most significant legal victories came in 1954 with the case of Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education in Kansas. The judgment said that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision provided a huge spur to the civil rights movement, which started to take 'direct action' through non-violent protest to end segregation and discrimination. One such example was the Montgomery bus boycott.

Montgomery bus boycott, 1955

Rosa Parks, who was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, triggered the Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King. Blacks and whites that disagreed with segregation refused to use the buses and pay fares to the bus companies. The bus boycott lasted over a year. Finally, the Supreme Court said that buses should be desegregated.

The campaign revealed King's great gift for getting people to work together and his ability as a powerful speaker. It also led to the creation of the church-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), with King as its president, dedicated to co-ordinating non-violent civil rights campaigns around the South.

Civil rights campaigns, 1960-3

In the 1960s civil rights protests heated up even more. For example:

- Four black students protested at Woolworth's segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Numerous sit-ins followed aiming to integrate libraries, parks, theatres and swimming pools in the Southern states. These protests resulted in the setting up of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organisation of young black people who wanted to be involved in the campaign for civil rights.
- 'Freedom riders', organised by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), travelled on interstate buses to the South to defy desegregation on the buses and in the bus stations. They refused to give up, even when they faced violence and abuse.
- James Meredith was the first black student to enrol at the University of Mississippi. A riot broke out and President Kennedy was forced to call in the National Guard just so Meredith could register.
- Martin Luther King made Birmingham, Alabama, the focus of another powerful protest against segregation. The events in Alabama and elsewhere in 1963 convinced President Kennedy of the need to push for a new civil rights bill.
- Later in 1963 King made his famous "I have a dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial to 250,000 people who marched on Washington. The demonstration attracted immense media interest and included a wide range of civil rights organisations. They demanded an end to segregation and discrimination.



Voter registration, 1964-5

President Johnson finally passed the Civil Rights Act in July 1964. It forbade discrimination of all kinds based on race or religion. An Equal Employment Commission was set up.

Campaigners now turned their attention to voting rights. 'Freedom Summer' was a big campaign to register black people to vote in 1964. Many civil rights activists, including white students from the North, went to Mississippi. This was the poorest state, where 86% of black families lived in poverty. Activists hoped that the vote would give the black community the means to change their society. CORE led the campaign and other organisations took part. Many campaigners were attacked and threatened and three were murdered. This horrified the nation and gained more support for the movement.

In March 1965, 600 marchers left Selma to walk 54 miles to Montgomery, the state capital, to push for voter registration. When the marchers reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, police attacked the adults and children with clubs and tear gas. Later Martin Luther King led another march to the same bridge in memory of 'Bloody Sunday'. Civil rights leaders organised a third march from Selma to Montgomery, this time with federal troops for protection, after James Reeb, a white minister from Boston, was murdered.

Such voter registration drives led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Poll tax and literacy tests could no longer be required as qualifications to vote.

The death of Martin Luther King

Dr King started to plan another march on Washington. It would be called the Poor People's Campaign for economic equality. He took time out to support the black sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee, in March 1968. On 4 April, Martin Luther King was assassinated. The news shocked the world. There followed riots in 125 cities across the USA. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 the day after King's funeral, extending government protection to civil rights workers and making it illegal to discriminate in the sale and rental of housing.



Black power

A different kind of black American leader was emerging.

- Malcolm X, a member of the Nation of Islam, was critical of King's belief in non-violence and passive resistance. He said that black people had a right to defend themselves if attacked. He also felt that civil rights legislation was not enough to solve the problems experienced by poor blacks living in the slums of the North. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965.
- Stokely Carmichael, the leader of SNCC in 1966, popularised the term 'black power'. He was against the integration of blacks into white society.
- In 1966 Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panthers (for Self Defence) in Oakland, California. Members of this organisation said they would fight for the right of blacks to decide their own destiny and gain freedom from white control.

Black leaders sometimes disagreed on the best direction for activism and the civil rights movement, and racial conflicts continued throughout the 1960s. However, one of the most important aims and consequences of the black power movement was to build up pride and strength in black communities.