

“We Shall Overcome”: The Modern Civil Rights Movement

Year 3
History Unit 3
Sourcebook

Lesson 1: The Birth of a Movement



March on Washington, August 28, 1963, with civil rights leaders (left to right) Whitney M. Young, Jr., Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Walter P. Reuther, and Arnold Aronson. (Scherman, Rowland. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

To what extent did black Americans gain civil rights after World War II?

Station 1: *Plessy v. Ferguson*
Plessy v. Ferguson

Read the article “*Plessy v. Ferguson*” on the History Channel website.

***Plessy v. Ferguson* Majority Opinion**

The following text was adapted from Justice Henry Billings Brown’s majority opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

The object of the [14th] Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.

Brown, Henry Billings. Majority Opinion in Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537. 1896. The Supreme Court.

Station 2: Jim Crow Laws

Jim Crow Laws

Read the article “Jim Crow Laws” on the PBS American Experience website.

Examples of Jim Crow Laws

The following are examples of Jim Crow laws passed in multiple states beginning in the 1890s.

“It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers.”

—Birmingham, Alabama, 1930

“Marriages are void when one party is a white person and the other is possessed of one-eighth or more negro, Japanese, or Chinese blood.”

—Nebraska, 1911

“Separate free schools shall be established for the education of children of African descent; and it shall be unlawful for any colored child to attend any white school, or any white child to attend a colored school.”

—Missouri, 1929

“All railroads carrying passengers in the state (other than street railroads) shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races, by providing two or more passenger cars for each passenger train, or by dividing the cars by a partition, so as to secure separate accommodations.”

—Tennessee, 1891

Jim Crow Laws. Courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of American History, AmericanHistory.SI.edu.

Station 3: *Brown v. Board of Education* ***Brown v. Board of Education***

Since 1896, segregation in American society had been legally protected by the Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson, which had defended segregation under the guise of “separate but equal.” Of course, segregated public spaces were anything but equal, but even so, into the early 1950s, the case continued to defend segregation. In 1954, though, the Supreme Court suddenly reversed course, unanimously ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” in the case Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. The case laid the groundwork for what would become the Civil Rights Movement.

The case began in 1951 in Topeka, Kansas. The Brown family lived minutes from an all-white school in Topeka, but their daughter had to take a bus far across town to an all-black school instead. Families, including the Brown family, joined together with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to sue the school system to challenge segregation. The NAACP lawyers, headed by Thurgood Marshall, a future Supreme Court justice, brought the case to the Supreme Court and won.

The following is an excerpt from the court’s unanimous decision, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren.

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. **Compulsory** [required] school attendance laws and the great **expenditures** [money spent] for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. ...

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. ... Any language in contrary to this finding is rejected. We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

Warren, Earl. Majority Opinion in Brown v. Board of Education. The Supreme Court. Courtesy of Oyez.org.

***Brown v. Board of Education* Fact Sheet**

Read “The Segregationists’ Arguments” and “The Integrationists’ Arguments” on the Smithsonian National Museum of American History website.

Station 4: Emmett Till
The Body of Emmett Till

In August 1955, Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old, was lynched in Mississippi after allegedly whistling at a white woman. His murderers, a group of white men, were all found innocent by an all-white jury. Emmett Till's gruesome murder caused waves of fury across the United States, as Americans were horrified by photographs of Till's mutilated body and the lack of justice brought to his murderers.

Watch the documentary short [The Body of Emmett Till](#) on [Time magazine's 100 Photos website](#).

Document A

The North Isn't Better than the South (Part 1)

The following excerpt is adapted from the book All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn by historian Jason Sokol (Basic Books: 2014).

For Edward Brooke, the North pulsed with promise. Brooke first set foot in New England during World War II, when his army regiment trained in Massachusetts. He was a native of Washington, D.C., and Washington was a Jim Crow city. When the war ended, Brooke moved to Boston and enrolled in law school. He voted for the first time in his life. And he did much more. Brooke was elected the state's attorney general in 1962; four years later, he won election to the United States Senate. Brooke achieved all of this in a state that was 97 percent white. What constituted political reality in Massachusetts — an African American man winning one million white votes — was the stuff of hallucinations below the Mason-Dixon line.

At the same time, an open secret haunted America's Northern states. As the nation gazed at Southern whites' resistance to the Civil Rights Movement [de jure segregation] — at the Klansmen and **demagogues** [*political leaders who gain popularity by exploiting prejudice*], attack dogs and cattle prods — many recoiled in horror. Northerners told themselves that such scenes came from a backward land, a dying region, a place apart from their own. Yet rampant segregation in cities across the country rendered racial inequality a national trait more than a Southern **aberration** [*abnormality*]. When black migrants streamed north during and after World War II, James Baldwin reflected, "They do not escape Jim Crow: They merely encounter another, not-less-deadly variety [de facto segregation]." They moved not to *New York*, but to Harlem and to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Here were the two sides to race in the Northeast, embodied in Brooke's political success and in Baldwin's cautionary tale. The cities of the Northeast were simultaneously beacons of interracial democracy and strongholds of racial segregation.

Both stories — seemingly contradictory — unfolded side by side, at the same moments, in the same places. Black neighborhoods **congealed** [*solidified*] in the years after World War II as segregated schools **proliferated** [*increased*] across the urban Northeast. The numbers of black Northerners in poverty and behind bars would continue to grow. And yet these cities and states were also home to movements for racial equality. African Americans scored advances at the voting booth, in the courtrooms, and in the region's cultural arenas as well.

These two stories are rarely told together. The North as a land of liberty holds power in the popular mind. When the idea of "Northern history" enters into the public consciousness, it often comes attached to the American Revolution or the Civil War. This was the home of the minutemen, righteous abolitionists, and the noble Union Army. Many schools still teach about slavery and segregation as distinctly Southern sins. And the North continues to bask in its enlightened glow. To travel from Boston to New York is to take in Harvard and Broadway, high culture and high ideals. Northern states are **blue states** [*states that vote for liberal Democrats*]; they have powered American liberalism and provided the first black president with his largest margins of victory. To many Americans, the North remains a higher place.

To scholars, however, the North as a land of liberty is an illusion. No reflective historian any longer believes it. Scholars have focused on the North's dark side. They have shown slavery's deep roots in New England and New York City. Histories of twentieth-century America reveal the North's bloody record of racial violence and its stunningly segregated landscape of affluent white suburbs and **destitute** [*impoverished*] brown cities. In recent works of history, the North and the South emerge as rough racial equivalents: The South had Mississippi; the North had the Boston busing crisis. If the progressive side of the North enters into these stories, it is depicted as a rhetorical mask that hides the reality of racism.

The truth is that both stories are real, and they have coexisted — although uneasily. This kind of truth can be difficult to assimilate into the public mind. It does not fit with a portrait of American history as the story of freedom. Neither does it jibe with an understanding of America as the story of oppression. The larger tale weaves together these warring strands — it is a story befitting a nation that boasts an African American president as well as staggering racial and economic inequality.

The Northeast has been, and remains, the most American of regions. This is not because it is a glittering model of freedom and democracy. It is because the Northeast has long held genuine movements for racial democracy, and for racial segregation, within the same heart. The Northeast best illuminates the conflict that stands at the center of American race relations.

The story of the Northeastern past reigned in the regional imagination. It scarcely acknowledged settlers' persecution of Native Americans, the centrality of African slavery in many Northern cities, episodes of brutal racial violence like the New York City Draft Riots, or the fact that Jim Crow laws had their origins in Massachusetts. In the region's collective history, the narrative of freedom had no room in it for these less savory realities. African Americans thus exposed the gap between the language of freedom and the inequalities that defined Northern life.

This was nothing particularly new in America — the white embrace of freedom with one hand and the tightening of the rope with the other. But it had a different urgency in the decades after World War II. The Civil Rights Movement exposed the enormity of the division that separated America's ideals from its practices. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to this as a distinctly American belief, one rooted deeply in history. "Ever since the Declaration of Independence, America has manifested a **schizophrenic** [*inconsistent*] personality on the question of race," King wrote. "She has been torn between selves — a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the **antithesis** [*opposite*] of democracy." This American contradiction has played out most powerfully in the Northeast. No region professed democracy more proudly than this one. And in the Northeast, the battle between racial democracy and its antithesis actually seemed like a fair fight — at least for a time.

*Sokol, Jason. All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn. 2014.
Courtesy of Salon.com*

Lessons 2–3: The Impact of Segregation



*Drinking fountain on the county courthouse lawn, Halifax, North Carolina, 1938
(Wikimedia)*

Against which form of segregation, de jure or de facto, should civil rights activists focus their efforts?

Homework

The North Isn't Better than the South (Part 2)

The following excerpt is adapted from the book All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn by historian Jason Sokol (Basic Books: 2014).

Say the phrase “the South,” and absorb the images it invites: plantations and [porches], white necks burned red by the sun, black backs whipped raw. Southern history is filled with extraordinary images of racism. The cast of characters ranges from antebellum slaveholders to hooded Klansmen. “The South” carries an established meaning in the American mind.

In contrast, Americans’ impressions of the North are far more [widespread]. This makes the North both easier and harder to think about, to write about, and to argue about than the South. There is an opening to define “the North,” and to give it a story, yet few previous definitions to set it up against.

Through the centuries, the North has been defined as all that the South was not. Historian James Cobb asserts, “Not only was the North *everywhere* the South was not, but in its relative wealth and presumed racial enlightenment, it had long seemed to be *everything* the impoverished and backward South was not, as well.” Perceptions began to change in the late-1960s. African Americans forced Southern whites to bury their Jim Crow signs; buildings burned in Northern cities; the ugly faces of resistance to integration appeared in Chicago and New York and Boston. The most important difference between North and South had vanished.

Through the 1960s, scholars as well as civil rights leaders questioned the racial meaning of the Mason-Dixon line. In 1961, historian Leon Litwack opened *North of Slavery* with a [piercing] observation: The Mason-Dixon line “is a convenient but often misleading geographical division.” Malcolm X stood before a Harlem audience in 1964 and declared: “America is Mississippi. There’s no such thing as a Mason-Dixon line — it’s America. There’s no such thing as the South — it’s America. ... And the mistake that you and I make is letting these *Northern* crackers shift the weight to the Southern crackers.” Malcolm’s **rhethoric** [*the art of using speech to persuade*] was more fiery, but his message was the same.

In the scholarship on the civil rights movement, the classical portrait held that the regions were marked by their difference. The South had Jim Crow and the North supposedly did not. Clearly, this perspective needed revision. But some of the most recent scholarship threatens to replace this old [superficial] argument with a new one. Scholars now highlight the most blatant examples of Northern racism. Yet these extreme cases tell us less about the whole. In addition, such studies underplay the fact that the South had an all-white politics, a racial **etiquette** [*rules of conduct*] of its own, and a unique history of slave societies, secession, and lynching.

In the South of the 1960s, “a gesture could blow up a town.” So wrote James Baldwin. A Southern black man could no more look a white woman in the eye than he could drink from the “whites only” water fountain; he could no sooner omit “ma’am” from the end of a sentence than he could represent his state in the U.S. Senate. As Baldwin noted, the most important regional difference was not found in basic racial attitudes. The difference was that “it has never been the North’s necessity to construct an entire way of life on the legend of the Negro’s inferiority.”

When faced with the stifling atmosphere in the South, just a little room to exhale could mean the world. Lewis Steel was an attorney for the NAACP. A native New Yorker, he worked on school segregation lawsuits in the North. He had no illusions about the racism that **festered** [*decayed, infected*] in Northern cities. Steel also traveled to the Deep South more than once. He was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1964, when James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman went missing in Mississippi. He realized that to work for the NAACP in the Deep South was to put one's life on the line. The North acted as a safety valve. "The instant I got on the plane" back to New York, "I could breathe," Steel said. "They could never breathe." In the North, "I was safer. There is no doubt about it. I could sleep in a hotel. I wasn't worried about somebody breaking into my room and killing me." This was a distinct advantage that Steel held over his Southern brethren.

African Americans who migrated from the South threw these regional differences into sharp relief. They did not totally escape Jim Crow, but many still felt they had traded up. Robert Williams, who left Georgia for New York, was among the uprooted millions. Of paramount importance, he reflected, was "feeling like a man. You can't do that in the South; they just won't let you." Northern cities answered some of their prayers. As another migrant told a reporter in 1956, "I'd rather be a lamppost in New York than the mayor of a city in Alabama." A writer for the *New Yorker* would later put it this way: Black migrants exchanged the "unnameable horrors" of Southern life for the "mundane humiliations" of their new land.

African Americans' ability to achieve equality all too often depended on white Northerners. Whites frequently helped to forge racial breakthroughs in what might be termed "symbolic" realms — on baseball diamonds, in human-relations programs, in state laws, and in electoral politics. But economic inequalities and segregation deepened by the day. Still, "symbolic" advances had real value. They helped to form the very fabric of Northern society. And on the question of what was possible in the North, they constructed a high ceiling.

Yet important generalizations emerged. There was a surprising amount of agreement among whites when it came to race. Liberal leaders and **purveyors** [*a people or group of people who spread or promote an idea*] of the white backlash alike believed that their region was a [fortification] of racial tolerance. Louise Day Hicks led the white resistance against school integration in Boston. At the same time, she championed her city's enlightenment. "The important thing is that I know *I'm* not bigoted," Hicks said. "To me that word means all the dreadful Southern segregationist Jim Crow business that's always shocked and revolted me." By the same token, many liberals **blanched** [*grew pale from shock/fear*] at the prospects of open housing and school integration. Racial conservatives and progressives shared a vast middle ground. They could agree that they were more advanced than Southerners, that African Americans could rise high in the North, and that African Americans ought neither move next door nor enroll their children in majority-white schools.

Gunnar Myrdal explored this apparent contradiction in his 1944 **treatise** [*essay, critique*], *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal was a Swedish scholar who conducted one of the great studies of American race relations. Among white Northerners, he observed, "almost everybody is against discrimination in general, but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in his own personal affairs." When racial equality remained a matter of principle, whites were all for it. But they exhibited prejudice when integration threatened to affect their everyday lives.

Over the decades, a glue has held the conflicting sentiments together. Most white Northerners agreed that their society ought to be color-blind. This allowed them to cast votes for black leaders. At the same time, even as city officials presided over segregated school systems, these officials claimed they were not segregating because they fancied themselves as color-blind.

While such claims to color blindness often proved empty, they presented an opening that African Americans could seize. This was what made white Northerners' racism so different: There were enormous holes between their professed ideals and their practices, and African Americans could blow those holes wide open. The gap between a white liberal yearning and a segregated reality left room — small but meaningful room — for racial progress.

*Sokol, Jason. All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn. 2014.
Courtesy of Salon.com*

Document A

Malcolm X on Segregation

The text below is an excerpt from The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley) (Ballentine Books: 1965).

The Deep South white press generally blacked me out. But they front-paged what I felt about the Northern white and black Freedom Riders going *South* to “demonstrate.” I called it “ridiculous”; their own Northern ghettos, right at home, had enough rats and roaches to kill to keep all of the Freedom Riders busy. I said that ultra-liberal New York had more integration problems than Mississippi. If the Northern Freedom Riders wanted more to do, they could work on the roots of such ghetto evils as the little children out in the streets at midnight, with apartment keys on strings around their necks to let themselves in, and their mothers and fathers drunk, drug addicts, thieves, prostitutes. ...

... I believe my own life mirrors this hypocrisy. I know nothing about the South. I am a creation of the Northern white man and of his hypocritical attitude toward the Negro. ...

... Actually, America’s most dangerous and threatening black man is the one who has been kept sealed up by the Northerner in the black ghettos — the Northern white power structure’s system to keep talking democracy while keeping the black man out of sight somewhere in the corner.

Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Ballentine Books, 1965, pp. 276-277

Document B

Martin Luther King, Jr. on Segregation

This is an excerpt from a speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr. in London on December 7, 1964.

While living with the conditions of slavery and then, later, segregation, many Negroes lost faith in themselves. Many came to feel that perhaps they were less than human. Many came to feel that they were inferior. This, it seems to me, is the greatest tragedy of slavery, the greatest tragedy of segregation, not merely what it does to the individual physically, but what it does to one psychologically. It scars the soul of the segregated as well as the segregator. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, while leaving the segregated with a false sense of inferiority. And this is exactly what happened

... But let me give you the other side, and that is the fact that there are still more than 10 million Negroes living in the Southern part of the United States, and some six million of the Negroes living in the Southern part of the United States are of voting age, and yet only two million are registered. This means that four million remain unregistered, not merely because they are **apathetic** [*uninterested*], not because they are **complacent** [*self-satisfied*] — this may be true of some few — but because all types of **conniving** [*conspiring to do something immoral, illegal, or harmful*] methods are still being used to keep Negroes from becoming registered voters. Complex literacy tests are given, which make it almost impossible for anybody to pass the test, even if he has a Ph.D. degree in any field or a law degree from the best law schools of the world. And then actual economic [retaliation is] often taken out against Negroes who seek to register and vote in some of the Black Belt counties of Mississippi and Alabama and other places. Then, some are actually faced with physical violence, and sometimes physical death.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. December 7, 1964. Courtesy of DemocracyNow.org under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license.

Lesson 4: “By Any Means Necessary”?



Civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. (left) and Malcolm X (right) on March 26, 1964, in Washington, D.C. (Library of Congress)

How did Malcolm X’s philosophy on achieving rights for black Americans differ from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s?

Homework
Dr. King and Malcolm X

Read the biographies of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Biography.com.

Document A
Economics and Equality

The following is a quote from “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” by Martin Luther King, Jr. It appeared in Ebony on October 21, 1961.

There is nothing quite so effective as a refusal to cooperate economically with the forces and institutions which perpetuate evil in our communities.

In the past six months, simply by refusing to purchase products from companies which do not hire Negroes in meaningful numbers and in all job categories, the Ministers of Chicago under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) Operation Breadbasket have increased the income of the Negro community by more than two million dollars annually . . . This is nonviolence at its peak of power.

*King, Martin Luther, Jr. Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom. October 21, 1961.
Courtesy of TeachingAmericanHistory.org.*

The following is a quote from Malcolm X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” delivered in 1964.

The economic philosophy of black nationalism is pure and simple. It only means that we should control the economy of our community . . . Why should white people be running the banks of our community? Why should the economy of our community be in the hands of the white man? Why? If a black man can’t move his store into a white community, you tell me why a white man should move his store into a black community. The philosophy of black nationalism involves a re-education program in the black community in regards to economics.

Malcolm X. The Ballot or the Bullet. 1964. Courtesy of BlackPast.org.

Document B

Philosophy of Nonviolence

The following is a quote from a speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr. at a staff retreat on November 14, 1966.

Violence may murder the murderer, but it doesn't murder murder. Violence may murder the liar, but it doesn't murder lie; it doesn't establish truth. Violence may even murder the dishonest man, but it doesn't murder dishonesty. Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn't murder hate. It may increase hate. It is always a descending spiral leading nowhere. This is the ultimate weakness of violence: It multiplies evil and violence in the universe.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. November 14, 1966. Courtesy of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Stanford University, KingInstitute.Stanford.edu.

This is an excerpt from The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley) (Ballantine Books: 1965).

They called me “the angriest Negro in America.” I wouldn't deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. “I believe in anger. The Bible says there is a time for anger.” They called me “a teacher, a **fomenter** [*agitor*] of violence.” I would say point blank, “That is a lie. I'm not for **wanton** [*deliberate* and unprovoked] violence, I'm for justice. I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes — if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes — then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law fails to protect Negroes from whites' attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves.” ...

The white man can lynch and burn and bomb and beat Negroes — that's all right: “Have patient” ... “The customs are entrenched” ... “Things are getting better.”

Well, I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that's how “Christian” philosophy is interpreted, if that's what Gandhian philosophy teaches, well, then, I will call them criminal philosophies

“I am for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution the American black man's problem — just to avoid violence. I don't go for non-violence if it also means a delayed solution If it must take violence to get the black man his human rights in this country, I'm for violence.”

Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Ballentine Books, 1965, pgs. 373-374.

Document C

Malcolm X: “Message to the Grassroots”

This is a quote of a speech Malcolm X delivered in Detroit, Michigan, on November 10, 1963.

First, what is a revolution? Sometimes I'm inclined to believe that many of our people are using this word “revolution” loosely, without taking careful consideration of what this word actually means, and what its historic characteristics are

Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. Number one, it was based on land, the basis of independence. And the only way they could get it was bloodshed I'm telling you — you don't know what a revolution is You haven't got a revolution that doesn't involve bloodshed. And you're afraid to bleed.

You bleed for white people [in war], but when it comes to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven't got any blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark

If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.

Malcolm X. Message to the Grassroots, November 10, 1963. Courtesy of TeachingAmericanHistory.org.

Document D **Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail”**

This is a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that he wrote in August 1963 in response to his critics.

... You may well ask, “Why direct action, why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?” You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

... Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the **unfettered** [*unrestrained*] realm of creative analysis and objective [evaluation], we must see the need of having nonviolent **gadflies** [*someone who provokes others into action by criticism*] to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. Letter from Birmingham Jail. August 1963. Courtesy of African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, Africa.UPenn.edu.

Lessons 5–6: Nonviolent Protest



Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) protestors march in Montgomery, Alabama, March 17, 1965, by Glen Percy (Wikimedia)

How was nonviolence used in the Civil Rights Movement?

Homework

Direct Action and Nonviolent Protest

The following text was adapted from the essays “The Civil Rights Movement,” by Taylor Branch, and “The Civil Rights Movement: Major Events and Legacies,” by James T. Patterson, published by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

Many historians have identified the *Brown v. Board of Education* case as the pivotal moment in the history of American race relations and the beginning of a broad civil rights movement that escalated in the 1960s. In December 1955, grassroots activists in Montgomery, Alabama — NAACP members E. D. Nixon and Rosa Parks chief among them — sparked what soon became a large-scale boycott of buses and of white-owned businesses in Montgomery, Alabama. The boycott began after a white bus driver had Parks arrested for refusing to obey rules that required blacks to move to the back of buses when no seats were available for whites. The Montgomery movement catapulted the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. By 1957, King had created his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to carry on the struggle.

Yet segregated social patterns did not vanish. The Court’s ruling that “all deliberate speed” should be used to enforce the *Brown* decision offered little guidance to federal courts in the South and encouraged white opponents of desegregation to develop delaying tactics. In 1964, ten years after *Brown*, only 1 percent of Southern black children attended public schools with whites.

Escalating white violence in the South saddened proponents of racial justice during the 1950s. Many black people, especially young people, became impatient with the slow process of legal cases. To them, the federal government was both remote and unhelpful, and organizations like the NAACP seemed too conservative. Local people, they decided, must take direct action to change racial patterns in their communities. Beginning in February 1960, with the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins at the Woolworth lunch counter, the sit-in tactics spread like wildfire throughout the South. These tactics initiated the most powerful phase of America’s Civil Rights Movement, which peaked over the next five tumultuous years. The restless young people had been essentially correct: Direct-action protest, especially if it provoked violence by white extremists, was the most productive means of civil rights activity.

In April of 1960, just ten weeks after Greensboro, King hosted a pilgrimage of 300 students from sit-ins in nine states. Nearly all were close peers of Emmett Till in age, haunted by his fate. Most had been raised to avoid trouble on a narrow college path, bearing family hopes that had been stifled for generations. Many had opposed nonviolent politics as a tool for the weak, but their outrage compelled them to leap into the unknown. Those who went to jail found themselves liberated rather than ruined. Personal impact touched strangers through the news, and activists and organizers pitched into workshops on nonviolence.

At King’s conference on nonviolent organizing, Reverend James Lawson of Nashville praised a unique army of disciplined nonviolence “to implement the Constitution,” but he knew the cost was high. “Most of us will be grandparents before we can lead normal lives,” Lawson predicted. Determined despite the danger, sit-in leaders formed their own Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for protests. In October 1960, King joined his first sit-in and was sent to prison by Georgia officials eager to punish his fame. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy made a condolence call to King — a call that helped Kennedy win the presidency.

By 1961, when President Kennedy took office, civil rights were starting to become a national issue. SNCC attracted little notice with anniversary sit-ins across the South in February, but hidden change took hold among the students. Nine sit-in prisoners refused bail in South Carolina, choosing to serve thirty days instead, and students from three states joined them at hard labor in Rock Hill. The “jail-in” created a larger identity beyond each campus-based struggle. Students expanded national awareness more dramatically in May, after mobs attacked the first Freedom Riders, who traveled into the Deep South to test court orders protecting integration on interstate buses. With one commercial bus burned outside Anniston, Alabama, and bloodied riders trapped in Birmingham, the federal Justice Department arranged a publicized rescue. In emergency debates, students in Nashville, Tennessee, changed the urgency of civil rights. What was imperative, they told speechless Kennedy officials, was a continued “freedom ride” to assert nonviolent strength in a just cause. “If they can stop us with violence,” said SNCC founder Diane Nash, “the movement is dead.”

These bloody confrontations across the South attracted more and more public attention. They also revealed that the Kennedy administration, concerned mainly with Cold War issues, was reluctant to jeopardize its political strength among whites in the South and Southerners in Congress. Kennedy was slow to recognize the moral passion of civil rights demonstrators or to use force in order to slow the resistance and rage of many Southern white people, police, and politicians. It took two deaths and almost 400 injuries at Ole Miss, a university in Mississippi, before Kennedy sent in federal marshals to end the violence on the campus.

*Branch, Taylor, The Civil Rights Movement. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History)
“The Civil Rights Movement”: History Now 8 (Summer 2006)*

Group 1: Children's March
Document A
The Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963

Read the article "The Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963" on Biography.com.

Group 2: Freedom Riders
Document A
“The Movement”

In May 1961, civil rights activists, black and white, rode interstate buses through the South. The Supreme Court had ruled that public buses could not be segregated, and these riders rode together in order to challenge the lack of enforcement of this decision. Many of these rides became violent, as white Americans in the South attacked the protestors — even setting fire to one of the buses in Alabama.

In response to the violence in Alabama, President Kennedy sent federal marshals and governor MacDonal Gallion sent state troops to restore peace and kick the Freedom Riders out of Alabama. Ultimately, the Freedom Riders were arrested upon arrival in Jackson, Mississippi.

Watch the video “The Movement” on the PBS American Experience website.

Group 3: Little Rock Nine
Document A
Brown v. Board of Education and the Little Rock Nine

Since 1896, segregation in American society had been legally protected by the Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson, which had defended segregation under the guise of “separate but equal.” Of course, segregated public spaces were anything but equal, but even so, into the early 1950s, the case continued to defend segregation. In 1954, though, the Supreme Court suddenly reversed course, unanimously ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” in the case Brown v. Board of Education. The case laid the groundwork for what would become the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1957, nine black students enrolled in Central High School, a formerly all-white high school, in Little Rock, Arkansas. On the first day of classes, however, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called the state National Guard and blocked the students’ entry into the building. In response, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to protect the black students on their way to school, as white protestors violently tried to stop them. The students were able to successfully begin classes on September 25, a full three weeks after the first official day of school.

Watch the video “60 Years on, a Look Back at the Little Rock Nine” by the Associated Press on YouTube.

Group 4: March on Washington

Document A

“The March on Washington: The Spirit of the Day”

Civil rights and labor activist A. Philip Randolph and civil rights and gay rights activist Bayard Rustin organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Wednesday, August 28, 1963. An estimated 250,000 people attended the march to call for the economic and civil rights of African Americans. During this march, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” while standing at the Lincoln Memorial.

Watch the video “The March on Washington: The Spirit of the Day” by Time on YouTube.

Group 5: Montgomery Bus Boycotts
Document A
Montgomery Bus Boycotts

On December 1, 1955, seamstress and political activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was arrested, and in response, Edgar Nixon, president of the Montgomery NAACP, and Jo Ann Robinson, an Alabama State College professor and member of the Women's Political Council, joined together to organize a boycott of the Montgomery buses. Overnight, a boycott was born. The boycotters formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, electing a then unknown Martin Luther King, Jr. to be its leader. During the 381 days of the boycott, nearly 50,000 African Americans stopped taking the buses.

Watch the video "Montgomery Bus Boycott / American Freedom Stories / Biography" on YouTube.

Group 6: Sit-Ins

Document A

“How a Lunch Counter Sit-In Became an Iconic Civil Rights Moment”

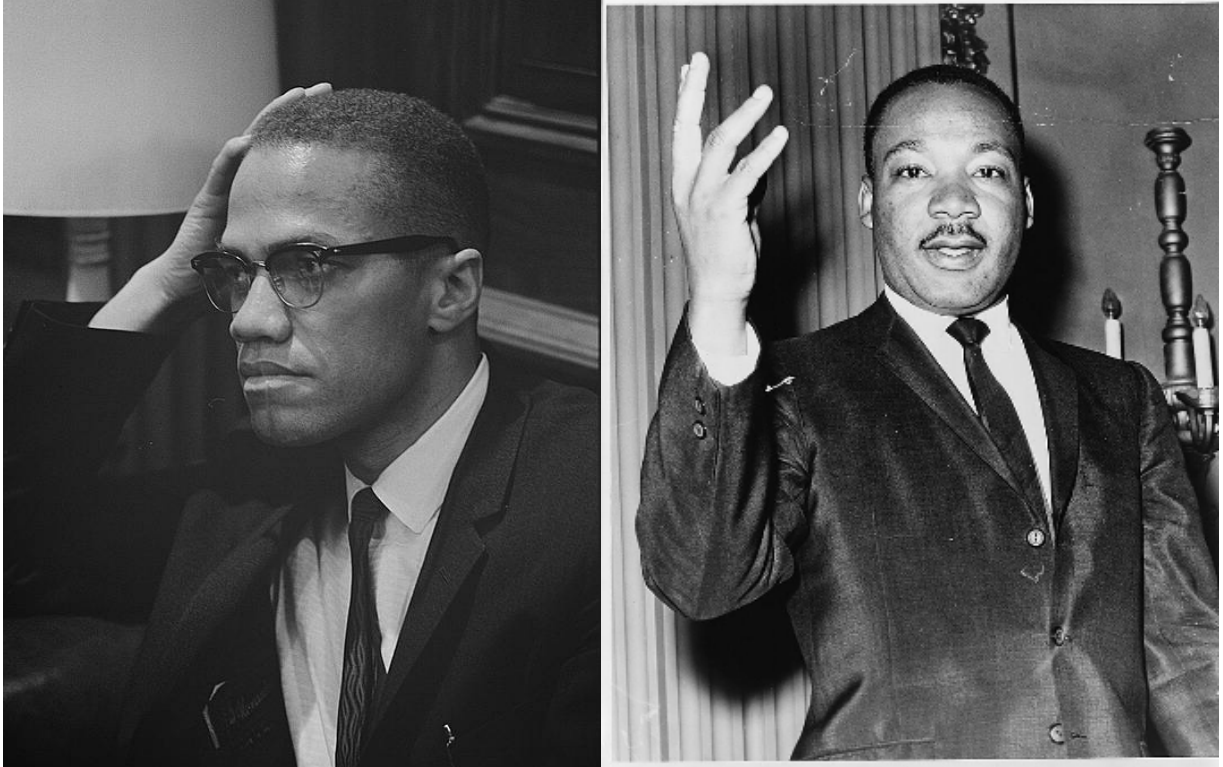
During the Civil Rights Movement, among the most publicized and strongest campaigns were the sit-ins organized by students across the country. The first sit-in began on February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four black college students tried to sit down at a Woolworth’s lunch counter designated for white patrons only. When the waitress refused to serve them, the students remained. As white customers threatened them, the students still remained.

Students around the country began organizing sit-ins. Before taking part in sit-ins, the activists would go through nonviolence training to prepare for the harassment they could expect from white customers. If attacked, protestors were supposed to curl up into a ball and let themselves be beaten in order to highlight the violence of their opposition and to emphasize the moral justice of their cause.

By the end of 1960, more than 1,500 black demonstrators had been arrested for their sit-ins.

Watch the video “How a Lunch Counter Sit-in Became an Iconic Civil Rights Moment” on YouTube.

Lessons 7–9: Competing Philosophies



Malcolm X (left) on March 26, 1964, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964 (Library of Congress)

Which Philosophy, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s or Malcolm X's, was more effective at addressing racial injustice?

Homework

Dr. King's and Malcolm X's Perspectives on Integration

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The following excerpt is from "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written by Martin Luther King, Jr. in August 1963. It discusses his impatience with ending segregation.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."...

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with **impunity** [*without punishment*]; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in **agonizing pathos** [*frustrated feelings*], "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"... — then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of despair.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. Letter from Birmingham Jail. August 1963. Courtesy of African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, Africa.UPenn.edu.

Malcolm X

The text below is an excerpt from The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley) (Ballantine Books: 1965).

The white Southerner was always given his due by Mr. Muhammad. The white Southerner, you can say one thing — he is honest. He bares his teeth to the black man; he tells the black man, to his face, that Southern whites never will accept phony "integration." The Southern white goes further, to tell the black man that he means to fight him every inch of the way — against even the so-called "**tokenism** [*symbolic effort to address minorities*]." The advantage of this is the Southern black man never has been under any illusions about the opposition he is dealing with.

You can say for many Southern white people that, individually, they have been **paternalistically** [*system of control for the good of the other*] helpful to many individual Negroes. But the Northern white man, he grins with his teeth, and his mouth has always been full of tricks and lies of "equality" and "integration." When one day all over America, a black hand touched the white man's shoulder, and the white man turned, and there stood the Negro saying "Me too..." why, that Northern liberal shrank from that black man with as much guilt and dread as any Southern white man.

... The word "integration" was invented by a Northern liberal. The word has no real meaning. I ask you: In the racial sense in which it's used so much today, whatever "integration" is supposed to mean, can it precisely be defined? The truth is that "integration" is an *image*, it's a foxy Northern liberal's [*disguise*] that confuses the true wants of the American black man. Here in these fifty racist and neo-racist states of North America, this word "integration" has millions of white people confused, and angry, believing wrongly that the black masses want to live mixed up with the white man. That is the case only with the relative handful of these "integration"-mad Negroes.

I'm talking about these "token-integrated" Negroes who flee from their poor, [oppressed] black brothers — from their own self-hate, which is what they're really trying to escape. I'm talking about these Negroes you will see who can't get enough of nuzzling up to the white man. These "chosen few" Negroes are more white-minded, more anti-black, than even the white man is.

Human rights! Respect as *human beings!* That's what America's black masses want. That's the true problem. The black masses want not to be shrunk from as though they are plague-ridden. They want not to be walled up in slums, in the ghettos, like animals. They want to live in an open, free society where they can walk with their heads up, like men, and women!

Few white people realize that many black people today dislike and avoid spending any more time than they must around white people. This "integration" image, as it is popularly interpreted, has millions of vain, self-exalted white people convinced that black people want to sleep in bed with them — and that's a lie!

Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Ballentine Books, 1965, pp. 277–278

Document A

Malcolm X's Famous Speech After Returning from Mecca (Transcript)

Upon his return from Mecca, Malcolm X spoke at a press conference at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, New York on May 21, 1964.

Reporter: I think a lot of people are confused by the new Arabic name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Malcolm X: This is always ... I've always had the name on my passport, Malik El-Shabazz. Only, I only used it in the Muslim world. Well, Hajj is a title that is given to any Muslim who makes the pilgrimage to Mecca during the official Hajj season.

Reporter: Well you, will you now use Shabazz and drop X?

Malcolm X: I'll probably continue to use Malcolm X because, and I'll probably use it as long as the situation that produced it exists.

Reporter: Well, you don't feel it, you don't feel this Shabazz takes the place of X?

Malcolm X: Uh ... my going to Mecca and going into the Muslim world into the African world, and being recognized and accepted as a Muslim and as a brother may solve the problem for me personally, but I personally feel that my personal problem has never [been] solved as long as the problem is not solved for all of our people in this country, so I remain Malcolm X as long as there's a need to protest and struggle and fight against the injustice that our people are involved in in this country.

Reporter: Are you prepared to go into the United Nations at this point and ask that charges be brought against the United States for its treatment of American Negroes?

Malcolm X: Oh yes, oh yeah, please, the audience will have to be quiet. Yes as I pointed out when I was in doing my traveling that nations look, African nations and Asian nations and Latin American nations, look very hypocritical when they stand up in the United Nations condemning the racist practices of South Africa and that which is practiced by Portugal and Angola and saying nothing in the UN about the racist practices that are manifest every day against Negroes in this society. Even in South Africa, those Africans aren't faced with bayonets and aren't faced with police dogs. I would be not a man if I was in a position to bring it in front of the United Nations and didn't do so I wouldn't be a man.

Reporter: Malcolm, do you intend to lead the charge in the United Nations?

Malcolm X: Well I find that to say you're going to lead something creates a lot of hostility, division, jealousy, and envy. I hope to work with any group of leaders or any group of organizations to do whatever is necessary to see this problem is brought before the United Nations.

Reporter: Have you had any commitments from any nations in Africa to support?

Malcolm X: I would ... I would rather not say at this time, but one thing I found in my travels, all of them look at upon us as their long-lost brother.

Reporter: You realize the implication is that you have had such commitments when you say...

Malcolm X: This is your interpretation of what I said. One thing that I found in all of my travels was that all of the Africans, not only Africans but the Asians and the Muslims, look upon us as their long-lost brothers, and America had actually tricked many of them into a hands-off policy by giving them the impression that she was honestly trying to do something to solve the problem. My argument over there was designed to prove that it is impossible for the United States government to solve the race problem. Is impossible.

Reporter: Malcolm, on your trip abroad, you said you sensed a feeling of great brotherhood and that conceivably would be working toward integration in this country. Now, at least this is what you're reported to have said. Do you want to comment on it?

Malcolm X: I don't think that I ever mentioned anything about working toward integration. They haven't even got integration right here in New York City. You have worse integration problems in the North, than they have in the South, so if it doesn't work in, if you can't bring about integration in New York City, that's international cosmopolitan up-to-date as it's supposed to be, you'll never get integration anywhere else in the country.

Reporter: Are you prepared to work with some of the leaders of the other civil rights organizations?

Malcolm X: Certainly we will work with any groups, organizations, or leaders in any way as long as it's genuinely designed to get results.

Reporter: Does your new beard have any religious significance?

Malcolm X: No, not particularly, but I do think that you find black people in America, as they strive to throw off the shackles of mental colonialism, will also probably reflect an effort to show, to throw off the shackles of cultural colonialism, and they may begin to reflect desires of their own, with standards of their own.

Reporter: Malcolm, [one of] your more controversial remarks was a call for black people to get rifles and form rifle clubs sometime back. Do you still favor that for self-defense?

Malcolm X: I don't see why that should be controversial. I think that if white people found themselves the victim of the same kind of brutality that black people in this country face and they saw that the government was either unwilling or unable to protect them that the intelligence on the part of the whites would make them get some rifles and shotguns and protect themselves. Now Negroes are developing some kind of intellectual maturity, too, and they can see that by having waited upon the government to protect them has been a wait that has been in vain, so any of them who live in areas where the government is not able to do its job, then we do have to get together and do a job of protecting ourselves.

Transcribed from YouTube, [youtube.com/watch?v=tuHYZdf-ad0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuHYZdf-ad0).

Document B

“I Have a Dream” Speech (Transcript)

Martin Luther King, Jr. gave this famous speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. In it he describes his vision of a united country. Read the transcript of this speech on the Stanford University King Institute website.

Lessons 10–12: The Impact of the Civil Rights Movement



President Lyndon B. Johnson (right) meets with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders on January 18, 1964. Photographer: Yoichi Okamoto (National Archives)

What is the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement?

Homework**The Civil Rights Act, Selma, and the Voting Rights Act**

Read the articles “The Civil Rights Act of 1964” on the History Channel website and “Selma to Montgomery March” on the Newsela website.